

A data-driven approach to preventing violent extremism in Tunisia

By Evelyn Rupert

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What makes youth susceptible to recruitment by violent extremist organizations? And how can their risk be measured?

In Tunisia, the [ETTYSAL](#) program, whose name means “reaching out” in Arabic, sought to answer these questions and work with youth and their families to build resilience to violent groups. The 18-month pilot program was funded by the U.S. Department of State and implemented by [Creative Associates International](#).

ETTYSAL adapted a diagnostic tool to measure youth risk for joining gangs, called the Youth Services Eligibility Tool, and applied it to a context of violent extremism. With this data, the program could identify youth who were in danger of engaging with a violent extremist organization and work to lessen those risk factors and strengthen protective factors, especially within the family.

“The YSET was originally developed in by the University of Southern California and used by the [Los Angeles Gang Reduction and Youth Development](#) office as part of their gang prevention strategy. It was then adapted by Creative in [Latin America and the Caribbean](#),” says Creative’s Citizen Security Practice Area Director [Enrique Roig](#). “In working with credible local partners, Creative was able to take a diagnostic tool used to predict gang joining and adapt it to a context for working with youth in preventing violent extremism.”



Slim Masmoudi

A crucial partner in this effort was [Dr. Slim Masmoudi](#), Assistant Professor in Cognitive Psychology and Director of the Career Center at the University of Tunis. Masmoudi and his team were a key part of adapting, administering and analyzing the diagnostic tool and working with family counselors to best serve the participating youth and reduce their risk factors.

In this Q&A, Masmoudi shares some insights into this data-driven model and how it was tailored and applied in vulnerable communities in Tunisia.

How did your work with ETTYSAL begin and what did your role entail?

Masmoudi: My work with ETTYSAL really began with two big connections. First, when I organized a workshop gathering together students, colleagues, Creative staff, the ETTYSAL team

and representatives from the University of Southern California. Then, we engaged Tunisian NGOs and activists that work with youth. These two significant connections built the first bridge between research and field, between researchers and counselors and activists, and between the university and the communities.

Once my work with the program began in earnest, I was the scientific and academic supervisor and coordinator consultant throughout implementation. We adapted the Youth Services Eligibility Tool (YSET), a diagnostic originally applied to youth at risk of engaging with gangs, into what we called the Arabic YSET, or AYSET, adding some risk factors and validating the tool. We then helped administer the tool to 600 youth – 100 were ultimately selected to participate in the program – and conducted thorough statistical analysis. We also facilitated trainings and workshops for the family counselors and supervised the use of the family-centered intervention approach. This work was all done in coordination with ETTYSAL [Chief of Party Halima Mrad](#), her team and Creative in D.C.

How did the AYSET measure youth risk?

Masmoudi: The AYSET comprises 12 risk factors which are: antisocial tendencies, weak parental supervision, critical life events, impulsive risk taking, neutralization of guilt, peer influence, deviant behaviors, peer radicalization, family radicalization, religious extremism – both concerning and worrying behaviors – and social vulnerability.

These risk factors are formulated as scales, measuring in some cases the frequency of the behaviors and in others the degree of agreement about certain behaviors. This frequency or degree was reflected in the scoring system we used.

We developed a cut point, or threshold, to determine who could be considered high-risk and was consequently eligible for the family-centered intervention based on their scoring.

This AYSET administration was a standardized process conducted by family counselors, who were all psychologists or sociologists.

How did ETTYSAL adapt this tool from the YSET already in use in Latin America and the Caribbean?

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Masmoudi: Our adaptation process was multidimensional, progressive, interactive and took into account the expertise of a wide range of people. First, we designed and administered an online survey by the University of Tunis with more than 200 youth to validate the previously existing nine risk factors to make sure they still applied in the CVE and Tunisian context.

We conducted a series of six focus groups with 64 youth, partnering with local NGOs. We then did a theoretical background review and analyzed the tools and factors related to radicalization and analyzed the results of our survey and focus groups.

Based on those results, we adapted the YSET questions, adding three additional risk factors to the original nine. Those three focused on religious extremism – for which we added two factors – and social vulnerability to reflect the local context.

I'd like to highlight the fact that through our program, religious extremism was proven not to be the factor that determines whether a youth will join a violent group. Rather, the other behaviors and risk factors in the AYSET can lead to religious extremism.

Why do you think ETTYSAL's family counseling model is an effective response to these risk factors?

Masmoudi: The family counseling model was effective because it was systemic, working on all the components and processes in the family system. The model's success stems from restoring healthy relationships between a young person and his family members by: building the feeling of connection to the family; strengthening family links; improving a feeling of acceptance by others; and reestablishing individual resilience.

The family intervention model showed a positive impact on the youth and their families, and the counselors were highly committed to their work. ETTYSAL also built the local capacity for youth services and strengthened networks of service providers so they can continue to provide resources for youth.

Long term, I think expanding this systemic approach would be very beneficial and we should continue to build resilience at the individual, family and community levels. I'd like to focus in even more on the role of women in preventing violent extremism – particularly mothers, but also aunts, sisters, etc.

At the end of the program, what did the data show?

Masmoudi: Data showed that religious extremism is not the cause of youth engaging with violent extremist organizations but is the result of other explaining and implicit factors such as social vulnerability, antisocial tendencies, impulsive risk taking and so on. The unmet expectations of the Tunisian revolution in 2011, discrimination and feelings of injustice feed the individual risk factors among vulnerable youth in marginalized communities of Tunisia. Then peer and family radicalization, influence and critical life events serve as a catalyst.

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Our data also showed that the family-centered intervention, which was validated with gangs, is a powerful approach to prevent youth from joining extremist groups. This approach aims to reconnect the young person to his family horizontally (with siblings, parents, aunts and uncles) and vertically (with older generations like great-grandparents).

Results showed that thanks to this approach, 95 percent of youth reduced their risk factors to below our threshold for risk, meaning only 5 percent of youth remain eligible for family counseling.

In addition, the average percent change across all risk factors between the first and last AYSETs was 30 percent. The risk factor that saw the biggest drop was family radicalization, with an 84 percent decline. That was followed by impulsive risk taking, which dropped by 46 percent.

These results showed a significant change in decreasing the risk factors related to the youth, their families and their peers, despite the challenging conditions related to the local community. They also showed the success of the program in decreasing the risk factors and in creating a real and significant change in the lives of the youth who were eligible and qualified for the program.

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