Countering Violent Extremism in Tunisia – Between Dependency and Self-Reliance

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Abstract

In current counter-terrorism efforts, the potential of civil society organizations is recognized by international actors for countering radical narratives and implementing prevention activities in non-Western countries. Civil society-led interventions, it is assumed, constitute a more sustainable as well as locally acceptable approach to reduce the threat of radicalization. In line with this, international actors including EU, UN and EU key-member states have lately incorporated this strategy in Tunisia, which since the fall of the Ben Ali regime in 2011 has experienced an increase in jihadist activities challenging the democratic consolidation of the country. In response to growing donor interest, the bulk of civil society organizations in Tunisia have recently started to develop policies and programs to counter violent extremism and radicalization. However, the lack of comprehensive empirical research on civil society engagement in counter- as well as de-radicalization complicates the assessment of scope and impact of these initiatives on local communities in Tunisia. To encounter this lacuna, this paper focuses on the experiences, subjective perception and practices of activists working on the ground in an arising Tunisian Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) landscape. (Critical) peacebuilding and development literature on civil society is introduced to investigate the interplay of international and local actors in the context of CVE interventions. 25 in-depth narrative interviews with local activists and international experts involved in developing CVE initiatives in Tunisia root this paper in rich empirical data that was analyzed by applying a Grounded Theory methodology. Due to the high dependency of civil society actors on external funding, international actors exert a strong influence on how preventative activities are designed and implemented and which local actors are involved. This paper further shows that this dependency does not just result in agenda adaptation, but rather that local actors, to some extent, can resist to the imposed donor agenda or strategically use the increased donor attention for their own purpose.

Keywords: Tunisia, Countering Violent Extremism, Civil Society

Introduction

In the context of an emerging Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism (henceforth P/CVE) agenda the international donor community has recently shifted its focus of attention towards civil society as a relevant stakeholder and important ally in contemporary counter-terrorism

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efforts. A growing number of globally relevant policy documents - in particular the UN Secretary-General's Plan of Action on PVE (UN 2018), the EU Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism (2014) and several national PVE strategies - emphasize collaboration between governments, communities, civil society, NGOs and the private sector in accordance with a 'whole-of-society-approach' (EU 2017: 19). Within these policy documents it is argued that civil society can make important contributions to CVE initiatives in particular „with regard to building resilience to violent extremism" (UN 2018: 6). Actors from the local civil society, so the argument goes, often possess pertinent knowledge of and ties with local communities - characteristics that are deemed relevant to tackle the recruitment to terrorist groups (UN 2018; OSCE 2018: 25). Further, civil society is attributed the ability to promote peaceful and inclusive societies by protecting vulnerable groups (OSCE 2018: 25-26).

This growing donor attention has resulted in a growing number of civil society organizations (CSOs) implementing P/CVE or P/CVE-related projects globally. Ucko (2018: 257) estimates that in 2016, more than 850 CSOs were involved in these efforts, comprising around 1,000 P/CVE initiatives. In spite of the growing recognition of civil society as an important ally and its incorporation within current global PCVE discourses and policies, there is no clear consensus, let alone guidelines, on how to effectively involve civil society and how to identify local civil society actors relevant for P/CVE efforts. Likewise, Aly et al. (2015) highlight the lack of a comprehensive research agenda on the intersection of civil society and counter-terrorism (Aly et al. 2015), in spite of which initial research, even more so after 2001, was mostly based on anecdotal data (Howell and Lind 2009: 2).

With a focus on everyday politics of P/CVE in Tunisia, this article attempts to investigate how global counter-terrorism policies are being reproduced and challenged on the ground. It thereby seeks to contribute to an emerging research agenda dealing with ´everyday´ experiences of counter-terrorism within IR and (Critical) Terrorism Studies (Jarvis and Lister 2013; Jackson and Hall 2016; Jarvis and Lister 2016). In the current debate on CVE, little attention has been devoted to the perspective of so-called front-line workers or practitioners.

With an increased academic focus on prevention and CVE programs introduced in Western Europe, some scholars (Peddell et al. 2016; Mattson 201; van der Weert and Eijkmann 2018) have commenced to explore professionals' and practitioners' perceptions based on single case studies in specific countries (Netherlands, Sweden, UK). Against this background, this paper aims to contribute to a broader understanding of challenges civil society actors and practitioners face in implementing P/CVE in non-Western contexts. It focuses on the effects of international funding for national and local CVE- interventions in a development aid landscape that is characterized by increasing competition compelling civil society actors to act in accordance with marketized logics (Banks and Hulme 2014). Taking a closer look at these occurrences – an approach that academic scholarship on P/CVE has so far neglected – helps to better grasp how these dynamics shape the outlook and implementation of P/CVE-efforts in countries in which the national government is unable or unwilling to take over the funding.

Given the high donor involvement in security assistance as well as externally-driven civil society building particularly since 2011, Tunisia makes an excellent case for this endeavour. Just this year, the EU started to grant funds to Tunisia's civil society for implementing P/CVE-related projects and other major donors announced to extend their support in the upcoming years (Interviews #9, #12 and #15). In response to growing donor interest, a bulk of civil society organizations in Tunisia have developed policies and programs to counter violent extremism and radicalization. However, the lack of comprehensive empirical research complicates the assessment of the scope as well as of the impact of these civil society initiatives on local communities in Tunisia.

The growing incorporation of civil society in CVE efforts shows similarities to liberal peacebuilding and democratization practices and discourses, where acknowledgment of the role local actors play in reaching successful outcomes has led to an increasing focus on civil society. In reality, however, these efforts have often resulted in the support of professional NGOs disconnected from local communities (Richmond 2011). In contrast, drawing on contributions of critical peacebuilding and development scholarship provides an understanding of the role civil society that takes power relations inherent in peacebuilding and

development interventions into consideration. By introducing these approaches to the field of CVE research, I anticipate to find new ways to better evaluate and grasp existing CVE practices in non-Western contexts. With its long experience in conflict prevention, "the peacebuilding community and its related methods and practices can help develop a more expansive understanding of violent extremism and its causes and a more localized, inclusive, and sustainable approach to countering it" (Holmer 2013: 1). The longstanding experience peacebuilding scholarship has in investigating local-international encounters is particularly relevant for this endeavor given the fact that the Tunisian P/CVE scenery is highly influenced by the presence of international actors.

The empirical material this endeavour is based upon consists of 25 in-depth interviews, informal talks and participant observation undertaken during May 2018 in Tunisia. It was analysed by deploying a grounded theory framework. The empirical analysis suggests that international actors involved in P/CVE agendas recognize the importance of local knowledge for the successful outcomes of P/CVE interventions and are aware of existing rifts within the Tunisian social and political scenery. The dominance of certain institutional practices, however, requires the preference for well-established professionalized NGOs at the expense of more locally rooted small-scale associations within existing initiatives. The practices and strategies local actors in the CVE context develop in their engagement with donors point to a high dependence of local actors on donor assistance. This does not just result in agenda adaptation by local actors, but also, to some extent, in their resistance or strategic use of increased donor attention for their own purpose. Local actors are further involved in agenda setting by bringing political issues to the public sphere, notably in the context of the controversial debate on returning foreign fighters.

(Critical) Peacebuilding and Development scholarship on civil society

Donor intervention in civil society creates its own politics - a battlefield of contending norms, values, and visions of how social, economic and political life should be

organized around the respective roles of the individual, collective, and state therein. There is a politics of choice that leads to insiders and outsiders, the included and the excluded. (Howell and Pearce 2001: 121)

Development discourses and policies in the context of civil society support are often characterized by differing understanding of and normative claims on civil society. With reference to Härdig (2015), this paper adopts an inclusive understanding of civil society taking into account faith and community based associations as forms of civil society that tend to be socially and historically rooted within local communities (Härdig 2015: 1147). This approach allows to capture the complex makeup of civil society in the region and to recognize civic engagement in the Tunisian P/CVE landscape beyond professional Westernized NGOs. Resulting from the failure of top-down approaches in peacebuilding, the inclusion of civil society has been put on the agenda of liberal peacebuilding projects and development efforts driven by the International Community. NGOs are perceived as the new "sweethearts" of development (Banks et al. 2015: 708) that possess more flexibility, efficiency and innovative potential than traditional bilateral aid mechanisms (Baldursdottir et al. 2018: 28). They are considered bridge-builders that facilitate links between more locally rooted grassroots movements and regional and national entities (Banks et a. 2015: 708). Creating a vibrant civil society has thus emerged to be an essential ingredient of liberal peacebuilding efforts as "it supports the liberal peace's overall emancipatory claims […] and offer[s] grounded legitimacy, being derived from local agency as well as international liberal norms" (Richmond 2011: 5).

The local within international peacebuilding

Recent peacebuilding literature is somewhat wary of increased donor and international actor efforts to include civil society in peacebuilding. It is argued that liberal peacebuilding, with its increased focus on civil society intervention, has led to the emergence of an artificial civil society that is highly dependent on external interveners and often prioritizes professional

NGOs disconnected from local communities and thus without any local legitimacy (Richmond 2011). Scholarship on international intervention, particularly regarding the relationship between local and international actors (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2016, 220), provides a detailed analysis of prevalent institutional practices as well as social practices that shape the international-local relationship (Autessere 2014; Mac Ginty 2015; Richmond and Pogodda 2016). In her analysis of everyday lives of international peacebuilding experts, Autessere (2014: 249) for instance discovered that the social practices of interveners exert a strong influence on how international experts interact with local civil society.

Within peacebuilding practices and discourses, local ownership and local legitimacy are considered core principles of international peacebuilding interventions (Ejdus and Juncos 2018: 7), deemed to lend authenticity to these efforts and thereby make a relevant contribution for their successful and sustainable outcome (Mac Ginty 2015: 840). The question of legitimacy is particularly relevant for P/CVE efforts, where the involvement of not locally rooted/legitimized actors can have counterproductive effects and unintended consequences (Holmer 2013: 6). Verkorken and van Leeuwen (2013) direct attention to potential disparities between local and international legitimacy in case of interventions that involve external actors. Following statement underlines this:

> In sum, groups that are most deeply rooted, completely trusted, and experienced as legitimate on the ground, are often not the same as those most in step with Western norms. There is tension between what might be termed 'international legitimacy' - being in line with the norms of interveners - and 'local legitimacy' - the support of local people." (Verkorken and van Leeuwen 2013: 164)

Analysing the UN system's approach towards civil society, Sheperd (2015: 904) highlights perceptions of civil society as a „legitimating actor for UN peacebuilding practices as CSOs are the bearers/owners of certain forms of (local) knowledge". It is interesting to note here

that the role the UN assigns to civil society has changed from being a mere consultant towards being an implementing partner (Sheperd 2015: 905).

In most cases, international donors - following a very narrow understanding of civil society as professional NGOs "who can master the donors' terminology and ways of working" (Banks et. al. 2015: 709) - engage in civil society support via the creation or funding of professionalized NGOs. This often results in the adoption of a technocratic and thus depoliticized civil society agenda (Kontinen and Millstein 2017: 73). MacGinty (2017: 2) shows that the technocratic nature of the EU, in spite of good intentions to incorporate local perspectives, compels local actors to transform into institutionalized actors such as registered NGOs, which the EU is able to deal with (MacGinty 2017: 2). This procedure is justified with the predominant narrative on technocracy as an appropriate technique to strengthen efficiency based upon objective criteria (Mac Ginty 2017: 3).

Donors' handling of civil society

In development and peacebuilding practice, donors draw on different mechanisms to deal with NGOs and civil society actors. Vogel (2016) outlines five main categories international donors deploy to capture civil society: financial support, stipulation for partnerships, tacit conditions, opportunity and exclusion. These categories should be understood as general patterns and are not universally applicable (Vogel 2016: 477). According to Vogel (2016), these practices can be deployed for positive discrimination of actors in accordance with the donor interests/agenda or for excluding certain actors by denying funding requests. The category of tacit conditions includes informal requirements that may certainly form an obstacle for local actors - such as the ability to speak the donor's language as well as the professional skills required for application and report writing etc. Demanding these skills has resulted in selective cooperation with civil society actors that follow the 'Western' protocol of NGO activism, while other actors lacking the required professionalist culture are excluded despite their rooting in the ground (Vogel 2016: 478).

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These practices have been problematized in recent literature on EU cooperation with its Southern Mediterranean partners (Dandashly 2018; Bürkner and Scott 2018: 9), in which the EU approach towards civil society has been identified as 'selective engagement' prioritizing security issues over local demands. Following the strategy of selective engagement, the EU prefers to work with well-established professionalized NGOs that correlate with their liberal understanding of civil society:

> By promoting civil society through the prism of western concepts, the EU risks overlooking powerful grassroots actors capable of social and political change while, instead, strengthening domestic cleavages by supporting only those organisations that espouse a liberal agenda. This has direct implications for civil society landscape that appears fragmented or divided [...]. (Colomobo and Meddeb 2018: 39)

Against this background, the EU has proved to be equally reluctant to provide support or assistance to Islamist civil society organizations. However, the EU has since changed its approach in the post-uprising period by cooperating with Islamist actors that pursue a moderate agenda and thus are not seen as contradictory to the values the EU claims to promote (Voltolini and Colombo 2018: 97).

Civil society's strategies in their engagement with donors
Recent literature on civil society in the development context has focused on the perspective of civil society, detailing how institutional practices of everyday donor politics shape the way in which civil society organizes itself. Choudry and Kapoor (2013) refer to a process of 'NGOization' to describe the institutionalization and professionalization of the civil society sector (see for example Choudry and Kapoor 2013). The high dependency on resources provided by donors, so they uphold, has led to a declining autonomy of civil society organizations and has increased competition among local NGOs at the expense of coalition and alliance building. To secure their economic survival, local actors tend to follow the

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strategy of donor agenda adaptation (Howell and Pearce 2001: 121) by supporting the donor agenda in order to receive financial resources (Attial and Herrold 2018: 2). However, civil society organizations should not be perceived as passive recipients of donor funding, but rather as active agents that use donor attention for their own benefits. Ketola (2016: 481) argues that NGOs deploy several strategies in their engagement with international donors. In his in-depth analysis of the relationship between Turkish NGOs and the EU, Ketola (2016: 481) introduces a framework of NGO strategies consisting of four categories: 1. *Broker* denotes NGOs that seek to facilitate relationships between donors and local actors by bridging existing gaps; 2. *Translator* refers to an NGO strategy that interprets donor agendas in light of local needs, following own interest and priorities; 3. *Navigator* denotes NGOs' efforts to get hold of donor funds to realize own organizational goals based on an independent agenda, 4. *Agonist* refers to the NGO practice of rejecting external funding and thereby challenging the donor agenda. This set of strategies enables NGOs to selectively deploy different tactics at different stages in their donor engagement guided by their organizational objectives (Ketola 2016: 480).

Being aware of these dynamics seems particularly relevant when dealing with the emerging P/CVE landscape in Tunisia. In particular, sources of legitimacy, institutional practices of donor politics, the methods donors deploy to capture civil society, as well as the strategic repertoire of local civil society are aspects that speak to the Tunisian context and will be of relevance in the empirical investigation.

Empirical Section - The Everyday Practices of P/CVE in Tunisia´s civil society

This empirical analysis is based on field research conducted in Tunisia in May 2018. It builds on 25 in-depth narrative interviews, informal conversations and participatory observation. Interviews were conducted mainly with central activists possessing (or claiming to possess) some level of expertise or experience in the field of CVE and with international practitioners involved in security assistance programs that were identified by purposive sampling (Bryman

2012: 418)I further resorted to snowball sampling to reach out to other key actors in the Tunisian P/CVE field (Bryman 2008: 184). The table below (Figure 1) gives an overview of the interview partners composed of members of civil society organizations and international staff members according to their geographical distribution.

Figure 1. List of interviewees (see Appendix):

interview partners	place	number of interviewees
civil society activists (including researcher, journalist)	Tunis	11
civil society activists	Sousse	1
civil society activists	Kasserine	5
civil society activists (including researcher)	Medenine	3

international security practitioners
   - Dutch Embassy
   - EU Delegation to Tunis
   - Italian Embassy
   - UNDP
	Tunis	4

ministerial employees **-Ministry of Constitutional relations, Human Rights and Civil Society**	Tunis	1
Total		25

The interviewed informants working on P/CVE cover a wide spectrum of ideological orientations and possess different levels of professionalization, expertise and links to the international donor community. This includes Islamist-oriented civil society organizations with strong ties to the political party Ennahda, secularly oriented associations, youth-led initiatives, and a grassroots organization in Kasserine without any ties to the international donor scene.

Visiting Kasserine and Medenine and interviewing relevant local actors aimed at including the perspective of peripheral border regions into this research project. Doing so recognizes the fragmentation of the Tunisian social and political landscape in the post-uprising period. In particular, the polarization between secular and Islamist political groups (Martin 2015: 797), but also rising tensions and an existing heterogeneity within the Islamist sphere (Al-Anani 2012) shape the current state of civil society. Further challenges civil society organizations have recently been confronted with are a massive increase in

international donor attention and presence of international NGOs, which impose their specific neoliberal logic and promote a very limited vision of civil society (Yousfir 2017); and the ongoing fragmentation along the *a priori* existing division between the rural interior and the urban-coastal areas (Bürkner and Scott 2018: 9).

Ethical aspects of my research encompassed informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality and anonymity (Hennink et al. 2011: 62). By providing sufficient information about the research, I ensured that informants were aware of my role as researcher and had the possibility to determine the extent of their own participation. In accordance with the principle of confidentiality, data were treated with a maximum of diligence. I ensured the anonymity of the research participants during the whole data collection process by not recording any personal information. (Hennink et al. 2011: 77). The data collection and analysis design is primarily influenced by Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2006; Charmaz 2014), which provides clear guidelines for a systematic analysis of the collected data. In practical terms, grounded theory consists of a concurrent process of data generation, collection and analysis. In that regard, the data collected within an initially purposive sample was coded before more data was gathered (Birks and Mills 2015: 11). During the phase of theoretical coding, I consulted supporting information from the literature to categorize deployed strategies and interactions between international actors and civil society actors. Drawing on literature on civil society in the context of democratization and peacebuilding, I was able to identify relevant patterns that helped explain social practices and dominant themes encountered during field work as well as during the data evaluation process.

Context: The emerging field of P/CVE in Tunisia

Since the fall of the Ben Ali regime in 2011, Tunisia has experienced the emergence of salafist-jihadi movements (Cavatorta 2015; Torelli et al. 2012) as well as an increase in violent jihadist activities that represent a severe challenge to the ongoing transition process in the country. Consequently, Tunisia is one of the main exporters of foreign fighters worldwide

and further faces ongoing terrorist presence in its mountain areas close to the Algerian border. According to government estimates, around 3000 Tunisians have left the country for training or to fight in Syria, Iraq, Libya or Mali, while international statistics assume that around 6000 Tunisian jihadist foreign fighters exist (The Soufan Group 2015). Other numbers suggest that about 800 Tunisian foreign fighters have returned to Tunisia (Argoubi 2016).

Factors explaining the occurring radicalization include regional and international pull factors such as the unstable security situation in the neighboring countries (Watanabe and Merz 2017: 138-139) as well as political exclusion and socio-economic marginalization, unemployment, corruption and repression from security forces, which function as as reinforcers of individual and collective grievances (IRI 2016: 4, 10).[2]

What has the state done?

In response to the rise of jihadist radicalization and in particular the phenomenon of foreign fighters, the Tunisian government has adopted a number of measures, however slow this may have been. Just recently, Tunisia started to develop a comprehensive strategy to deal with foreign fighters (Watanabe 2015: 8). Up until now, the government was able to achieve some success by revealing recruitment networks, introducing travel restrictions and drafting a new anti-terrorism law (Gartenstein-Ross and Moreng 2015). Further achievements cover increasing control over religious institutions as well as improved border security cooperation with neighboring countries Algeria and Libya. Nevertheless, deficiencies in border monitoring cooperation are still existent as the porous border to Libya hampers the ability to trace returning fighters (Malka and Balboni 2016). Other difficulties have been detected with regard to information exchange within the Tunisian institutional setting: "[C]oordination between the heads of state and government is poor; numerous administrative obstacles remain between and within ministries; and the multiple ad hoc counter-terrorism commissions often underperform and even fragment policymaking" (International Crisis Group 2016: 1-2). State officials still struggle to develop a coherent long-term strategy to rehabilitate returning foreign

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[2] For a detailed analytical review of the literature on violent extremism in Tunisia see for example Ayari (2017).

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fighters that goes beyond recent efforts to develop a database to track returnees (Watanabe 2015: 9). So far, some returning fighters were incarcerated without any legal basis, while others did not experience any legal consequences (Ghribi 2014).

In November 2016, the government announced a new national strategy to fight terrorism and extremism. One of its four pillars regards prevention efforts in accordance with EU guidelines (The New Arab 2016). One major element of its adopted prevention agenda is the creation of a counter-narrative platform financed by the British Embassy and the British Council under the supervision of the Ministry of Constitutional Relations, Human Rights and Civil Society (Interview #4). This platform has been criticised for insufficient expertise of the involved employees of the ministries and for its high dependency on the UK as major funder. The platform furthermore lacks a plan of action regarding the involvement of and coordination with civil society (Jebali 2017: 32). This reluctance towards civil society was also perceptible during my interviews: A key person of the Ministry of Constitutional Relations, Human Rights and Civil Society was not able to provide details on P/CVE-related activities implemented by civil society actors (Interview#4). Beyond the counter-narrative platform, the state failed to implement adequate preventive measures and missed to inform the broader public about its planned interventions. It comes as no surprise then that the official strategy is not publicly available.

Countermeasures taken by the International Community
Western actors have continuously assisted the Tunisian government's effort to tackle the security problem mainly through financial support and capacity building. In particular, since the 2015 terrorist attacks on major tourist hubs, international actors such as the United States, NATO, the European Union and key EU Member States have initiated several programs to enhance the security performance of Tunisia. To coordinate the security assistance provided by different countries, the G7+6 grouping was installed, including the G7 alongside Belgium, the EU, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime. Aside of

reducing risks of duplication, it serves to guarantee the involvement of all major international players in Tunisia's counter-terrorism activities (Dworkin and El Malki 2018: 9).

Beyond bilateral security assistance, the international donor community is increasingly engaged in the implementation of preventative measures by providing funds to Tunisia´s civil society and has since 2016 pushed the P/CVE agenda as a policy practice that has just recently been introduced in Tunisia. At a glance, almost all activities carried out so far under the P/CVE-label by local activists seeking to tackle violent extremism can be classified as preventative activities at the tertiary level of intervention.[3] Among others, these encompass cultural activities, citizenship education, increased community work, capacity-building, training sessions, awareness-raising activities and dialogue sessions between youth and security forces - all financed by funds and grant schemes provided by key EU member states, the US, the EU and several UN bodies (e.g. UNDP; UNESCO). The only initiatives implemented at the secondary and primary levels of intervention up to date are attempts to reform the prison system. However, these efforts are so far carried out by state actors in cooperation with international donors without the involvement of local communities.

International actors' approach towards civil society

On the whole, interviewed international security practitioners perceived civil society engagement in P/CVE interventions as positive, in particular for their "impact on the local level". However, this positive framing of civil society repeatedly conflicted with allegations of NGOs as "just being attracted by money". In this section, I seek to highlight these

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[3] Existing policies and programs in the field of countering radicalization differ in terms of their level of intervention (primary, secondary and tertiary), their stakeholdership (state/non-state), form of contact (active/passive), the role of ideology therein as well as target groups (Koehler 2017a: 14 - 16). Preventative activities at the tertiary level of intervention concentrate on the reduction of particular push factors by strengthening resilience of affected communities; Interventions at the secondary level seek to counter emerging signs of radicalization by reducing specific pull factors. Activities at the primary level of intervention are directed at actors who are already part of extremist groups, with the aim to support their exit (Brett et al. 2012: 20).

competing international perspectives on civil society engagement, as well as point to potential sources of contradiction in terms of institutional 'blind spots'.

Assessing civil society

In interviews, international practitioners tended to underline the potential of local grassroots and civil society organizations for far-reaching impact at the ground level due to their superior contextual and localized knowledge (Interviews #9, #12 and #15). One interviewee highlighted the fact that civil society organizations, unlike international organizations, are able to include and to reach out to a wide range of stakeholders - including extremists (Interview #12). Also the potential role that religious civil society stakeholders can play was generally recognized by international practitioners. As one interviewee put it, "[t]hese people have a voice in the fight against violence and they might be better understood than a secular university professor affiliated with Ben Ali" (Interview #12).

Internal divisions of civil society were discussed as critical aspects that call for special attention in the interaction with local actors. International experts were aware of rifts, in particular between Ennahda-related, islamic organizations and liberal civil society orientated towards Europe. This division between islamist and secular actors was said to come with fierce competition between the two camps and to necessitate caution on the part of international engagement with civil society. The financing of NGOs close to the Ennahda camp, for example, could evoke criticism from liberal actors (Interview #9; Interview #12).

The second dominant theme in the dataset is the perception of NGOs as just looking for money and only intervening when rewarded financially. Against this background, international interviewees also noted that NGOs who claimed to have expertise on CVE "did grow like mushrooms" (Interview #15). This shows that donors reflect upon the dependencies their involvement creates, in particular regarding the provision of resources. Yet, interviewed international experts uniformly refused to question the international donor system as such as well as their contribution to donor dependency. The interviewed security practitioners critically reflected on local stakeholders' capacities to implement P/CVE-initiatives. One

international staff member for instance contrasted the bulk of NGOs that just work on P/CVE due to available funding with very few Tunisian partners that in his/her view command sufficient expertise and pursue a consistent and coherent strategy (Interview #12). This stresses the awareness of interviewed international security practitioners that the successful implementation of P/CVE-efforts requires operational guidelines, well-designed programs and expert knowledge – requirements which are rarely met within the Tunisian context. Internationals' nuanced evaluation of actors beyond their relation to religion shows that the concept of *'local legitimacy'* (Verkorken and van Leeuwen 2013) has been incorporated into the internationals' discourse on P/CVE. A closer examination of donors' handling with local stakeholders, however, demonstrates that this consideration has not yet prevailed in practice. Despite their awareness of the incapability of smaller localized structures to manage high amounts of financial assistance in the context of high scale donor schemes (Interview #15), international stakeholders failed to reflect on and to develop alternative means of identifying local NGOs with outreach and local legitimacy. Rather, they adhered to the usual procedure by collaborating with professionalized NGOs that fulfill the technical requirements. Credible local partners - including relevant islamist stakeholders - listed by internationals during the interviews almost solely comprised of NGOs based in the capital with experience in receiving donor funds. This suggests that donors pursue a strategy of selective engagement that counteracts the discursive appreciation of *'local legitimacy'*. The reluctance of international actors to engage with smaller and unknown civil society structures can also be linked to a more general problem related to P/CVE-interventions. Within the P/CVE expert community, it is already known that poorly and ineffectively designed initiatives in the P/CVE-field can have unintended negative consequences, notably the potential of increasing the risk of terrorism and violent extremism (Koehler 2017b: 1). This is aggravated by the fact that the P/CVE- agenda at the policy making level is based on definitional ambiguity and a lack of consensus with regard to the results these interventions aim to achieve (Heydemann 2014: 1). The awareness of these pitfalls leads international actors to prioritize well-established and accountable NGOs as partners within their P/CVE-efforts.

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Engaging with civil society

The UN's regional focus of intervention is another example for the discrepancy at work between theory and practice. In their official strategy, the UN identifies three main areas of intervention: the border region, prisons and popular quarters (Nations Unies 2017). To date, the UN mostly collaborates with trustworthy stakeholders in the governante of Medenine, the border region to Libya, which according to my informants will remain the main funding area in the next three years (Interviews #9 and #13). Collaborating with clearly identified local partners that both possess local legitimacy and the capability to cooperate with an UN-body in this case is thought to allow the UN to intensify its relationship with local partners and to build a sustainable long-term partnership (Interviews #9, #13 and #14). However, this strong focus on long-term engagement in Medenine comes with neglect of other marginalized border regions. An interviewed UNDP staff member justified the organization's refusal to work in Kasserine - the border region to Algeria - with potential frustration by the local population over the implementation of single projects in the context of lacking large-scale economic interventions (Interview #9). The UN's way of proceeding has further been criticized by local activists from Medenine. In particular its intransparency alongside with lacking criteria for selecting local associations has provoked discontent (Interview#13; Interview#14). Furthermore, even though the UN strategy builds upon evidence-based knowledge and local expertise, at least parts of its practical implementation so far have proved to be impossible, as UN interventions persistently encounter difficulties to gain access to prisons.

The EU, on the other hand, still concentrates on security sector and governance reform in its engagement with civil society, whereby P/CVE just represents a part of this strategy (Interview #12). To select suitable NGOs, the mechanism of the "call for proposals" is deployed by the EU - an approach that is based upon well-defined and objective guidelines (Term of References) which in principle allow every registered organization to apply (Interview #12). Being aware of the ideological rifts as discussed above, the interviewed EU staff member also stressed that it would be ideal if proposals were submitted from different ideological camps (Interview #12).

However, in practice only few Tunisian NGOs have the capacity to apply for EU projects. The mechanism of "call for proposals" unintentionally/structurally prioritizes well-established and professionalized NGOs, while failing to include less professionalized associations and to ensure diversity regarding ideological orientation. Drawing on Vogel's (2016) categories of how international donors capture civil society, the EU's *tacit conditions* effectively *exclude* much of the locally rooted civil society from receiving *financial support*. The institutional requirements resulting in this exclusion are legitimated with the prevailing narrative on technocracy as enhancing efficiency (MacGinty 2017). In this light, the second prevalent theme/frame discussed in this section, that is, NGOs are only following the money, appears somewhat contradictory - demands of professionalism and efficiency clash with a rejection of financial interests of such professionally oriented institutions as 'greedy'.

The civil society perspective: Strategies of agenda adaptation or self-reliance?

On the part of civil society actors, several strategies and tactics were found to be deployed vis-a-vis international donors. These can be broadly divided into (technical) adaptation to donor requirements, (strategic) agenda adaptation, active agenda setting and resistance to the donor involvement.

(Technical) adaptation to donor requirements
Adapting to technical donor requirements first and foremost regards searching for grants, designing project proposals and writing reports (Interviews #2 and #11). Knowledge on available funding and how to access it additionally requires awareness of varying alignments of donors in their approach to tackle terrorism and violent extremism. For example, the Canadian modus operandi is known for its support of projects related to family, while the US promotes good governance and rule of law in its fight against violent extremism (IC#3 with TUN#1). Further, donors tend to deploy methodologies and policies rooted in their specific understanding of terrorism and violent extremism. In line with this, one researcher and civil

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society activist argued: "The French consider the collective radicalism as terrorism, the radical one even at the political level is a future jihadist, for the Americans it is the opposite. Therefore you see in Tunisia you see the project of French they are financing work on collective radicalism, the Americans work on jihadist behavior." (Interview #1)

(Strategic) agenda adaptation

Elements of agenda adaptation are traceable in the ways in which interviewed civil society stakeholders design and implement CVE related projects. This includes the search for and the inclusion of innovative ideas, concepts or globally approved best practices in project proposals to fulfill donor expectations for innovative projects complying with international standards (IC#3 with TUN#1). Initial research was deployed by local CVE actors to first understand the problem and how to tackle it. This suggests that civil society activists sought to develop expertise on the topic through the conduct of research as a way to establish an exclusive domain. Drawing on the terms of Ketola (2016), such efforts to grant international actors access to knowledge on local communities refer to the notion of *Broker.*

Close ties to donors have proved to be an essential determinant with respect to the design and implementation of P/CVE-related activities. The differences between international attention towards the capital and coastal areas as well as Medenine and towards Kasserine and other neglected areas are reflected in the available repertoire of P/CVE related methodologies and implemented activities. Kasserine-based actors advocated, almost without exception, a cultural approach to counter violent extremism in their communities (Interviews #5, #6, #7 and #8). In other regions, notably Tunis and Medenine, NGOs commanded a broader repertoire of methods such as capacity-building, training activities and awareness campaigns targeting at "at-risk" youth, among other things.

The ongoing phenomenon of civil society's adaptation to international agendas has been harshly criticized from multiple angles. Local actors condemned the use of the *prevention* label by civil society organizations that in their view only work on violent extremism because there is donor interest. The fact that genuine grassroots involvement in

CVE is scarce strengthens those suspicions. As expressed by one civil society activist and researcher, "a lot of people are working on projects of prevention which I don't think are really about prevention. Even some projects I worked on myself, I don't believe they are prevention" (Interview #3). A further point of critique facing civil society engagement in CVE is the lack of P/CVE specific expertise. One interviewed researcher expressed his concerns in the following manner: "This is not a subject that anyone should deal with [...]. This is not a topic of human rights, this is not a topic of development" (Interview #13). The absence of local legitimacy, another matter of frequent contention, was scrutinized in connection with implemented projects resting upon determined project logics that are often not "locally based" and thus have very limited impact against violent extremism (IC#1 with TUN#1). This is enhanced by widespread public mistrust towards organizations that in former times were often affiliated with the Ben Ali regime.

Despite this critique, the ongoing agenda adaptation is regarded a strategic decision within the Tunisian civil society scene, as after all, receiving funds ensures the survival of these organizations. Against this background, one activist and researcher mentioned: "They are pragmatic, so we will not judge" (Interview #1). This pragmatic understanding of civil society activism can be traced back to an enhanced awareness of a civil society sector that is increasingly exposed to market constraints. The tendency towards marketization is noticeable in increasing competition over projects in order to sustain organizations and careers. Several local actors condemned these developments and criticized that civil society activism has become a career in a setting in which civil society organizations act increasingly like enterprises (Interviews #1, #3, #13 and #14).

In a funding environment that is increasingly competitive and driven by donor interests, it appears to be difficult for civil society organizations to design their projects in line with local needs and circumstances. Aligning their strategies and policies with donor priorities and interests as a result of their high financial dependency hampers their ability to implement bottom-up tailored initiatives (Banks and Hulme 2012: 12). This is particularly problematic in the P/CVE policy field in which program designs need to be adopted to the specific context

(Koehler 2017 b: 1). Within the Tunisian context, this trend is also apparent in that civil society organizations mostly operate and install their office in better-off urbanized neighbourhoods with no outreach to local communities. Other organizations that failed to get access to funding due to their unpopular agenda for donors, on the contrary, have difficulties to survive and do not command the means to rent an expensive office in the capital (Interview #16).

Active agenda setting

In spite of a lack of available funding for topics that are not in line with donor interests, few local actors act as active agenda setter by informing the public about neglected issues/cases. Foremost among there are awareness raising activities on the situation of Tunisian foreign fighters as well as returnees. In the context of Tunisia´s foreign fighters problem, international actors exclusively focused on prison reform, as the issue of returning foreign fighters is strongly connected to the situation of Tunisia's overloaded prison system. However, putting returnees in prison is just a short-term solution and may exacerbate the security situation further as imprisoned former jihads may radicalize other prisoners. (Interviews #9, #12 and #15).

The reluctance of most of the civil society actors to engage with this topic can be explained by the fact that the theme of returnees polarizes the Tunisian society and receives minimal support from the populace. In this light, several interview partners favored the denial of the right to return as an adequate strategy to handle Tunisians that traveled abroad to join violent extremist groups, while others rejected the concept of de-radicalisation per se (Interview #1,#3 and #13). All civil society activists, however, agreed that the Tunisian authorities had failed to develop an holistic rehabilitation program. The reasons were identified above all in the absence of resources and competences and the lack of knowledge on the phenomenon. According to a study carried out by the International Center for Religion and Democracy (McDonell 2018), only ten percent of interviewed religious actors had

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knowledge on existing rehabilitation or reintegration programs, whereby a not insignificant percentage favoured an approach led by the community.

Even though the majority of interview partners refused to work on or did not tackle the issue of returning foreign fighters and how to deal with them, a few civil society activists made concrete proposals or intended to focus on reintegration or rehabilitation in their future agenda. Concrete proposals covered the development of a risk-assessment tool to evaluate the level of ideologization as well as efforts to facilitate the rehabilitation process of foreign fighters by focusing on their reintegration within their communities and families and the idea of founding a center forde-radicalization (Interview #10).

A further issue in which local activists served as agenda setters is the controversy over the "children of Daesh"- children and family members of foreign fighters that still remain in Libya and Syria. The Tunisian government refuses to speak about the topic or make it public, although several incidents, most currently the case of an orphan who remained in a Libyan prison for 13 months, stress its topicality. Civil society activists put an effort to stay updated about the latest situation and inform the population by organizing a press conference on the topic with affected family members (Interview #16). Civil society could further provide precise information on the situation of Tunisian children and women remaining in Libya and thus demonstrate that a significant number is affected by this phenomenon. (Interview#14). In that regard, civil society activists were intervening in crucial issues that the state and the International Community had so far neglected and thus acted as agenda setters within the Tunisian P/CVE community by bringing current controversies to the public sphere.

Resistance to the donor involvement

Even though civil society stakeholders generally tended to adapt to donor demands, some attempts of showing resistance to and rejection of the imposed donor agenda could be detected. Several activists highlighted the problem of donor dependency and its consequences, such as the imposition of donor logics and preferences on experienced NGOs. However, very few went beyond rhetorics in their critical appraisal of donor dependence to actually adopt

strategies in the sense of an *Antagonist* (Ketola 2016). Resistance to donor agenda encompassed the complete refusal of foreign funding, the slow acceptance of foreign resources in the interest of sustainable organizational growth (Interview #10) or the installment of offices in popular neighbourhoods - such as Dour Hiche, a suburban area in Tunis known for the salafist movement - instead of well-off neighbourhoods. Other actors did not reject the funding system per se, but emphasized the necessity for critical evaluation of external assistance as well as the importance to negotiate with donors in order to uphold one's own interest, such as the production of high academic knowledge in the context of a sponsored research project (Interviews #1, #3 and #13). Such strategic use of funds for their own knowledge production suggests that local stakeholders adopted strategies corresponding to the notion of *Navigator* (Ketola 2016). As one civil society activist and researcher expressed:

> [T]hey try to always limit your scope that's one thing so pretty much they don't think much the manner you see the foreign work but of course we have our own ways we can put what we really want to put, but you have to go to a lot discussions a lot of justification a lot of forth and back in order to convince the funders even small suggestion that's one thing that's what I find problematic. (Interview #3)

Conclusion

The absence of the state in the field of P/CVE and the inefficacy of its security approach strengthen the position of international NGOs and donors in the emerging P/CVE landscape as the main providers of financial resources. The high dependency of civil society actors on external funding exerts a strong influence on how P/CVE projects are designed and implemented via funding mechanisms and tacit conditions. Even though international actors involved in CVE agendas recognize the importance of local legitimacy and local knowledge for the successful outcome of CVE interventions as well as the fragmentation of Tunisia's

civil society in particular along ideological lines, they still pursue an exclusionary strategy of selective engagement. By demanding certain language and bureaucratic skills as well as certain institutional settings, international experts prefer to collaborate with urban, Westernized NGOs, while neglecting the presence of more socially rooted community- and faith-based associations in rural areas. The recourse to professional and accountable NGOs further represents an attempt to reduce the risk of financing unprofessional and inefficient P/CVE-programs and to avoid the possibility of being held responsible for unintended negative consequences lack of professionalism and P/CVE-related knowledge may evoke.

The fragmentation of Tunisia's civil society creates specific conditions for civil society activists engaged in tackling radicalization and violent extremism. In particular, the division between urban areas with high donor presence and rural areas with less donor intervention equips local actors differently with financial resources and options to develop expertise on the topic and to engage with international donors. In response to growing donor attention on P/CVE, local civil society activists deploy several strategies. By fulfilling technical and content-related donor demands as well as by complying with a specific institutional setting, local actors show attempts of agenda adaptation and professionalization to secure the survival of their organizations. Operating within a funding environment that is donor-driven and adopted to marketized logics compromises civil society actors' ability to design programs in line with the local context and community needs (Banks and Hulme 2012: 12).On the other hand, practices of rejecting foreign funds, negotiating with donors and promoting own agendas at the public sphere indicate that local actors also resist to the imposed donor agenda and possess agency within the everyday politics of external funding. The identified strategies and tactics deployed by civil society actors are certainly not just unique to the implementation of CVE-related activities, rather, they are present in much of the development context. Notwithstanding, determining these strategies allows to better understand the circumstances under which CVE-related projects are implemented. Introducing contributions of (critical) peacebuilding and development scholarship on civil society has thereby proven useful to investigate the interplay of international and local actors. Nevertheless, the limitations in the

overlap of P/CVE and peacebuilding interventions should not be neglected given the strong ties of P/CVE to security policy and practice (Holmer 2013: 6).

In Tunisia, the lack of a proper coordination mechanism and of a thorough mapping of existing CVE-related activities at the local level becomes apparent. Contrarily, on the level of international actors a coordination mechanism – the G7-working group on radicalization and violent extremism - has been established as a frame in which international partners cooperate with Tunisian counterparts (Interviews #12 and #15). The inability to establish a coordination mechanism at the local level while focusing on the synchronization of international efforts clearly shows the way priorities are set. The donor community should attempt to reach out to smaller and locally-based civil society organizations by helping them to develop P/CVE-related expertise and skills as well as by developing more adequate small-scale funding mechanisms at the local level. The findings of this thesis indicate that CVE research should not solely focus on how to effectively design and evaluate projects in accordance with evidence-based knowledge and structured guidelines, but also to take the broader environment in which CVE structures are developed into consideration. This seems particularly relevant in non-Western contexts of development, in which CVE efforts are highly influenced by external actors. Several obstacles Tunisia deals with are also prevalent in other countries in the North African and Middle East region. This concerns in particular the parallel existence of several un-coordinated, externally funded P/CVE initiatives and lacking links between national actors and local P/CVE practitioners (Rosand and Skellet 2018).

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