


Embracing Social Exclusion in Douar Hicher: Isolation and Code Words





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They are not like us and we are not like them
Even our taste is not like theirs
We do not speak the same language
While we trip out on weed
They trip out on coke and the most expensive wines
While they travel whenever they want with a red diplomatic passport
We get arrested whenever we want, the police is always harassing us and making us feel like criminals¹

1. Introduction

Jasmine Foundation for Research and Communication, in collaboration with the West Asia-North Africa Institute and with funding from the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research, conducts a study on human security approaches and hard security policy and their effectiveness in countering and preventing violent extremism. Six locations in Tunisia were selected to conduct the research, and these are Carthage, Menzel Bourguiba, Douar Hicher, Teboursouk, Djerba, and Ben Guerdane.

This paper focuses on a field research conducted in the area of Douar Hicher which included around 90 participants- 49 males and 41 females- from among local and regional government officials, civil society organisations, the private sector, international organisations, and imams, in addition to marginalised individuals who are considered most at risk of being recruited by radical groups. The conclusions of this paper reflect the viewpoints of the different participants based on two workshops, individual interviews and focus groups organised during eight months of field research.

This project aims to elicit the views of the local communities on how human security programming contributes to countering violent extremism in their areas and how security policies impact the implementation of human security programmes and the effectiveness of CVE efforts. A theory of change is developed on how to strengthen the relationship between human security programming, security policies and countering violent extremism.² It should be noted, however, that the phenomena analysed in this paper do not necessarily reflect a general situation and are not intended to stigmatise the area of Douar Hicher.

Douar Hicher, a commune in the Manouba governorate, is considered as one of the most socially stigmatised neighbourhoods, in addition to Hay Ettadhamen, on the grounds of high crime rates and involvement with extremist groups. It was established in 1988 after having been part of the

¹ Popular rap song by Balti and Mustapha.

² For more information about the project, visit <http://wanainstitute.org/ar/project/towards-more-effective-human-security-approaches-context-emerging-threat-violent-extremism>.

municipality of Manouba (Manouba - Ettadhamen) and then it was divided into two communes (Ettadhamen and Douar Hicher). It was divided again into the communes of Douar Hicher and Khaled Ibn El Walid.³ It has a population of 84,090, with an average age of 31.76 years. According to the 2014 census, 19.61 percent of the population is illiterate. Factories employ 24.04 percent of the working population, who are mainly women working in socially fragile situations. Men, on the other hand, tend to work more in construction and public works sectors, which employ 17.92 percent of the working population in the city.⁴

2. Embracing Social-Exclusion and Self-Exclusion

Research findings from Douar Hicher have supported results from earlier research conducted in relatively similar areas (Bousalsla, BharLazreg, and Hay Ibn Khaldun)⁵ suggesting that the imposed social exclusion that has been practised in these areas has created a strong sense of belonging to the local community derived from a sense of non-belonging to, or exclusion from the State, thus generating violent reactions such as addiction, crime, and hostility.⁶

This paper provides a twofold definition of exclusion, distinguishing between **imposed social exclusion and self-exclusion**. This notion extends beyond poverty and impoverishment, and touches on issues of polarisation and inequality. Exclusion then becomes a form of **social alienation** reflected by a low degree of integration as put by Max Weber. It is not a matter here of a stratified social order separating the people “above” from the people “below,” but of a reticular society, taking the form of a circle, where you can either be at the center or at the periphery, it is either “in” or “out”, as Alain Touraine explains, be it at the political, economic, or cultural levels.

Therefore, the idea of exclusion in the sense of alienation and withdrawal does not stem solely from personal factors, i.e. differences in the level of capacity among the individuals, or from exclusionary policies, or social stratification, but it is a combination of all that, and more. The combined effect of all of these factors explains what leads the excluded groups to live in closed circles detaching and excluding themselves from, and rejecting the “formal” and the state-run circles. They develop a sense of belonging to all that antagonises the formal structure of the state, which has excluded them over the generations through a systematic and violent exclusion process

³ We relied on available official statistics on the governorate of Manouba in the General Population and Household Census of 2014.

⁴ National Institute of Statistics. (2014). *Manouba in the General Population and Household Census* [Data file]. Retrieved from http://www.ins.tn/sites/default/files/publication/pdf/4_MANNOUBA-1.pdf

⁵ “Our Neighborhood, Our Democracy” an unpublished field study carried out by Jasmine Foundation for Research and Communication in 2016 in Bousalsla and BharLazreg in the context of decentralization.

Maheer Zoghlemi, “Al-shabab wal Salafiyat. Malamah’ Al-radiqaliya Al--diniya [Youth and salafism. Features of religious radicalisation],” in *Taq’rir al-h’ala al-madaniya wa h’orriyat al-d’amir, Montada al-ouloum al-ijtima’iya [Report on the state of religion and freedom of conscience in Tunisia]*, edited by Abdeltif Hermassi (Tunis: The social sciences forum, 2015), 125.

⁶ Douar Hicher verification focus group, February 15th, 2019.

used by the authoritarian state to suppress any form of pluralism and political, economic, cultural or social participation.⁷

3. Manifestations of Self-Exclusion: Hard Security Policy and Hostility Towards State Bodies

Douar Hicher's historical and social background (the history of the neighbourhood where many political prisoners and outlaws lived, the history of oppression and marginalisation...) is seen as a key factor that exasperates the sense of separation and self-exclusion, and fuels the feeling of hostility towards state bodies, especially the security apparatus. In fact, the excluded seek any excuse, usually in relation to some political or sports event,⁸ to indulge in direct and violent confrontations with police officers. However, the most curious examples of these kinds of confrontations between the youth and security forces are the ones that take place around young bachelors' funerals, "*Janaẓat al-a'ẓab*," in underprivileged neighbourhoods, where the religious funeral rite degenerates into running streets clashes between police and the excluded young people.

As was clearly expressed by respondents, the strained relationship between law enforcement and people living in the excluded areas is one of the greatest causes of social isolation constantly leading to violent and extremist phenomena. In fact, their assessment of the effectiveness of hard security measures in combating violent extremism did not exceed 26 percent.⁹ Such profound confrontations and deep-rooted acrimony toward police reveal the fact that the excluded area always contains high levels of latent violence. While the manifestations of this violence may differ in nature, the excluded young person who called the police officer "*al-Hakim*" (which literally means the state) or "Hnash" (snake) before joining salafi jihadist groups, is the same person who called him "tyrant" afterwards.¹⁰

4. Spatial Isolation and a Distinct Language Indicating a Different Sub-culture

The urban sprawl in Douar Hicher reflects a failure in the city's planning, and this is one of the

⁷ John Hills Julian, Lougran, and David Piancho (Eds.). *Understanding Social Exclusion* (Kuwait: National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters, 2007).

⁸ Participant in Douar Hicher workshop, November, 3rd, 2018.

⁹ Participant in Douar Hicher workshops, October, 19th and November 3rd, 2019. See also Mohamed Ali Kurdi and Helmi Toumi, *Tunisia Policy Lab Report* (Amman: West Asia North Africa Institute, 2019), Available at: [http://wanainstitute.org/sites/default/files/files/%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1%20%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%B1%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%AA%20%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%86%D8%B3\(4\).pdf](http://wanainstitute.org/sites/default/files/files/%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1%20%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%B1%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%AA%20%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%86%D8%B3(4).pdf)

¹⁰ Mohamed Al-Haj Salem, "Al-Jihadi al-Salafi fi Tounes [The jihadi Salafist in Tunisia]," in Al-Salafiyya Al-Jihadiyya fi Tounes. Al-Waq'ah wa al-Maa'lat [Jihadi salafism in Tunisia. The presence and the future], edited by Mohammad Al-Haj Salem (Tunis: Tunisian Center for Strategic Studies, 2014).

greatest challenges for any possible future implementation of human security approaches. Refined urban models constitute the main foundation for human security approaches.

Urban planning failure in Douar Hicher has clearly exasperated isolation and withdrawal. This was made clear through the respondents' repeated mention of the problems of urban transportation being unable to cope with the growing population's demand.¹¹ Besides, taxi drivers often refuse to drop customers up in Douar Hicher in fear of getting robbed as a result of the negative stigma surrounding the area (regardless of how true it is) and to avoid the poorly paved and uneven roads, especially in winter (which is, in fact, true).

All of these factors gradually drive the economically fragile group away from the neighbouring urban centres and toward the narrow circle of exclusion where basic infrastructure, education and employment opportunities are lacking, living conditions are poor and violence rates that take the form of different radical phenomena such as delinquency, crime and religious radicalisation, are high. Only 19.5 percent of respondents consider the programmes put in place by the state and civil society, combined, with the aim of improving employment prospects, effective. The same percentage was given to evaluate the programmes implemented under the education approach.¹² Participants stated that "The concentration of employment in the capital city compounded by the transportation difficulties and the absence of employee transportation programmes, in both public and private sectors, breed societal frustrations that fuel violent phenomena".¹³

In addition to the failing urban planning in the region and its role in geographical isolation, a second form of isolation—a mental/ psychological isolation—is observed at the level of the excluded groups' perception of geographic space. In their evaluation of the rapid railway network (FRF) project in the city of Tunis, which required building up a wall along the rail to ensure safety and prevent accidents, respondents expressed their rejection for what they referred to as the "separation wall" in a clear reference to the mental images of isolation it conjures up.¹⁴ They also considered the interruption of the construction work on the bridge between Douar Hicher and Hay Bourtoukal (Manouba delegation) an additional factor deepening this sense of isolation.

The most important factor leading to self-exclusion, as expressed by many participants, especially young people, is the policing practices and the troubled relationship they have with law enforcement. For instance, when a young man is "caught" walking around in the capital or in a "high-end" neighbourhood, he is stopped and forced to justify his presence outside of his neighbourhood,¹⁵ and maybe even to commit in writing to never do it again.

¹¹ Participant in Douar Hicher verification focus group, February, 15th, 2019.

¹² Participant in Douar Hicher workshops, October 19th and November 3rd, 2018.

¹³ Participant in Douar Hicher workshops, November 3rd, 2018.

¹⁴ Participant in Douar Hicher verification focus group, February, 15th, 2019.

¹⁵ Participant in Douar Hicher workshops, November 3rd, 2018.

This spatial isolation culminates in a linguistic isolation. People who belong to the excluded circle start to develop their own slang,¹⁶ a language of their own creation that outsiders do not understand, which is one of the most important sociological expressions of isolation and self-exclusion. Thus, language or accent is transformed from a communicative act into a manifestation and a means of social isolation and an expression of living in closed groups that are willing to communicate only with one another. It is a growing phenomenon that can be easily observed, especially when combined with behaviors such as addiction and delinquency. What poses an even bigger threat to what we can call “linguistic security”¹⁷ is the gradual spread and normalisation of this decline in communication between groups. This prevalence of “linguistic insecurity” is an explicit manifestation of social exclusion and the act of self-imposed exclusion.

5. Mental Isolation: Drugs and Crime

The phenomenon of drug abuse in Douar Hicher and similar exclusion areas cannot be tackled as an individual behaviour but rather as one of the most dangerous social phenomena threatening not only health security, but also civil peace.

This phenomenon is intertwined with several other factors and takes many forms. It can be seen among adolescents in elementary and middle schools, where glue sniffing is widespread and closely linked to the dropout phenomenon.¹⁸

The second phase of addiction is characterised by the prevalent use of raw medical alcohol, which has serious health effects, in addition to the spread of narcotic drugs, creating an atmosphere of social apathy and withdrawal from all societal roles (work, family, etc.).¹⁹

The phenomenon of hallucinogenic drugs abuse remains the most dangerous and striking form of addiction in recent years. We are dealing with the abuse of substances intended for medical purposes (the most common of which are the Methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA) ecstasy pills. It is also said that the hallucinating methamphetamine drug is fast spreading in many regions of the country), however are smuggled and taken as hallucination pills. They are used not just to provide pleasurable sensations, but also to completely alter the person’s mind, perception

¹⁶ Participant observation was the method used to collect data here. It’s the process of immersing oneself in the life, experiences and behaviors of the community under study. It requires a great amount of knowledge about their culture, oral traditions, and an understanding of their physical expressions, signs and gestures. All of this is done through a network of relationships where the part is understood through its relationship to the whole. It should be noted that many participants (in Douar Hicher verification focus group, October 15th, 2019, workshops, October 19th, 2018 and November 3rd, 2018) who were specifically young people, could not easily express themselves and interact with participants in the normal Tunisian dialect.

¹⁷ This concept was first used by the French linguist Nicole Gueunier in her research on the manifestations of linguistic pluralism in mixed societies, especially in the immigrant communities in France. She considered these groups to be a danger to linguistic security in terms of social communication and cohesion. Researcher Saleh Belaid, in *linguistic security (Algeria: Dar Douma, 2010)*, p. 43.

¹⁸ Moncef Wannes, “*Al-inqita Al-moubakir A’n Ta’lim: Dirassa Maydaniya fel Mojtama’ Attounissi* [Early school dropout: Field study on the Tunisian society],” (Tunis: Center for Studies Economic and Social Research, 2018), 96.

¹⁹ DouarHicher verification focus group, February, 15th, 2019.

of reality and distort his senses. All that, of course, in conjunction with the high levels of violence and resentment, provides a fertile ground for the strikingly high rate of heinous crime, which became a social phenomenon associated with the consumption of certain types of illicit drugs smuggled into the country.²⁰ This raises a serious question about the drug smuggling channels and the corruption schemes involved in this destructive process.

6. Parallel Religiosity or Religious Isolation

Douar Hicher is one of the areas in Tunisia that have been most affected by the widespread of violent extremism, particularly Salafi Jihadism, which is based on a belief in “physical” jihadism, in other words, accepts the use of armed struggle to achieve its objectives. This is due to all of the previously-analysed factors that coalesced into a deep sense of humiliation and *Hogra* (a feeling of being alienated, marginalised and devalued), a concept that explains the high level of hostility the youth of these underprivileged neighbourhoods display towards state institutions, including the state religion or the government-sanctioned religious establishment.

This move towards jihadism was fueled by high levels of grievance-based collective emotions and a search for forms of belonging/ inclusion to a movement which is an embodiment of violent opposition to, and resentment for, the deeply authoritarian state that maintained a strict control over all areas, including the religious sphere. Manifestations of this took many forms, from the Ministry of the Interior’s tight grip over the religious institutions to enforcing a policy repressing religious expression and education, especially in the early 1990s. The ruling regime employed its political and security forces against the “traditional religion” system under the pretext of modernising the state, and hindered the generation of religious knowledge.

Growing and continuing restrictions were placed on religious education and any form of public religiosity. Mosques were closed between prayer times and police infiltrated them and filed reports on those who seemed to be praying too regularly. Legal restrictions were imposed on the hijab and Islamic dress. Religious books, *Halaqas*, and any form of religious gathering or meeting for the study of Islam and the Quran were banned. The content of Friday sermons was controlled by the official authorities. All of these severe restrictions created a vacuum in the religious sphere and weakened it.

We could say that, during that period, the regime implemented a strategy that would both give the state an absolute monopoly over the religious sphere and repress any sort of religious expression and education. The official religious institutions, however, were incapable of managing the religious field and providing credible and relevant religious guidance in a way that guarantees

²⁰ Abdelhafidh Al-harkam, “Tounes: Al-alaqa Bayna Tijarat Al-moukhardarat wal Irheb? [Tunisia: The relationship between drug trafficking and terrorism?] *Leaders Arabiya*, July 23, 2016, <https://ar.leaders.com.tn/article/1171-%D8%A3%D9%8A-%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%AF-%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B1%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%A8>

spiritual security to a population equipped with a minimal level of religious education. The religious vacuum and the weakening of the official religious institutions have made it easier for both, moderate and radical ideas to spread.²¹

The workshop participants²² considered the voids in the spiritual security approach to be one of the major causes of violent extremism. This weakness is manifested in the following elements:

- Misinterpretation of the religious texts.
- Lack of awareness and religious culture.
- Lack of psychological / religious balance.
- The religious vacuum resulting from repressing any sort of religious education.
- The prevalence of Sheikhs igniting strife versus "exclusion of religious scholars".

The participants' evaluation of the spiritual security programmes implemented in Douar Hicher did not exceed 12.5 percent.

On the basis of the foregoing, we view social isolation as the inevitable outcome of the authoritarian state's exclusionary policies and exclusion as merely the result of voids in the aforementioned human security approaches (personal security, urban security, health and psychological security, spiritual security and linguistic security). We also see that high levels of imposed social exclusion lead to self-imposed exclusion. And that the interaction between the two results in an environment of isolation that generates social tensions, creating a conducive environment for violent extremism.

7. Recommendations

- Encourage start-ups working in the field of social and solidarity economy to provide impetus to Douar Hicher's economic growth and to set a good example through providing training courses on entrepreneurship, business creation, communication and marketing, providing opportunities to increase the projects' visibility by ensuring that they attend national and international forums and exhibitions.
- Break the town's isolation through twinning with other Tunisian cities and strengthening exchange and collaboration between local communities and municipalities. Creating international twinning relationships which endure bridges for cultural and economic exchange through intensifying mutual visits, developing economic and development partnerships and agreements, opening up spaces for joint research projects to promote the

²¹ Abou Yaarab Marzouki, "Tajfif Al-manaba': ma'rakat sha'b ashabe la noukhab Al-ah'zeb [The drying up of sources of religious education: Young people's battle and not the political elite's]", *Abou Yaareb Marzouki*, October 18, 2015, <https://abouyaarebmarzouki.wordpress.com/2015/10/18/%D8%AA%D8%AC%D9%81%D9%8A%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B9-%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A9-%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D9%84%D8%A7-%D9%86%D8%AE%D8%A8/>

²² Participant in DouarHicher workshop, November 3rd, 2018.

town of Douar Hicher and overcoming the obstacles building upon the experience of other countries.

- Fight violence and school dropout mainly through engaging different civil society actors to carry out awareness campaigns for both students and parents and provide support to teachers and those working with young people. Encouraging young people to stay in school by offering scholarships and school supplies and setting up clubs in the educational institutions (music, theater, cinema, agriculture, poetry, etc.), organising school trips and field visits to historical, cultural and institutional monuments. Adopting participatory and inclusive approaches to education.
- Develop an open dialogue among the institutions involved in strategic planning (The Tunisian Institute for Strategic Studies and the government-led strategic studies structures) and relevant ministries (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research) as well as state study centres and scientific academies (The Tunisian Academy of Sciences, Letters and Arts "Beit al-Hikma" and The Centre for Economic and Social Studies and Research) around the need for developing a linguistic policy following the language planning methodology.²³ This requires studying the needs, objectives and means to develop plans of action building on a study of the problems facing linguistic use. These problems can be purely linguistic, such as the creation and modernisation of vocabulary, or socio-linguistic that require knowledge of the cultural, social, economic and political factors, which affect how language is used and how it changed from being a tool for social harmony into a tool for social exclusion.
- Bridge the religious gap and unify the religious discourse according to "the teachings of Islam and its aims characterised by openness and moderation, and to the human values and the highest principles of universal human rights, and inspired by the heritage of our civilisation, accumulated over the travails of our history, from our enlightened reformist movements that are based on the foundations of our Islamic-Arab identity and on the gains of human civilisation, and adhering to the national gains achieved by our people,"²⁴ through creating a platform and a space for interaction within the religious institutions to deliver sermons and religious lessons closer to the population and more reflective of present-day realities. This requires developing the communication skills of all the religious actors including preachers, imams and *mu'adibin*²⁵ within the framework of a comprehensive strategic vision for the reform of religious discourse by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the official authorised entity to manage the religious sphere. This vision shall be implemented in cooperation with the National Association of the Holy Quran, that has been working through 24 regional and more than 500 local offices.
- Develop a national strategy to control drug trafficking and combat medicine smuggling through a participatory and realistic process, and establish scientific criteria for the follow-up and evaluation while taking into account the specificity of the area. Increase the number

²³ Michelle Zakariya, "*Q'adhaya alsounniya tatbiq'iya, dirasset loug'awiyya ijtima'iya nafsiyya ma' mouq'arana tourathiyya* [Applied linguistic issues, linguistic and socio-psychological studies with traditional comparison]", (Beirut: Dar Al-'alam lel Malayin, 1993).

²⁴ Adopted from the preamble to the Tunisian Constitution.

²⁵ Teachers at Kuttabs which are religious institutions for young children. Their role is to initiate them into learning the Quran as well as reading, writing, and arithmetic.

of rehabilitation and reintegration centres and put them into operation, make them more flexible and open to modern work mechanisms which are consistent with the specificities of the town and the beneficiary population, and develop a network of relations with security authorities, health and education institutions, civil society and residents of Douar Hicher to ensure the efficient and effective rehabilitation and social integration of drug addicts.

- Open up community dialogue to reform the security apparatus and improve police-citizen relations. This is done on two levels: on the one hand, alleviating the negative perceptions the citizens have of police officers, and on the other hand, ensuring the latter respect the legal procedures that guarantee the protection of human rights such as physical sanctity, freedom of movement, the right to legal representation, the inviolability of the home, the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, demonstrations, strike, expression and other basic rights.



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