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Socioeconomic Grievances, Opportunities, and Frames: Conceptualizing Marginalization and Islamist Radicalization in Post-2011 Egypt and Tunisia, and Implications for PCVE

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Abstract

The article investigates the widespread assumption that socioeconomic marginalization helps explain the dynamics of radicalization, using the example of Islamist radicalization in Egypt and Tunisia after 2011. It develops a theoretical framework informed by social movement theory and, based on a comprehensive study of both academic publications and grey literature on the case studies published between 2011 and 2023, identifies key mechanisms linking socioeconomic factors and Islamist radicalization. It finds evidence for two major categories of mechanisms: Socioeconomic grievances can drive radicalization processes by motivating individuals or groups to use violent tactics or join violent groups, and by contributing to the delegitimization of the state, which, in turn, can legitimize the use of violence. Socioeconomic opportunities, which are basically created by the (relative) absence of the state and its services, can contribute to radicalization by enabling violent groups to generate material resources, and by providing radical groups with the opportunity to attract supporters and followers and gain legitimacy among them by offering social services. The article identifies a lack of studies on framing processes and narratives that could explain the extent and manner of the groups' own referral to socioeconomic marginalization. In sum, the developed framework aims to help explaining the occurrence of radicalization in socioeconomically marginalized areas but also contribute to a better understanding of why many disenfranchised areas do not become jihadist hotbeds. The article concludes with discussing the practical implications of its findings, highlighting potentials for prevention, deradicalization and reintegration efforts.

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Introduction

After Mubarak and Ben Ali were overthrown in 2011, both Egypt and Tunisia saw Salafist[2]

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[2] We understand Islamism as a broad umbrella term encompassing "all socio-political ideologies that advocate social, economic, political, and/or cultural change referring to Islam" (Dihstelhoff and Lohse, 2020, p. 31). Relatedly, Salafism is defined as an ambivalent, conservative current of Sunni Islamism, which aims to reconstruct the 'pure', 'true' Islam at the time of the Prophet Mohammed. Jihadism can thus be described as a militant, violent form of Salafism, which differs from Salafism less in its aims than in its choice of means (see Zelin, 2020). In this article, we use the terms "violent Islamism", "Salafi jihadism" and "jihadism" interchangeably.

actors turn to violent strategies, a process we define as radicalization[3]: Both countries have been characterized by individuals radicalizing themselves, including a high number of so-called foreign fighters leaving to fight elsewhere, as well as the emergence of numerous radical groups (for a detailed overview on these dynamics and actors see Süß & Weipert-Fenner, 2021). The academic literature offers a broad spectrum of possible reasons, including ideological, political, and personal factors (for an overview see Malthaner, 2017). The most prominently discussed explanation in the context of political Islam is the political exclusion of Islamists (Schwedler, 2011).

However, the patterns of political in- and exclusion of Islamists differed considerably between the two countries: In Tunisia, Salafist groups, as well as the 'moderate' Islamist party al-Nahda, were completely excluded from the political sphere during the Ben Ali era (1987-2011). After the uprising in 2010/2011, al-Nahda came to power through democratic elections, initially as the most powerful party in the troika government (2011-2013) and later as a junior partner in the government led by secular Nidaa Tounes (Cavatorta & Merone, 2013). Hence, there was a shift from exclusion to inclusion of Islamist actors. In Egypt, in contrast, the shift moved in the opposite direction: The last decade of Mubarak's rule was characterized by a mostly quietist Salafi movement and by the political integration of the Muslim Brotherhood via parliament. Again, the Arab uprisings marked a turning point. After 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood founded the Freedom and Justice Party that won the legislative elections in 2012, but parliament was dissolved after a few months. The Muslim Brotherhood also won the presidential elections, but Muhammad Mursi was brought down by a military coup in the summer of 2013. After the coup, the military regime resorted to extreme repression against the Muslim Brotherhood and almost all other Islamist actors (Pioppi, 2013).

Another explanatory factor for radicalization that is frequently mentioned in the general and country-specific literature is socioeconomic marginalization. And indeed, the two countries face similar socioeconomic challenges, for instance high (youth) unemployment,

[3] We follow Eitan Y. Alimi, Lorenzo Bosi, and Chares Demetriou who define radicalization as "the process through which a social movement organization (SMO) shifts from predominantly non-violent tactics of contention to tactics that include violent means as well as the subsequent process of contention maintaining and possibly intensifying the newly introduced violence" (Alimi et al., 2015, p. 11; similar: Della Porta, 2018b). For a critical overview over the term see Neumann, 2013; Malthaner, 2017; Abay Gaspar et al., 2020.

extensive informal economies, and areas that have been marginalized or practically abandoned by the state, such as the Tunisian–Libyan and Tunisian–Algerian border regions and the Sinai in Egypt. At first glance, these commonalities seem to support the existence of a nexus between socioeconomic marginalization and Islamist radicalization—a thesis that is found in research on the MENA region, both from Europe and the United States (Fahmi & Meddeb, 2015; Varvelli, 2016).

However, while most studies on violent Islamist actors in Egypt and/or Tunisia emphasize socioeconomic factors as relevant or even crucial, an actual in-depth empirical analysis of the socioeconomic dimension of Islamist radicalization as well as conceptual frameworks are still missing. Comparative studies should seek to find answers to the central question: How and under which conditions do specific socioeconomic grievances (unemployment, lack of infrastructure, etc.) as well as their perception lead to the emergence and expansion of violent extremism? The importance of this question goes well beyond the cases of radical Islam studied here and is particularly relevant for right-wing extremism (Poli & Arun, 2019). Contributing to a broader research agenda, this article develops an analytical framework based on conceptual theorizing, mainly in the field of radicalization and social movement theory (SMT), and the qualitative content analysis of the academic and policy-oriented debate on Islamist radicalization in Egypt and Tunisia. It identifies existing knowledge on key mechanisms linking socioeconomic factors and Islamist radicalization as well as research gaps. The most developed of these was the role of socioeconomic grievances for radicalization, as well as a category we call "socioeconomic opportunities", i.e. the opportunities for radical actors to provide resources and services mostly created by the absence of the state or of state services. We also identify a major research gap regarding socioeconomic frames and narratives of radical groups. These findings also yield important implications for the fields of PCVE.

In order to advance theory building in the field, we chose to draw on SMT, which was the first general social science literature applied to Islamists (Wiktorowicz, 2004). It remains the most important literature that allows for comparative studies of radicalization beyond the Middle East and North Africa—in contrast to concepts depicting Islamism as a reaction to colonialism, macro political, economic, and social transformation, or as an inherent part of

Islam (Neo, 2019). However, it is fair to say that most studies do not touch on the full width and depth of SMT, a gap we try to fill to some extent here.

The article proceeds in four steps: The following section provides a short overview of the general debate on socioeconomic factors of radicalization. In the third section, we outline the methodological approach we used in this paper and explain the strategies of the literature review in terms of search criteria and keywords. The fourth section focuses on the theoretical background of this paper, presenting the key concepts and the analytical framework we developed. Sections five to seven comprise the empirical findings in the three major categories of the analytical framework, existing evidence as well as research gaps identified regarding socioeconomic grievances, socioeconomic opportunities, and socioeconomic frames and narratives. In part eight, we discuss potentials for prevention and deradicalization. The conclusion summarizes our findings and suggests avenues for further research.

Socioeconomic Explanations for Radicalization

Using socioeconomic factors to explain processes of radicalization is not a novel approach. In earlier discussions about violent Islamism, particularly in connection with terrorism, one key question concerned the social, economic, and political (root) causes (Denoeux & Carter, 2009), understood as the underlying contextual conditions that cause radicalization processes. Particularly after 9/11, the academic debate about poverty and terrorism flared up. The notion that poverty as "a root cause of terrorist violence is widely asserted, particularly in the Western world" (Gottlieb, 2010, p. 35) and is, at first glance, in keeping with basic liberal economic theory, which presupposes that individuals are motivated primarily by material well-being: Those who have opportunities to sustain and better themselves are likely to accept the system in which they live and behave peacefully. By contrast, those confronted with socioeconomic distress and deprivation are more likely to be drawn to radical and possibly violent movements, including terrorism (ibid.). Lieven determined that it was "especially young men [who] tend[ed] to be radicalised by considerations of jobs and status" (Lieven, 2008, p. 20).

Researchers mainly compared macro data, such as GDP per capita and the number of terrorist attacks in a country. Generally, however, direct links between terrorism and poverty were widely rejected (Abadie, 2006; Bjørgo, 2005; Krueger & Malečková, 2002; Lee, 2011; Piazza, 2006) causing this research trend to fade away in the late 2000s (Hegghammer, 2016). Although there is broad consensus among researchers today that radicalization is a process shaped by a whole series of factors, conditions, or variables, and not by one (root) cause (Abay Gaspar et al., 2020; Maskaliūnaitė, 2015; Schmid, 2013), socioeconomic factors still—and rightly so—feature prominently in academic works on radicalization processes (Ben Salah, 2017; Franc & Pavlović, 2018; Poli & Arun, 2019; Schmid, 2013). Organizations working in the area of development assistance have also started to explore this link in the last decade and have elaborated development responses (UNDP United Nations Development Program, 2016; United Nations General Assembly, 2016).

However, prevailing socioeconomic and psychological approaches to Islamist radicalization and militancy often rely on a rather "mechanistic understanding of political violence: individuals become aggrieved due to structural transformations, economic deprivation, and social alienation; they then develop particular worldviews and organizations; and, finally, they engage in political protest or violence" (Hafez, 2003, p. 17). In contrast, we agree with Donatella della Porta that "[o]rganizational resources and contextual opportunities are not just given: they exert their effects especially according to how they are framed by social movement actors" (Della Porta, 2018a, p. 11). Accordingly, collective radicalization might be fueled when subjective experiences of injustice, such as discrimination, marginalization, or deprivation, are interpreted by particular groups as part of a political (or religious) struggle. In this sense, "*militants' perceptions of external reality*" (Della Porta, 1995, p. 13) are crucial to understand (the causes of) radicalization processes and the link to marginalization. Looking at the existing literature, we would argue that the switch to the actors' perspective has not been adequately implemented in regard to grievances, and even less so for the perception of opportunities arising from socioeconomic marginalization. Our analytical framework is a first step toward filling this gap. It should help to explain the occurrence of radicalization in socioeconomically marginalized areas but also contribute to a better understanding of why many disenfranchised areas do not become jihadist hotbeds.

Methods

To contribute to the conceptualization and further investigation of the socioeconomic dimension of Islamist radicalization, we set out to take stock of the dispersed knowledge on these dynamics. Doing so, we aim to bridge area studies, social movement theory, and terrorism and radicalization research—a challenging endeavor, but one of the major contributions of this paper.

To this end, we rely on an extensive review of English, French, and German literature. Our systematic search in different catalogues (Google scholar, EBSCO, Project Muse) was based on a combination of keywords (radicalization, violent Islamist groups, Salafism, jihadism, Tunisia, Egypt, extremism, insurgency) and restricted to literature covering the dynamics in Egypt and Tunisia after the uprisings in 2011. Search criteria thus included substantial keywords, publishing date as well as language aspects. After exclusion of duplicate entries, we ended up with a database of 275 publications dealing with violent Islamism and/or (de)radicalization post-2011 in one or both countries of interest, published between 2011 and 2023. To capture the entirety of the debate, which tends to be in parts policy-focused, we decided to include existing scholarship and grey literature, i.e. policy briefs and reports as well as blog pieces of recognized outlets. The entire list of publications is given as a detailed bibliography in the Appendix (N=275).

Using literature management software, our team of three reviewed and coded these publications inductively, guided by key elements of SMT, which we will outline in the following section. One team member focused primarily on the publications related to Tunisia, another on those concerning Egypt, and the third took a comparative perspective. When a publication could not be clearly coded, a second or third team member was consulted. Each entry and its corresponding codes were generally visible to all team members at all times, allowing for peer checks and double-coding. The joint coding and re-coding process spanned several months and involved continuous collaboration within the project team through weekly meetings to discuss reading impressions, challenges with coding, and comparisons between the country cases. Looking at the database, it is striking that four fifths of these contributions focus on Tunisia, which might be explained by the political context in Egypt making research

difficult or even impossible. Not even a dozen of these contributions compares the two countries of interest. The total number of annual publications peaked in 2015 and 2016, dating back to a phase until 2014 characterized by very high and public activity of violent groups and radicalization, and thus media and scientific attention (year/n: 2011/6, 2012/15, 2013/21, 2014/22, 2015/40, 2016/38, 2017/32, 2018/24, 2019/14, 2020/23, 2021/27, 2022/3, 2023/9). Importantly, the number of publications per year has declined significantly in recent years.

While the entirety of these 275 publications (N) has informed the development of our framework, only a fraction of this literature can, of course, be cited and discussed within the boundaries of this article. To this end, we have selected the most important contributions to the debate on the socioeconomic dimension of Islamist radicalization. To select the publications to report on, we first searched the database for entries that refer to socioeconomic conditions playing an important role in the radicalization process, which amounts to almost 180 publications (n). We then chose to present works that assess this relationship in particular detail and tried to give as much attention to Egypt as to Tunisia to redress the imbalance of attention in the literature. Apart from case-specific studies, we build on scholarship on radicalization, political violence as well as social movements and contentious politics. The following section presents the framework we developed on that basis.

Toward an Analytical Framework

Many authors agree that marginalization, which is best understood as a process denying opportunities and outcomes to those 'living on the margins', while enhancing the opportunities of these 'at the center' of a specific order (see Ratka & Roux, p. 67), comprises a background against which radicalization may be more likely to occur (Alterman & McCants, 2015; Colombo, 2016; Marks, 2013; Sadiki, 2019). We therefore take a closer look at different causal mechanisms that can help explain radicalization in the context of socioeconomic marginalization. However, it must be pointed out that socioeconomic marginalization can overlap and interact with other forms of marginalization such as social, political or religious marginalization (Colombo, 2016, 119f.; Sadiki, 2019, p. 1). While

acknowledging the complexity of radicalization processes, we still think the focus on one dimension—socioeconomic marginalization—can contribute to conceptual clarity.

Recent research has particularly emphasized the need to understand radicalization as embedded in its local dynamics (Varvelli, 2016) and to take its spatial dimension seriously, i.e. the existence of certain 'hubs' or 'hotbeds' (Rosenblatt, 2021).[4] However, processes at the local level should not be mistaken for processes (entirely) specific to a certain locality, because despite the obvious overlap between socioeconomic marginalization and radicalization, in many other marginalized areas in Egypt and Tunisia there are no jihadist activities. We therefore develop mechanisms that can be applied to various contexts and in turn help generate comparable data on radical groups and explain how the link between radicalization and socioeconomic marginalization is made by the actors themselves.

In order to move forward from the older studies on poverty and terrorism, we need to go beyond the focus on a general population and the individual groups. Although we also draw on accounts of individual radicalization—either because the literature under study builds on such data, or because the group or movement level can never be fully separated from individuals—we focus mainly on the meso-level of analysis to capture the relationship between social structures and collective action. Drawing on the latest developments in SMT, which are shifting toward relational and interactionist approaches (Della Porta, 2016; Duyvendak & Jasper, 2015; Jasper & Goodwin, 2011), we need to reconstruct the most relevant relations of radicalized groups; internally as well as with potential recruits, their social milieu, other social, state, and transnational actors. These relations are dynamic and constantly developing as a result of the interactions with relevant actors. A new framework must also go beyond the underlying structuralist and rational choice assumptions of earlier research by introducing a constructivist perspective that focuses much more on the actors'

[4] For Tunisia, this concerns its border areas with Libya and Algeria and especially the Jabal Chaambi (Chaambi Mountains) region (Bøås et al., 2021; Boukhars, 2017; Duhaut, 2017; Ghanem and Jrad, 2021; Lamloum, 2016a). Likewise, radicalization and respective groups are said to be "rooted in specific areas of the country: the poorer suburbs of large and middle-sized cities" (Merone, 2017, p. 77), pointing to poor, (peri-)urban areas e.g. in (Greater) Tunis (Chirchi et al., 2021). Similar patterns can be identified for the Egyptian case, where certain marginalized districts of Cairo (Imbaba, Manshiyat Nasr) stand out in terms of radical groups' recruitment success and radicalization. Furthermore, the Sinai Peninsula potentially represents the most salient hotbed in that regard (Abdul, 2020; Dentice, 2018; Duhaut, 2017).

perception of given structures, their frames, narratives, and identity constructions, as well as emotions (Benford & Snow, 2000; Goodwin et al., 2001).

Research on social mobilization in the MENA region dramatically increased after 2011, mostly using the classic elements of SMT that also tend to be applied in the study of radical groups. The four key elements of SMT—grievances, the resource mobilization theory, political opportunities, and threats as well as collective action frames—served as a starting point for our reading of the existing literature. That said, the use of SMT here does not entail applying a theory as such but rather involves drawing on an analytical toolbox that helps us to systematically assess and compare social movements (Chalcraft, 2016; Weipert-Fenner, 2021; Weipert-Fenner & Wolff, 2020). Most of these elements have undergone major developments, from objective structuralist to socially constructed categories, which we are able to build on.

Regarding the first element, we hypothesized that the perception of *socioeconomic grievances* would certainly matter. At a very general level, they are defined as a real or perceived hardship, which forms a basis of complaint (Regan & Norton, 2005). As early as 1970 Ted Gurr showed that grievances as such do not explain mobilization but relative deprivation, i.e. the personal perception that prospects of future developments do not correspond to perceived entitlements. As further research showed that, in many cases, these perceptions might persist but still not lead to mobilization, grievances went out of fashion in SMT. Only recently have we seen a renewed interest with the move toward a broader social understanding of grievances deeply rooted in a local context (Martinez, 2018; Simmons, 2014; Weipert-Fenner, 2020).

We also assumed that the *resources* of the radical group would matter and how they were perceived by potential recruits, members of the group, and the social milieu, first conceptualized in the resource mobilization theory (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Resources can be material, but also immaterial in the form of support, knowledge, skills, and human networks (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004). The literature on both countries, however, shows that the ability to generate and distribute resources is not an inherent quality of the groups themselves, but very much dependent on the context, i.e. the absence of the state that allows for an informal economy to foster and for groups to establish themselves as welfare providers.

This explains how radical groups obtain resources and why these resources can be so attractive to the local populace. The explanatory power therefore lies in the interplay between aspects of a specific opportunity structure and the way actors behave within it. This is why we argue that we should conceptualize the question of resources under the banner of socioeconomic opportunities instead of relying on the original resource mobilization theory. At the same time, however, the latter reminds us to consider more than just material resources, but particularly also factors such as the support and solidarity of the local population as well as the actual capacity of a group in terms of socioeconomic resource generation and distribution.

Our new category also builds on another classic component of SMT, *political opportunity structures* (POS), which emphasize adjustments in the political context that influence the possibilities for mobilization and success of collective actors (Kriesi, 2004; Meyer, 2004). POS were also criticized for their structuralist approach, which led some authors to analyze the perception of opportunities (and threats) instead (McAdam et al., 2001). The openness of the political system to a movement is the central idea of the exclusion-radicalization hypothesis (and its 'twin' the inclusion-moderation debate). As mentioned in the introduction, POS—objectively as well as their perception—matter for radicalization in general. For the question being studied here, however, we found that socioeconomic marginalization is seen as a process in which the state is increasingly absent or distant from the people and is thus driving them away from the POS (Dentice, 2016, p. 133; Taşpınar, 2015, p. 80; Zoubir, 2017). In this sense, the opportunity structures most relevant here are of socioeconomic nature, as further elaborated in section five. The final elements of SMT that we used as a category for examining the existing literature were *collective action frames, narratives, and the question of identity*. Framing is "a collective process of interpretation, attribution, and social construction, mediates between opportunity and action" and helps to "produce a collective identity among claimants" (McAdam et al., 2001, p. 41). Collective action frames also help to "render events or occurrences meaningful and thereby function to organize experience and guide action" (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 614). There are three core tasks: diagnostic framing that identifies the problem, prognostic framing that involves the articulation of a proposed solution to the problem that has been identified, and

framing of action mobilization that provides a "'call to arms' or rationale for engaging in ameliorative collective action" (ibid., 617). From the perspective of the socioeconomic dimension, socioeconomic narratives can be understood as "story-telling, or as verbal expressions of an individual or groups of their grievances, marginalization, ideology or worldview" (Allan et al., 2015, p. 32).

When looking for socioeconomic elements in collective action frames and narratives that deal with the question of how and why socioeconomic marginalization effects a specific locality or populace, we need to acknowledge a certain overlap with grievances and opportunities, as frames and narratives are likely to refer to the absence of the state and the resources of the group. The reason we adopt them as an independent category is because of our focus on radical thought and sense-making by radical actors themselves, as well as on the question of the extent to which thoughts might legitimize the use of violence. In particular, given the long history of a social justice discourse in political Islam (Lia, 1998; Shepard, 1992), we also assumed that framing processes and narratives would make an important contribution to explaining the mobilization of Islamist groups.

Socioeconomic Grievances

It is fair to say that, when it comes to explaining the nexus between marginalization and radicalization, socioeconomic grievances are the factors most frequently referred to in the literature reviewed here. We identified one direct and one indirect argument linking socioeconomic grievances and radicalization.

Grievances as Motives for Radicalization

In the literature, there are several dimensions to the link between socioeconomic grievances and (collective) motives for radicalization. Yet, most of the studies only imply a correlation between specific grievances and radical Islam without actually spelling out how those grievances translate into radicalization. For Tunisia and Egypt alike, youth seems to be a crucial starting point for analyzing radicalization processes (Deman & Ouni, 2017, p. 36). First, youth unemployment is identified as a very relevant factor (Colombo, 2016, pp. 114–

116; Duhaut, 2017, p. 69; Fahmi & Meddeb, 2015; Zoubir, 2017, p. 5; Zsuzsanna, 2020), but not as a sufficient condition (Bendermel, 2015; Moos, 2017). It has become more and more difficult to enter the labor market, particularly for those with a university education. In sociological terms, "[p]eople without jobs are forced to remain 'young' – dependent on their parents [and] stuck in the supposedly transitional phase termed *waithood* – waiting to be included and to become adults (Singerman 2007)" (Vatthauer & Weipert-Fenner, 2017, p. 17). Relatedly, some authors find evidence of a generational conflict or divide that underlies the radicalization of young people and aggravates their feeling of marginalization: their particularly high level of unemployment combined with the feeling of not being represented by the government, the members of which are largely from the older generation (Marks, 2015; Zoubir, 2017). In this sense, radicalization and violence might even be seen as rebellion against the previous generations, as can be seen from Ansar al-Sharia fi Tunis (AST) where "the younger part of the movement favor[ed] more radical methods compared to the older generation" (Torelli, 2017, p. 166).

Grievances are also linked to gender aspects: Salafi jihadism in Tunisia is described "as a primarily male 'mouvance' (loosely defined social trend), that has its roots in a disenfranchised group of marginalized persons" (Marks, 2013, p. 110). Unemployment hits men particularly hard as they are still expected to be the major breadwinner. Generally referring to high-risk activism, earlier research pointed to the importance of "biographical availability" meaning "the absence of personal constraints that may increase the costs and risks of movement participation, such as full-time employment, marriage, and family responsibilities" (McAdam, 1986). The current socioeconomic grievances of youth in MENA could therefore be interpreted both as a source of discontent and creating a sense of having "nothing to lose". However, it cannot explain why some people radicalize, while others with the same grievances do not – as for instance some research concludes that "relatively deprived males in Egypt were more likely to join ISIS, but not in Tunisia" (Cerina et al., 2021, p. 2). Overall, the literature remains vague about how many fighters and sympathizers actually have a background of marginalization. For Tunisia, a survey of more than 80 detainees on terrorism charges revealed that economic hardships and exclusion figured as prominent push factors (Ben Arab et al., 2018), concluding that "the vulnerability of their socio-economic conditions

represents a turning point" (Ben Arab, 2021, p. 64). Furthermore, Boukhars argues: "Aggrieved youth sympathize with jihadists because they tend to share the same underprivileged socioeconomic backgrounds and inhabit the same blighted neighborhoods" (Boukhars, 2017, p. 5). In Egypt, Northern Sinai was "marginalized over years, underdeveloped, and inhabited by a majority of Bedouin population that suffers from exclusion and lack of equal opportunities" (Akl, 2018, p. 109; see also Jumet & Gulmohamad, 2020). However, a stronger focus on the actual overlap between the grievances of fighters, sympathizers, and social milieu would be beneficial for future research.

Thus, there is a clear and strong consensus in the literature that socioeconomic grievances explain radicalization, yet this consensus is based on a correlation between a mix of objective grievances (high youth unemployment) and some aspects of the self-perception of collective actors (youth), with almost no differentiation between members of the groups, sympathizers, and the social category of young people as a whole. An interesting question to explore would be whether the perception of socioeconomic grievances among people inclined toward jihadist groups differs from those who are either neutral or completely against such groups. Moreover, the emotions triggered by grievances could be further investigated when seeking to determine the link between marginalization and violent forms of mobilization.

Delegitimization of the State

A smaller part of the literature emphasizes a more indirect link between socioeconomic grievances and radicalization, and advances the delegitimization argument. According to this argument, marginalization seems to strengthen the perception of state failure. It is often said that especially young Tunisians and Egyptians are discontent with both the economic performance of their country and their personal (socioeconomic) situation (Boutieri, 2015; Colombo, 2016; International Republican Institute [IRI], 2017). This frustration and/or disappointment, which manifests itself, for example, as a sense of being 'forgotten' by the state (Ben Arab et al., 2018, 53f.; Ben Ismail et al., 2020; Boukhars, 2017; Deman & Ouni, 2017; Duhaut, 2017, p. 71; Lamloum, 2016b; Macdonald & Waggoner, 2018) is often referred to as the underlying 'cause' of socioeconomic grievances (Akl, 2018; Boutieri, 2015; Colombo, 2016; International Republican Institute [IRI], 2017; Moos, 2017).

This is also linked to perceptions of injustice (Ben Arab, 2018, p. 98) or to a "deeply rooted stigma of inferiority" (Ben Arab et al., 2018, 53f.). For the Tunisian case, these feelings of frustration and disappointment are often said to be connected to unfulfilled hopes and expectations associated with the revolution and the "failure of the democratic transition to improve the economic conditions for young Tunisians" (Boukhars, 2017, p. 6; see also Ben Arab 2021, 74). Furthermore, there is a general lack of (perception of) legitimacy in both countries when it comes to the national state:

> These grievances are directly related to perceptions of corruption in government and public institutions, as well as institutional injustice which promotes feelings of hopelessness that leads to stress and depression and results in increased violence (International Republican Institute [IRI], 2017, p. 10).

Moreover, (perceived) alienation seems to be a dominant pattern common to both countries: Egyptian Bedouins feel alienated by the state (Watanabe, 2015, p. 3) because of "the failure of Egyptian governments to respond to their socio-economic needs" (ibid., 2). They felt excluded from the state as they are prohibited from joining the security forces, be they police or military, one of the few sources of state jobs on Sinai (Neo, 2019). Also, in the Tunisian case, alienation is said to be one of the most important motives for the "quest for an alternative affiliation and belonging" (Ben Arab et al., 2018, p. 60), because the insecure economic situation creates a mood of distrust toward the state (ibid., 65). Former foreign fighters explained that the tension in their relationship with the state is "caused by the state's inability to create opportunities and integrate young people into the circuits of economic and social life", sometimes even "accusing the state of deliberately excluding them from society" (ibid., 59).

All in all, this tension in the relationship with the state and the delegitimization of the state caused by socioeconomic grievances paves the way for the vulnerability to radicalization and the appeal of radical ideas: "[R]ebels adopt Salafi jihadism because it offers the promise of imagining alternatives to a political and social system that is deeply corrupt and unjust" (Boukhars, 2018, p. 5). As Colombo puts it in reference to the Tunisian case, the "feeling of being a victim of different kinds of exclusion ultimately leads (after the disillusion of the

revolution) to belief in another dream: the utopia of the Islamic State" (Colombo, 2016, 119f.; see also Chirchi et al., 2021, 22f.). The more indirect link of grievances being interpreted as a failure of the state to provide for its citizens, at times even as the result of active exclusion, reflects the actors' perceptions and related emotions, from indignation to anger. It reveals context-specific benchmarks regarding what people expect from the state and these help explain why exactly people who are disappointed in the state turn to groups promising an alternative order.

Socioeconomic Opportunities

Socioeconomic opportunities as a combination of elements of resource mobilization theory and political opportunities—resource generation and distribution in the context of the absence of the state—also entail one direct and one indirect link to Islamist radicalization.

Facilitating the Generation of Material Resources

Socioeconomic marginalization and the absence of the state create opportunities for jihadist groups in Tunisia and Egypt to generate resources. At the same time, given the context of marginalization, even the availability of scarce resources to distribute can explain the success of radical groups. They profited from transnational networks via formal and informal financial flows predominantly from the Gulf, but also from terrorist groups like al-Qaida (Al-Anani & Malik, 2013; Werenfels, 2015, p. 66). The groups also collected money in (unsupervised) mosques (Al-Anani & Malik, 2013) from some religious Tunisians, including wealthy merchants, and through the charity of mosques unofficially run by their members, or from their sympathizers (see Allani, 2015, p. 104; Zelin, 2020). Besides this type of support, money laundering, illicit trade and black markets (Ahmad, 2017), and smuggling in the border regions also contributed to their income. Safe havens provide ideal conditions for the maintenance of public order or security and also facilitate resource generation by any means (Bosi, 2013, p. 95; on rebel groups' funding see also Mironova, 2019).

The instability and weakness of the state in the border areas between Tunisia and Libya (Meddeb, 2020), Tunisia and Algeria, and in the Sinai area encourage the inhabitants of

the region to become involved in cross-border smuggling. Consequently, links can be assumed to exist between Islamist group(s) and criminal networks such as smugglers (International Crisis Group, 2013; Matri, 2021; Torelli, 2018). However, Adeel Malik and Max Gallien (2020, p. 746) argue that "[w]hile smuggling incomes can undoubtedly sustain militant networks, the link between smuggling and militancy can be easily overstated. The nexus between radicalization, violence and smuggling in borderlands is highly complex and defies simplistic causal characterizations", as their cooperation might rather serve practical needs than a strategic or ideological partnership. One aspect is that the local population in the poor border regions relies on smuggling and the associated shadow economy, which often occurs along trade routes with long histories interrupted by state building. Therefore, the government's efforts to tackle the smuggling networks and the associated violent Islamist groups are said to be half-hearted (Werenfels, 2015, p. 65).

Adding to the complex interplay of material resources generated and provided by jihadist actors in marginalized areas, there was also rivalry among smugglers and the tribes in the border regions of Tunisia and the Sinai region of Egypt. The violent groups benefitted from these rivalries, have established bases and now control smuggling activities in the area (Gold, 2014; Zoubir, 2017). Moreover, there was also competition and conflict between jihadists and smuggler networks (Green, 2017a, 2017b).

Attracting Supporters and Followers by Offering Social Services

In recent years, research on the causes of civil wars[5] has shifted from an emphasis on the rebels' motives for violence to an analysis of the political dimensions of life during civil wars and the political and socioeconomic contexts that create opportunities for rebels to emerge and spread. One finding of the so-called rebel governance literature was that rebel organizations must seek support and legitimacy among the populations they control or interact with and therefore "must adapt to the population" (Péclard & Mechoulan, 2015, p. 21), since rebels "do not operate in a social and political vacuum" (ibid., 22). They provide different

[5] For a discussion on civil war and (socio)economic factors, see Collier & Hoeffler, 1998; Collier & Sambanis, 2005.

benefits such as "protection, money, [and] social services" (Boukhars, 2018, p. 6) in return for support.

From this perspective, the absence of the state and public services creates a 'gap' that armed groups can fill. This applies to jihadist groups, too. In Egypt and Tunisia, the "absence of effective public services opens the field for the rise of Islamist networks with their own political agendas" (Taşpınar, 2015, p. 80). Ansar al-Sharia for example provided basic goods and food in the poorest regions of Tunisia, such as the suburbs of Tunis and the inland regions, especially Sidi Bouzid, Jendouba, Kairouan, and Kasserine (Fahmi & Meddeb, 2015), "positioning them as alternative to the official state programs" (Torelli, 2017, p. 163). Interestingly, though, there is no evidence that Wilayat Sinai provided services that could "rival what ordinary Egyptian charities or even the Egyptian military give to Egypt's poor" (Awad, 2016, p. 14).

Socioeconomic opportunities for radical groups to become state-like service providers are particularly prevalent in border regions: Sinai in Egypt and the Tunisian border regions with Algeria and Libya are both clear examples of socioeconomically marginalized regions where the state has no effective control. In contrast to the general view that borders are ungoverned spaces, especially in weak states, the rebel governance literature reminds us that the 'absence of the state' must always be considered in the context of its surroundings:[6] The ineffective state control in some areas provides opportunities for (violent Islamist) groups to take root, spread, and mobilize.

There is even evidence of jihadists engaging in a so-called "economic warfare" or "economic jihad" and deliberately destroying parts of the formal economy to create further socioeconomic opportunities for them to act as a service provider. This was part of Ansar Bait al-Maqdis' (ABM) strategy, targeting the most important infrastructures of the Egyptian economy, including the Arab Gas Pipeline, for example (Dentice, 2018, p. 28, 39; Gold, 2016, 11f.; Jumet & Gulmohamad, 2020, p. 10). In Tunisia, too, attacks on tourist hot spots hit "avenues of income generation" (Neo, 2019, p. 104), destroying the foundation of the formal economy and making the local populace more dependent on jihadist groups as a resource and

[6] The term 'ungoverned' is misleading, since completely ungoverned areas are rare: "'Ungoverned' refers to the lack of effective state governance, not the lack of governance in total" (Hazen, 2010, p. 379).

service provider (Abdul, 2020, p. 277).[7] They thereby also challenge "the legitimacy of the state" highlighting its failure "to fulfill its side of the social contract" (Grynkewich, 2008, p. 353).

Finally, governance (whether it includes territory or not) and the provision of social services is not necessarily an easy process, but it can be competitive. There is a huge potential for conflict, for example in the form of hostility between Islamist actors (e.g., al-Qaeda versus ISIS or their offshoots) as well as non-Islamist actors (tribes, smuggler networks). The literature provides a number of indications of the importance of socioeconomic opportunities for radicalization, but none of the publications we reviewed take a comparative approach to explicitly and systematically study this aspect. In future research, a more comprehensive relational study of jihadists in this regard could provide a better understanding of the effects of socioeconomic opportunities on radicalization.

Socioeconomic Frames, Narratives, and Identity Constructions

Generally speaking, the literature reviewed does not explicitly address the whole topic of collective action frames and narratives of Islamist groups with regard to socioeconomic aspects in both countries. However, the evidence we did find, which tends toward the anecdotal, underlines the importance of and need for further studies on framing processes of radical Islamists. This is further underlined by findings about socioeconomic grievances and marginalization having "created a fertile indoctrination atmosphere for Salafi jihadist groups" (Ben Arab, 2021, p. 64) in Tunisia. We found a close connection between identity, socioeconomic marginalization, and the call to arms. With a few exceptions, the diagnostic as well as prognostic function of frames remains rather vague. Most of the references we found dealt with the motivational aspect of frames. Consequently, we actually know very little about the socioeconomic aspects of the different groups' ideologies, and to what extent these aspects matter for members, sympathizers, and the specific locality they are operating in.

[7] Interestingly, one study examines the economic impact of terrorism in Tunisia (e.g., through losses in the tourism sector) and found that marginalization and related grievances were exacerbated as a result (Boulila et al., 2021). Targeting such infrastructure thus also feeds into the first mechanism we identified.

For the Egyptian case, one key observation is that the most prominent group transformed itself into an IS province (Wilayat Sinai – WS) in 2014. During this transformation from ABM to WS their narratives also changed (for a detailed assessment of these shifting narratives see Jumet & Gulmohamad, 2020). As Staffell (2016, 62f.) points out, "an attempt is made to fuse the parochial jihadist narrative, which plays on the grievances of the people of Sinai (characteristic of ABM), with the vision of a caliphate being realised, and targeting the great enemy 'the Jews'". Contrary to this view, Dentice is of the opinion that after the ousting of Mohammed Morsi in July 2013, "ABM altered its narrative from protector of local populations and their interests, to embrace a new rhetoric involving no consideration for Sinai insurgencies and Bedouin grievances" (Dentice, 2018, p. 3). The latter reading was recently supported by a frame-analytical study concluding that "[w]hen ABM became WS, its core framing tasks transformed from diagnostic frames that ran parallel to those of the 2011 Uprising […] to transnational diagnostic frames that focused on "infidels" and other IS-related diagnostic frames instead of the immediate grievances of everyday Egyptians" (Jumet & Gulmohamad, 2020, p. 18). Although the empirical observations differ, they show the dynamics of the radicalization process in regard to collective action frames.

Jihadist groups have provided a sense of belonging to residents of both countries and encouraged them to take up arms to protect their identity. After the uprisings of 2011, one of their narratives was centered on the question of Tunisian identity, the Arab Muslim aspect of which was suppressed under the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regime, while the secular quasi-European identity was promoted (Cavatorta & Haugbølle, 2012). According to Haim Malka and Margo Balboni (2016), the demands to emphasize the Arab Muslim identity were a reaction to the policies of the preceding regimes. The ideological narratives used by jihadists were "wage a war in the name of God on infidels, illegitimate regimes and corruption, in a bid to create an Islamic state based on the principle of divine justice and welfare" (El Amraoui, 2014). So far, studies have not gone as far as to spell out how the respective groups understand social justice including equitable welfare provision.

Obviously, violent Islamist groups in Tunisia and Egypt were familiar with the problems in their societies and used these narratives to prey on marginalized and disenfranchised youth. For example, and linking back to the previous section, ABM claimed

responsibility for the bombing of the gas pipeline in summer 2012, and legitimated the attack as a reaction to Egypt suffering from "injustice, suppression, tyranny, poverty, unemployment, the rising of prices of products, housing and health crisis, epidemics, gas and petrol crisis, and the struggle to get bread" (video excerpt cited in Jumet & Gulmohamad, 2020, p. 10) – referring to widespread socioeconomic grievances. Based on their research on five Tunisian regions, Deman and Ouni conclude that the groups are "framing to a great extent youth's search for identity, social recognition, and hope, and […] also offering a financial solution to their needs and aspirations" (Deman & Ouni, 2017, p. 36). These narratives are said to be especially effective because of the "close relationship between those needs [of youth] and the capacity for rapid response" (ibid.). Generally, these narratives seem to have resonated quite well with the perceptions of Tunisian youth, as Salafism "helped them make sense of their socioeconomic marginalization but also because it offered them a path out of it" (Kirdiş, 2020, p. 22). Additionally, the Tunisian Salafi leadership admits that they are proud to be disenfranchised people of society (Merone & Cavatorta, 2012).
Moreover, the 'incomplete' revolution also plays an important role in people's minds:

> In the Tunisian context, the narrative appeal of Islamically inspired violent radicalization stems from the sense that the revolution has lost its way. […] In this view, the lack of an economic future, the sense that the revolution failed to deliver instant gratification by changing and easing at least mundane and difficult tasks of everyday life – finding work, earning enough to buy food, eat meat for all meals – become not about the failure of revolutions per se, but specifically about the incomplete nature of the 2011 revolution (Githens-Mazer, 2016, 85f.).

The violent groups in Tunisia, especially AST, targeted their propaganda at the wealth of the authorities to attract the sympathies of marginalized youth and channel their anger against the authorities (Duhaut, 2017; see also Lounnas, 2019). According to Fahmi and Meddeb, "Salafi jihadism provides disappointed youth with a grammar of rebellion, transforming the Islamic State into an alternative to the "illegitimate" national state" (Fahmi & Meddeb, 2015, p. 14). This is why it seems to make sense to argue "that rebels adopt Salafi jihadism because it offers the promise of imagining alternatives to a deeply corrupt and unjust political and social

system" (Boukhars, 2018). IS propaganda is also said to be very successful in Tunisia: "It promised political purpose and social prestige gained from fighting for a greater cause, a sense of belonging once in the caliphate, and material benefits, including salaries and housing" (see also International Republican Institute [IRI], 2017; Watanabe, 2018, p. 2).

Monica Marks (2013) is of the opinion that Salafi jihadism offers young people a sense of identity and inspires them to fight for something bigger than themselves. It offers them a completely different way of living and a sense of belonging. The violent groups based in the Sinai also benefited from the identity issue: The Bedouins have a long history of marginalization and socioeconomic, but also political grievances (see Dentice, 2018), which made them vulnerable to radical ideas. Salafi jihadists offered Bedouins a platform where they can consider themselves part of Islamic Umma (Gold, 2014), and provided a more "'realistic' solution" for their dire economic situation (Abdul, 2020, p. 278). Through their social services program, the violent actors have helped the Sinai population and have used the absence of the state and/or of state services as a propaganda tool to present themselves as defenders of the region's population (Gold, 2014). The same could be said for the distribution of food and medicine in Tunisia by AST.

To conclude this section, some violent Islamist groups are very keen to exploit existing socioeconomic grievances and opportunities, for example by claiming to speak on behalf of the poor, by using the absence of the state as a propaganda tool to present themselves as the defenders of the region's population, or by denouncing the wealth and corruption of the ruling elites. Thus, this constructivist perspective has considerable explanatory power, but has rarely been covered in the literature to date. We call for systematic research to be conducted in this area.

Potentials for Prevention, Deradicalization and Reintegration

Behind the background of the mechanisms developed above, studying socioeconomic factors also is of particular importance for prevention and deradicalization efforts, even if radicalization is not as urgent a challenge as it was a few years ago: Certainly, the activities by violent actors have declined in Tunisia in recent years which can be traced back to a

relative success in terms of (mostly security focused) measures to prevent and counter violent extremism (PCVE). In Egypt, the scope of action for (radical) Islamist actors is even more restricted due to the crackdown by security forces. Also, the defeat of the so-called Islamic State as a state-like entity has contributed to the decreasing appeal of jihadism in both countries. However, the underlying push factors and grievances "have not been seriously addressed" (Ben Arab, 2021, p. 67) and even said to have been "exacerbated by the unsatisfactory governmental responses to the Covid-19 pandemic" (ibid, 80; see also International Crisis Group, 2021). Here again the aspect of framing and narrative comes into play. If radical actors manage to use the (youth's) frustration and tailor their communication accordingly, they may again be successful in terms of mobilization. Recent political turmoil and an autocratic turn in Tunisia since July 2021 as well as ongoing harsh repression and silencing of opposition and Islamist actors of all kinds in Egypt add to this equation. Hence, it is perhaps all the more worthwhile to take the socioeconomic dimension of radicalization seriously.

So far, PCVE in both countries[8] has been mostly focused on security interventions and crackdowns, which in Tunisia has been described a "security-centered approach" (Ben Arab, 2021, p. 81) and in the Egyptian case even as "military driven" (Trauthig, 2021, p. 12), referring in particular to the dynamics in North Sinai. A perhaps special challenge to Tunisia concerns the reintegration of returnees, that comprise of (former) fighters, but also women and minors (Ben Arab, 2019; Matri, 2021), and to "adopt a re-integration program for its foreign terrorist fighters or even local terrorists" (Cragin, 2021, p. 555). There are numerous demands to move beyond such approaches and turn towards "inclusive and holistic responses" (Ben Arab, 2021, p. 81) "that encompass […] dimensions relating to socio-economic conditions, political participation, and governments' legitimacy" (Rafaat & Jrad, 2021, p. 86), and also include a "development-driven CT [counter terrorism] approach" (Trauthig, 2021, p.12).[9] This becomes even more important given the fact that (mistreatment

[8] For a comprehensive overview of PCVE efforts and logics see e.g. Ben Arab, 2021; Cragin, 2021; Trauthig, 2021; Letsch, 2018. Additionally, there is a lot of research on deradicalization in Egypt prior to 2011, for instance Ashour, 2007; Gunaratra & Bin Ali, 2009; Weatley & McCauley, 2009.

[9] At this point, it is worthwhile to remember that "the radicalization of religious beliefs does not match with violent jihadi practices of militance [sic!]" (Bøås et al., 2021, p. 58). To tailor such approaches effectively, it is

in) prisons and the contact with other radicals are known to potentially exacerbate radicalization (McManus et al., 2019, p. 20).

Regarding potentials for PCVE, our framework once more emphasizes the need for development-responses to counter regional inequalities and to respond to the basic needs of the populace. Since the dire socioeconomic situations as well as the (perceived) absence of the state in certain regions are an important element in explaining the propensity to propaganda and thus for adopting radical thought or even legitimizing violence, PCVE approaches should continue to incorporate these aspects and perhaps emphasize the socioeconomic dimension even more. This becomes perhaps even more important when dealing with the reintegration of both local terrorists and returnees. It is crucial to develop long-term programs after and during (possible) detention and generally to offer prospects for a better future. At the same time, our findings underline the need to monitor radical (online) communication to understand the way such actors are making sense of these grievances to mobilize and recruit, and to counter such efforts accordingly.

Exploring the area of PCVE further reveals the connectivity and transferability of our findings beyond the Egyptian and Tunisian cases. As recent contributions to the debate have highlighted, social relations are crucial for building trust and social cohesion, particularly in marginalized neighborhoods (Berner & Bertrand, 2023). Our argument aligns with what has been termed a "relational and 'everyday' approach to deradicalization and prevention" (Ellefsen & Sandberg, 2022, p. 4), which seeks to "highlight the importance of attending to the various influences of state intervention on the development of radicalization trajectories" (ibid., p. 5). As previously discussed, we conceive of radicalization as a process shaped by various interactions and relationships within social surroundings. It is, therefore, consistent to understand prevention, deradicalization, and reintegration within this same framework. Based on our findings, this approach involves not only implementing short-term measures but also investing in deprived communities, building trust, and working towards the long-term improvement of socioeconomic conditions for all. In summary, recent programs, including those implemented in the context of international development cooperation as well as recently

crucial that "policymakers […] distinguish between radicalization and violence. While many Islamists youth have been radicalized, few have taken the decision to take up arms" (Fahmi and Ahmed, 2021). Tackling the underlying causes for radicalization, however, also minimizes the risk of people turning towards violent means.

established large research projects and networks (DARE, CONNEKT, PREVEX etc.), already acknowledge the relevance of socioeconomic factors and contexts when it comes to radicalization. Our framework adds to that insofar as it highlights the notion to approach and understand that dimension holistically and to also take more indirect links between socioeconomic marginalization, respective grievances and radicalization into account. Consequently, future studies should consider socioeconomic factors as more than just a marginal and contextual component — taking this approach will generate important insights for research as well as prevention efforts.

Conclusion

Based on a systematic literature review, this paper has developed a framework that identifies key mechanisms linking socioeconomic marginalization and Islamist radicalization. The paper brings together the fragmented evidence of the relevance of socioeconomic aspects for radicalization processes in Egypt and Tunisia. More specifically, the framework distinguishes between socioeconomic grievances, socioeconomic opportunities, and socioeconomic frames and narratives. Socioeconomic grievances can drive processes of radicalization by motivating individuals or groups to use violent tactics or join violent groups, and by contributing to the delegitimization of the state, which, in turn, can legitimize the use of violence. Socioeconomic opportunities, which are essentially created by the (relative) absence of the state and thus of state services, can contribute to radicalization by facilitating the generation of material resources on the part of violent groups (e.g., through criminal activities), and by providing radical groups with the opportunity to attract supporters and followers by offering the absent social services. Socioeconomic narratives and frames show how leaders or groups make sense of existing socioeconomic hardships and give us insights into why people join those groups. However, the main need we identified was for further empirical research to achieve comprehensive and comparable insights in this field.

Among the research caveats identified throughout this article it is important to stress that relational aspects remain generally understudied, in particular from a comparative perspective. The interaction among different Islamist groups as well as with non-Islamist

groups such as tribes and smuggler networks—including competition and conflict also among transnational jihadist groups—was observed in many cases but was not systematically analyzed in terms of its effects for the group on the ground. Furthermore, a genuinely explanatory study of the socioeconomic dimension of Islamist radicalization would include a comparison with cases in which similar patterns of socioeconomic marginalization exist, but where jihadist actors have not recently gained influence on the ground, such as the Gafsa mining basin in Tunisia, Upper Egypt or, on the national level, Morocco. Research on socioeconomic protests in Tunisia and Egypt, for instance, has revealed that Islamists do not play a role in demonstrations, marches, and sit-ins for socioeconomic demands (Weipert-Fenner & Wolff, 2020). A comparison based on the suggested analytical framework could make a significant contribution to the theorization of socioeconomic factors driving Islamist radicalization and, in turn, help tailor and further develop prevention, deradicalization and reintegration practices.

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