

“The pandemic brought challenges AND opportunities to combat extremism”

- 1- How has the pandemic impacted your research on the link between gender and violent extremism?

I am conducting research for my second book on the question of women returnees from areas previously held by extremist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Due to the pandemic, I can not conduct field research and collect data anymore. I had planned to do interviews with women and families who returned to Tunisia, but this has become harder now. Instead, I am gathering secondary information from books and articles, and doing much more reading than writing. Despite this, I keep working and participating in many online international conferences in the meantime and until the COVID-19 situation enables me to conduct research on the ground and to talk directly to women returnees.

- 2- What are the challenges and opportunities that working online has brought to your work?

It is difficult to work online with returnees. For example, Tunisian women and men who have returned from areas previously held by

On the other hand, sometimes, being behind a screen helps some women to be less shy and more forthcoming about their experience with violent extremist groups. One of the advantages of interacting online is that the women do not have to show their faces, so they can interact with us without being visible. Often, these women cannot speak freely without their family's approval, as talking to a researcher can be frowned upon by society and a male family member is usually present during such talks. However, now they can connect online, at home, and feel less exposed.

3- How do you think the pandemic has impacted violent extremism in Tunisia?

Civil society should adapt their services to vulnerable groups, including women returnees. There are many things we can still do remotely. We can deliver psychosocial services by phone. We can establish mechanisms to report hate speech on social media.

We also need to ensure that efforts to prevent violent extremism continue during and post COVID-19. The government needs to build partnerships and strategies with civil society and other actors to face the new challenges that the pandemic has brought, and help the most marginalized and vulnerable among us, including women. Unfortunately, social aid is not always gender sensitive. For example, the Tunisian government has been distributing aid to some families to alleviate their hardships during the pandemic, but in many cases only men receive the monetary support as they are considered the head of family, leaving many women behind. The government should rethink their laws and policies to prioritize vulnerable women and ensure that they do not fall victims to poverty or to the extremist agenda.

