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# POLITICS ON THE MARGINS IN TUNISIA

Vulnerable young  
people in Douar  
Hicher and  
Ettadhamen

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# POLITICS ON THE MARGINS IN TUNISIA

Vulnerable young people in  
Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen

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## Abbreviations

<b>CDIS</b>	Social Defence and Integration Centre
<b>CPR</b>	Congress for the Republic
<b>CSO</b>	Civil society organisation
<b>FGD</b>	Focus group discussion
<b>MTI</b>	<i>Mouvement de la tendance islamique</i> (The Islamic Tendency Movement)
<b>RCD</b>	Democratic Constitutional Rally

## Executive summary

This report is part of a wider project, funded by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, which seeks to understand the opinions of young people in Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen, two neighbourhoods in the suburbs of Tunisia's capital Tunis that are marked by high unemployment rates, school dropouts and insecurity. International Alert interviewed almost 800 people aged between 18 and 34 living in the neighbourhoods of Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen between January and October 2014. In 2015 we published the preliminary findings of the quantitative survey,<sup>1</sup> and this report provides a more in-depth presentation and analysis of the data provided by both the quantitative and qualitative field studies.

Studying young people's relationships with politics in the neighbourhoods of Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen allows us to analyse the political leanings of these young people, who played a major role in the protest, and enables us to look beyond the institutional matters. This report aims to demonstrate how the social and urban inequalities to which these young people are subjected penetrate every aspect of their lives, shaping their identities and influencing the development of their relationships with politics, leaving them excluded from the various forms of representative democracy and marginalised from the legitimate political scene.

The report is divided into three sections. The first section is concerned with young people's opinions of the revolution, in terms of its promises and let downs, and what it has changed and what it has not. It also aims to understand how young people interpret their situation in relation to the state and its institutions. The second section deals with young people's involvements in civil society organisations (CSOs) and political parties, and investigates the types of collective action in which they have become engaged. The third section discusses Salafism and the effects of its firm and long-standing presence in the two neighbourhoods.

The first section highlights that there is a common sense of resentment, frustration, deprivation and dereliction in the young people's daily lives. Almost half of the young people we interviewed (44%) believe that their daily lives have not changed since 14 January 2011. Worse, 46% say that their living conditions have deteriorated, and they see the public authorities as extremely deficient.

In the second section, we suggest that the history of the two neighbourhoods (severely affected by a lack of public space during the Ben Ali years) may be the main reason behind the lack of political engagement among the youth. Young people's politicisation and improved access to politics since the revolution has failed to make much of a difference, and in fact, most young people have developed a suspicious attitude towards the established political parties. Despite the unprecedented rise in the number of political parties and CSOs since the revolution, the parties have trouble engaging young people and winning their trust. The survey found that the young people who are drawn to various forms of political activism do not necessarily get involved in traditional political structures, but many now engage with CSOs. This allows them to take ownership of their neighbourhood, reverse the stigma that tarnishes its reputation, distinguish themselves as members of the community and gain a form of social recognition. Additionally, girls and young women said that being involved with CSOs allows them a chance to get out of the house, or even the neighbourhood.

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<sup>1</sup> International Alert, *Experiences and perceptions of young people in Tunisia: The case of Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen*, London: International Alert, 2015, <http://www.international-alert.org/resources/publications/experiences-and-perceptions-young-people-tunisia>

The third section argues that, when looking at the relationship between young people and politics in Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen, the issue of Salafism is unavoidable. Salafism seems to be perceived in its local form: an ensemble of different groups drawn together around a young leader or local mosque. Salafists present themselves simultaneously as preachers who offer redemption and salvation of the soul, benefactors who help those in need, and ‘social workers’ who mediate conflicts between young people and help to prevent youth crime, all of which enables them to win sympathies of deprived young people. In many respects, Salafism can be seen as a backlash to the disintegration of the welfare system over the last 20 years and a type of radical youth movement that tolerates – or even values – the resourcefulness of disadvantaged young people. It offers a platform for action that takes into account young people’s needs, not only for survival but also for recognition and distinction. The report argues that the characteristic that best defines the relationship between these young people and Salafism is ambivalence. While people may not agree with the strict religious practices advocated by Salafism, they do not think that Salafism should be excluded from the legitimate political scene.

The study finds that, with the erosion of the social bonds formed by work, territory is now the main factor that creates bonds between young people and shapes their social identity. The revolution, which was spearheaded by young people, has not changed this reality, but it has shaped hopes and expectations, and granted legitimacy to their demands for inclusion, justice and recognition. The young people of Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen feel cheated by the elections and political parties, ignored as usual by the state and sidelined from the ‘democratic transition’. As a result, young people are turning to their local neighbourhoods more than ever, as the only basis on which they can build links with political or civil society groups. Even then, there is little on offer except charity-based groups, which are most prevalent, followed by Salafist groups.



# 1. Introduction

*“Nothing has changed ... Before, if you wanted to talk about one topic or another, you did it undercover ... Now there’s no cover to hide under! You just shout out loud! But talking doesn’t help you eat or drink; in fact it does the opposite – if you speak out, you end up even hungrier!”*

Saber, unemployed male, Douar Hicher<sup>2</sup>

Now that four<sup>3</sup> years have passed since Tunisia’s revolutionary protests of December 2010 to January 2011, it is worth looking into young people’s relationships with politics in the neighbourhoods of Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen<sup>4</sup> in Tunis for two good reasons.

First, it allows us to analyse the political leanings of these young people, who played a major role in the protests, and explore their views on the main issues and characters at play in the new context that came about when the former president, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, stepped down from power.

Secondly, it enables us to look beyond the institutional matters and the ongoing ‘political transition’, which too often form the main point of focus, and instead step back to look at the broader picture from the point of view of young people from working-class backgrounds – a subordinate,<sup>5</sup> fragmented social group which is excluded from the newly created public space.

When examining the topic on these two different levels, it becomes evident that any analysis of the relationship between young people and politics in Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen must take into account their specific position “on the fringes of the city and the State”.<sup>6</sup> The young people in these two neighbourhoods are, of course, not a homogeneous group; there are unmistakable dividing lines among them on the basis of gender, education and position in the labour market. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that this diversity is anchored in a shared situation, in which one layer of inequality is stacked on top of another. First, there is social inequality. As our survey has revealed, being a young person in Douar Hicher or Ettadhamen is often synonymous with being from a poor sector of society,<sup>7</sup> having low social capital and being prone to precarity and unemployment. Then on top of social inequality, there is urban inequality, meaning unequal access to the available resources and services (e.g. leisure, culture, eating/drinking establishments, places where social groups and genders can mix) in these sidelined urban territories, all of which is compounded by the effects of the stigmatisation and discrimination to which these young people are subjected.

The intention of this report is to demonstrate how these social and urban inequalities penetrate every aspect of these young people’s lives, shaping their identities and influencing the development of their relationships with politics, leaving them excluded from the various forms of representative democracy and marginalised from the legitimate political scene.

<sup>2</sup> Interview by research team, Douar Hicher, 2014

<sup>3</sup> As this text was originally published in early 2015, it was at that time four years since the protests. At the time of this publication, in March 2016, it’s now been five years.

<sup>4</sup> Here, politics and politicians are defined not just through a Weberian approach to institution-based politics, but also refer to the related “frameworks of collective action”, as analysed by Gamson in his work on the political competence of “ordinary people”, and to a sense of injustice and collective identification. See W. Gamson, *Talking Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992

<sup>5</sup> As defined by Gramsci.

<sup>6</sup> A. Dias, *Aux marges de la ville et de l’État: Camps palestiniens au Liban et favelas cariocas [In the margins of the city and the state: Palestinian camps in Lebanon and Rio’s favelas]*, Paris: Karthala-IFPO, 2013

<sup>7</sup> In fact, 27.6% of the young people in our population sample said that their fathers worked as day labourers and 23.1% said their fathers were low-ranking civil servants.

This report aims to present and analyse the political dimensions of the data provided by the qualitative and quantitative field studies. It also draws on the observations that we made during our numerous visits to the two neighbourhoods and the informal interviews that we conducted with local political leaders and officials.<sup>8</sup>

The report is divided into three sections. The first section attempts to offer an insight into what young people think of the revolution, in terms of its promises and let downs, and what it has changed and what it has not. It is also aimed at understanding the frames of reference and modes of interpretation that these young people use to decipher the situation and figure out where they stand in relation to the state and its institutions. The second section deals with these young people's involvement in CSOs and political parties, and investigates the types of collective action in which they have become engaged. The third and final section discusses Salafism and puts forward an analysis of the situation based on Salafism and the effects of its firm and long-standing presence in the two neighbourhoods.

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<sup>8</sup> At this point, the author would particularly like to thank Souhail Sassi, former Secretary-General of the Municipality of Ettadhamen-Mnihla; Mohamed Bédoui, member of the Shura Council in Ennahdha; and Ahmed from Douar Hicher, for their valuable assistance.

## 2. Revolution, hope and disillusion

Unlike their elders, the 18- to 34-year-olds of Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen grew up and developed their social identities during the Ben Ali era. Prior to the revolution, the majority of these young people had never experienced any form of political dissent. They have no knowledge of the first time their neighbourhoods were swept by protests following the general strike of January 1978,<sup>9</sup> and barely have any recollection of the bread revolt of January 1984, which it seems did succeed in securing a number of urban redevelopment projects for the neighbourhood. These young people first came into contact with politics in an unprecedented context, that of a revolution, which brought with it post-independence authoritarian rule. From 9 January 2011 onwards, it was through riots that hundreds of these young people first entered the world of politics. That was the day when, at the roundabout opposite the line 5 metro terminus, at the intersection between three working-class suburbs (Ettadhamen, al-Entilaka and el-Mnihla), the first of the anti-Ben Ali demonstrations reached Greater Tunis. That was the place where young people assembled, clashing with the police. Their motives were varied. Some, angered by the repression suffered by their families and friends in their home towns and villages (such as Kasserine, Siliana and Thala), were bent on battling it out with the police. Others were following the crowd. But all of them, or almost all, shared a common sense of resentment, frustration, deprivation and dereliction in their daily lives.

*“I didn’t know anything about politics. It wasn’t that I wanted Ben Ali out or anything, I had just seen the people from my neighbourhood going out into the street chanting ‘Allahu Akbar’, so I went out too! I don’t pray, but I was roused by the words ‘Allahu Akbar’. I saw people throwing stones at police who were shooting at them, and the smoke from the bombs, and I felt compelled to go and join in.”*

Ahmed, 23, unemployed, has served a number of prison sentences, Douar Hicher<sup>10</sup>

Between 9 and 14 January 2011, the protests gained both ground and momentum. Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen were hit by a wave of repression, which radicalised the local youths. During that unforgettable week of the crackdown on the two neighbourhoods, 25 people were killed and dozens were injured.<sup>11</sup> A mixture of left-wing activists, Islamists, *clochard* Salafists and *zabratas*<sup>12</sup> all came together and joined forces to confront the police and attack symbols of authority. They overcame their fears and realised their strength. In Ettadhamen, they set fire to four National Guard stations, the *Maison des Jeunes* (youth centre), the local headquarters of the municipality, delegation and the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD),<sup>13</sup> the local branch of the Tunisian Solidarity Bank<sup>14</sup> and the local office of the Ministry of Social Affairs.

9 Before that, as Morched Chabbi points out, “the residents were afraid of how the State would react because of their insecure living situation as a result of the illegal status of their neighbourhood.” See M. Chabbi, *Pratiques et logiques en matière de planification urbaine: Le cas du plan de restructuration du quartier Ettadhamen à Tunis* [The practicalities and logistics of urban planning: The case of restructuring the district of Ettadhamen in Tunisia], in CNRS, ORSTOM, France; Ministère de l’Urbanisme, du Logement et des Transports [Ministry of Urban Development, Housing and Transport]; Plan Urbain [Urban Plan], MSH (Paris); Université Paris 8, Institut d’Urbanisme [Institute of Urbanism], 1986, pp.84–85

10 Interview by research team, Douar Hicher, 2014

11 These figures was given to us by the *Collectif des familles des martyrs et des blessés de la révolution* [Collective of the families of the martyrs and injured people of the revolution]. The figure 25 relates to the martyrs who were killed in Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen-Mnihla.

12 ‘*Clochard*’ and ‘*zabrat*’ are two categories of people that are often referred to in the two neighbourhoods. *Clochard*, which translates roughly as ‘hobo’, refers to young delinquents with problems, and *zabrat* appears to be derived from the French word ‘*apéritif*’ and refers to people who drink alcohol.

13 The RCD Federation supervised 25 local branches in Ettadhamen and 22 in Douar Hicher.

14 The Tunisian Solidarity Bank specialises in giving credit to ‘poor people’ who cannot provide payment guarantees, and, according to Hamza Meddeb’s analysis, “was a micro-informal financial instrument ... and was a way of extending control through discretionary access to micro-credit”. See H. Meddeb, *Courir ou mourir: Course à el Khobza et domination au quotidien dans la Tunisie de Ben Ali* [Run or die: The race for el khobza (bread) and domination in everyday life in Ben Ali’s Tunisia], Paris: Institut d’Etudes politiques [Institute of Political Studies], 2012, pp.237–238

When Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia on 14 January 2011, his RCD party vanished from Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen. The party's local neighbourhood committees became volatile and three of the central National Guard stations were burnt to cinders, with the fourth left deserted. The repressive security forces, which for over three years had patrolled every inch of the neighbourhoods, disintegrated. Young people, even minors, set up self-defence committees, an embryonic form of power structure, which ended up being the only real source of authority in the two neighbourhoods for over five months.

It is no coincidence that the most visible impact of this revolutionary chain of events on the youth of Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen was their politicisation. Our focus group discussions (FGDs) and semi-direct or informal interviews showed that these young people took an interest in public affairs and were well informed about political issues and current debates in the country. Since 2011, many of them have engaged in various forms of collective action. Increasing numbers of people have become involved in activist groups, for example by attending political party meetings (14.7%), electoral meetings (12%) or 'religious propaganda tents'<sup>15</sup> (11%). Some have taken part in protest activities such as street demonstrations (27.7%), sit-ins (19.1%) and strikes (11%), while others have spoken out publicly on the internet (29%).

However, females are not as heavily involved as males in these activities. The results revealed a gender gap in political involvement, with the overwhelming trend being that women socialise in private spaces and men in public spaces. According to our observations, more female than male respondents express their opinions on the internet (31.1% of females compared to 27.3% of males), while fewer girls take part in demonstrations (34.1% of males compared to 18.1% of females) or sit-ins (12.8% of females, 23.2% of males). The only notable exception relates to the strikes, where there is little difference between the sexes (10.4% of females, 11.4% of males). A possible explanation for this could be rooted in the social struggles facing the workers (more of whom were women than men) at the sweet and textile factories established in Douar Hicher under the 1972 law, which gave tax breaks to foreign investors.

The fact remains that this politicisation of young women and men is manifested in their adoption of a new attitude towards the state and society; people are beginning to demand their political and social rights. Here are a young woman's comments during an interview:

*"Even though other people might say that it was better before because vegetables were cheaper, I think that before the revolution only one category of people was benefiting from the situation ... For example, under Ben Ali, I didn't know who any of the ministers were, I didn't know how the state functioned, but now I take an interest in politics, I watch the news, I am more open-minded. What I admire since the revolution ... is that nowadays people have an opinion, there are demonstrations, you can express yourself, and all that is a good thing ... Since the revolution, I've changed my opinions – I didn't know the dictatorship was so harsh! I thought that was just normal life! I knew nothing of the injustice, the torture, or the people who were unfairly detained."*

Amal, 23, unemployed female graduate, Ettadhamen<sup>16</sup>

The revolution revived young people's hopes and raised their expectations, opening up a greater range of possibilities than ever before. Young people, both female and male, said that they hoped to gain freedom of expression (87.1%), an improvement in their treatment by the police (83.6%), a job (83.4%), a change in their family's living conditions (82%), or see the former regime brought to justice (75.9%). They also expected an improvement in the appearance of their neighbourhood (65.1%) and the adoption of a new constitution (57.4%). Clearly, the hierarchy of expectations,

<sup>15</sup> A 'religious propaganda tent' is a public meeting held by Salafist preachers under a covered tent. Such activities were banned after the classification of Ansar al-Sharia as a terrorist organisation in mid-2013.

<sup>16</sup> Interview by research team, Ettadhamen, 2014

as well as the high numbers of people in favour of the first four items, reveals a common set of demands that includes calls for a range of social improvements (relating to work and family), improved democracy and symbolic recognition (relating to their neighbourhood). These young people have been politicised on both social and democratic levels.

Nonetheless, although the qualitative study shows that some young people (primarily graduates) value the freedom of expression that they have recently acquired as a result of the revolution, and have set about putting it to good use to demand that the authorities<sup>17</sup> give them their rights, the quantitative study shows that 44% of young people believe that their daily life has not changed since 14 January 2011. Worse still, 46% say that their living conditions have deteriorated. Some of the most disadvantaged people even miss the days of Ben Ali.

As may be expected, the most common reason given is an economic one, relating to the ongoing problem of unemployment and the steep rise in the price of staple goods. During interviews, many young women also cited safety fears that hindered their freedom of movement; some of them even had to give up their jobs because of a lack of safe transport in the evenings.

The second reason relates to young people's relationships with authority, whether in the form of the local authorities (at the municipality, delegation and sector level) or the National Guard, which is in charge of security in both the suburbs. When we questioned young people about their treatment by the local authorities, more than 85% said that they had seen no improvement since the revolution.

By way of explanation, they did not hesitate to mention ongoing corruption among government civil servants (95.2%) and the conspicuous absence of local officials (94%). They also complained of being sidelined from the decision-making process (92.3%) and treated with contempt (89.4%).

In contrast, the responses to the questions on relations with the police (known as *hâkim* in both neighbourhoods) were practically unequivocal. Although the quantitative study showed that 28.5% of young people considered that their treatment by the police had improved, the qualitative study showed that, despite a slight ambivalence,<sup>18</sup> there was almost no sign of any such improvement. It also showed that, young people with stable jobs are more sensitive to the need to 're-establish order' in their neighbourhood and are more critical of the "laxity of the authorities".<sup>19</sup> This contrast between the quantitative and qualitative studies can be explained by the gender variable; the improvement was mentioned by 37.2% of young women. In other words, this is an observation made by the segment of the population that has less contact with the police.

Generally speaking, during the interviews, young men – particularly those who were most disadvantaged – spoke of their resentment towards the law enforcement authorities. They described incidents where the police had intervened violently, with no intention of preventing the incident, often treating them as common criminals. They also reported acts of brutality and humiliation during 'crackdowns' and spoke of the harassment and discrimination that they had encountered during identity checks in Tunis city centre and affluent areas. In Douar Hicher in particular, young people criticised what they called the Saturday night 'curfew', referring to the heavy deployment of police officers on the weekends, supposedly sent to contain any potential resurgence of juvenile delinquency.

17 "Before the revolution, when you raised your voice, it was simple, you didn't have the right document, more and more obstacles would be put in front of you and you just had to calmly deal with them. Now you can stand your ground, negotiate and you can get what you want!" [Zohra, focus group with *femmes célibataires* [single mothers], 2014]

18 For example, Ahmed, a 23-year-old from Douar Hicher living in precarious circumstances, said: "Nowadays, the police is better than Zine's police. Before, for example, when the police officer told you to get into the car, they would insult you and curse at you. Nowadays, there is a bit of respect." Interview by research team, Douar Hicher, 2014

19 Young person, interview by research team, 2014

Here are two testimonials on the subject:

*“The police behaves as they did before, they’ll never change, there is still corruption. When they see you drinking, they’ll leave you alone if you give them two dinars.”*

Zohra, 29, unemployed single mother, Douar Hicher<sup>20</sup>

*“It’s the same old qaswa (harsh) behaviour, they come down on us really hard ... You can tell that the police have a bone to pick with us, so to say. Whenever even the most minor incident happens in the neighbourhood, large numbers of police are deployed and they react violently. In these neighbourhoods, the young people hate the police.”*

Mohamed Ali, 21, final year of secondary school, activist in a cultural organisation, Ettadhamen<sup>21</sup>

According to the accounts we heard, it seems that the stark divide between the police and the youth is deeply ingrained in the social history of the two suburbs. This division breeds resentment and has a significant impact on the course of these young people’s lives, moulding within their conscience an acute awareness of injustice and exclusion.

To sum up, both the questionnaires and the interviews show that young people currently see public authorities as extremely deficient.

This observation brings us to what we believe is a key question: to what extent has the revolution changed the methods that are used to ‘govern’ the young people in these areas grappling with precarity and mass unemployment?<sup>22</sup>

Through conducting interviews with the local authorities and reading the decisions of the local development council in Ettadhamen, we were able to gain an idea of the social side of governance since 14 January 2011. These sources show us that there continues to be a lack of any sort of policy on youth, in terms of either government projects or the structures in charge of their implementation. Although the ‘political and social marginalisation of young people’ is acknowledged in official discourse, almost nothing has been done to convert these policies into specific action. The only measure that has been taken was the revival of a law known as the ‘*loi sur les chantiers*’ (Law on Construction Sites) under Ghannouchi’s government, in an attempt to defuse social tensions by promoting the hiring of unskilled, unemployed people, albeit on low wages and short-term contracts. In 2011, the municipalities of Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen employed many young people on these unfavourable terms, and it was only recently that – bowing to pressure from demonstrations – around 10 of them were given permanent contracts.<sup>23</sup> It must therefore be acknowledged that, almost four<sup>24</sup> years since the revolution, the majority of young people in the two neighbourhoods remain excluded from all the benefits of social citizenship (such as health insurance, social protection, community facilities), and deprived of access to cultural or leisure infrastructures.

Faced with such a lack of political strategy to promote the social and economic inclusion of young people, the public welfare system is still the only mechanism that the authorities use to take any form of social action in favour of young people. Social welfare contributions, rather than alleviating the effects of mass youth unemployment, are only a small, optional contribution given

<sup>20</sup> Interview by research team, Douar Hicher, 2014

<sup>21</sup> Interview by research team, Ettadhamen, 2014

<sup>22</sup> Governance, as defined by Foucault, is “the combination of institutions, procedures, analyses, considerations, calculations and tactics that enable the exercise of this very specific, albeit complex, type of power, which has the population as its main target, has the overall aim of understanding the political economy, and uses security mechanisms as its basic technique”. See M. Foucault, *Dits et écrits [Sayings and writings]*, Vol. III, 1976–1979, Paris: Gallimard (NRF), 1994, p.655

<sup>23</sup> Local authorities, interviews by research team, Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen, 2014

<sup>24</sup> As was the case when this text was originally published in early 2015.

to the most disadvantaged people.<sup>25</sup> In Douar Hicher, for example, government social projects to help young people in situations of particular difficulty are left in the hands of the Social Defence and Integration Centre (CDIS), a local structure with very limited resources, established in 1991 and affiliated with the Ministry of Social Affairs. While the social educators at the CDIS are extremely dedicated to their work, this structure is in no way capable of dealing with this issue alone.

Nonetheless, this local institutional mechanism has undergone two notable changes. The first of these relates to the role of the ‘delegate’ (*mou ‘tamad’*). This person is a civil servant attached to the Ministry of the Interior, which until recently was the very incarnation of authoritarian rule and institutionalised corruption. At the end of 2011, a new law was passed, reducing the powers of the Ministry of the Interior and revoking its control of social welfare, which is now managed by the Ministry of Social Affairs. The second change came about with the opening of the ‘special delegations’<sup>26</sup> in 2012 and the local development council for civil and political society. Apart from being an important step in itself, what this measure really appears to demonstrate is a willingness on the part of the authorities to cooperate with certain selected local partners. What these two changes undoubtedly show is that progress is being made on the relationship between citizens and the state. However, these changes are still a long way off from breaking away from the old forms of governance, given the continuing lack of a real strategic plan on how to bring about the necessary inclusive methods and procedures to ensure that young people’s needs are taken into account.

So what about the role of security in governance? Under the rule of Ben Ali, the state security apparatus served three different functions. The first of these was to uphold the government and ensure that the authoritarian order<sup>27</sup> remained in place by stemming any form of opposition. In Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen, for over 20 years, the state security apparatus was sent out mainly to tackle opposition from the Islamist Ennahdha party in the 1990s, and later in a similar way against the Salafist opposition following the Djerba attack.<sup>28</sup> From the 1990s onwards, the ‘privatisation of the state’, which should be understood here to mean the seizure of public and private economic resources by Ben Ali and his entourage, gave the security forces an economic function,<sup>29</sup> helping to regulate unlawful activities, siphon off resources and engage in other types of racketeering.

According to various accounts given during the informal interviews, the police had a hand in a range of illicit activities in Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen. In addition, the security apparatus also performed a social function, which was reinforced following the introduction of the structural adjustment policies. The security apparatus maintained social order by keeping these two disadvantaged neighbourhoods on a tight police leash. Using raids, and later the Law 52-1192,<sup>30</sup> the security forces used combating youth crime and drug abuse as a cover for stepping up their containment of the ‘dangerous classes’ and physically hemming them in.

25 In Ettadhamen, for example, only 976 people receive free healthcare across all age groups, and only 750 households are in receipt of the benefits reserved for the most disadvantaged families.

26 Since its establishment under the decree of 12 April 2011, the Ettadhamen-Mnihla special delegation has been presided over successively by Jaad Mansouri, Abdalkader Aloui and Abderraouf Mezi.

27 On authoritarian rule in Tunisia, see in particular O. Lamoulou, *Tunisie: Quelle transition démocratique?* [Tunisia: What democratic transition?], in J.-N. Ferrié and J.-C. Santucci (eds.), *Dispositifs de démocratisation et dispositifs autoritaires en Afrique du Nord* [Application of democratisation and authoritarian devices in North Africa], Aix-en-Provence: CNRS Editions, 2006, pp.121–147; and V. Geisser and M. Camau, *Le syndrome autoritaire: Politique en Tunisie de Bourguiba à Ben Ali* [The syndrome of authoritarianism: Politics in Tunisia from Bourguiba to Ben Ali], Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2003.

28 The neighbourhood of Ettadhamen, which has an area of around four square kilometres, was covered by two district units of the National Guard.

29 See the works of Béatrice Hibou, in particular B. Hibou, *La force de l’obéissance* [The force of obedience], Paris: La Découverte, 2006.

30 This law provides for cannabis users to be given prison sentences of one to five years and fines of 1,000–3,000 Tunisian dinars (US\$490–1,470).

It seems that, although the revolution did manage to overturn the predatory and political functions of the security forces, it did nothing to alter their social role.

Thameur, a young rapper from Douar Hicher, had this to say on the subject:<sup>31</sup>

*“You can see what has happened in the area. There are young people who spend a year without going into the city because the police can stop the number 56 bus, just before the tunnel or at the Bab el-Khadra terminus, to check people’s papers, and they categorise people at random, saying, ‘You, come over here! You, here!’ They even find excuses to send students off to do their military service!”*

It all runs on in a continuous cycle, as if successive governments were all simply using the sovereign powers of the state, police and judiciary to continue excluding young people. As the state’s ability to govern is weakened, this generates a sense of social decline among young people, which causes them to remain confrontational in their attitude towards the state authorities. Essentially, now as before, governance in Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen has failed to create an institutional bond of political and social citizenship between young people and the state. It is therefore no surprise that many young people see governance as a sort of restrictive “workfare”, connected to an expansive “prisonfare”, all of which fuels the vicious cycle of their exclusion.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Interview by research team, Douar Hicher, 2014

<sup>32</sup> We have borrowed these concepts from L. Wacquant, *Punishing the poor: The neoliberal government of social insecurity*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009.



### 3. Weak links with organisations and political groups

Somewhat curiously, and despite their disenchantment, young people's faith in democracy does not seem to have been rattled. More specifically, when they were questioned about the best ways to improve their situation, their responses indicated that they subscribed to the model of representative democracy. Around half spoke of voting and belonging to a CSO, and 27.1% said that they were involved with a political party. A significant proportion (40.6%) of the respondents said that participating in demonstrations was an important form of legitimate activism and only 5.9%, split evenly between Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen, were willing to resort to violence.

Nevertheless, the young people who are drawn to various forms of political activism do not necessarily get involved in traditional political structures. In both Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen, only 8.2% of young people said that they were members of a CSO and only 4.5% were members of a political party.<sup>33</sup>

This means that, despite the unprecedented rise in the number of political parties and CSOs since the revolution, the parties have trouble engaging young people and winning their trust.

So why is there such a discrepancy between young people's perceptions of political citizenship and their involvement in it? Many said that the most important areas of their lives were work (88.8%) and religion (88.6%), with politics trailing much further behind (10%). From our perspective, this low figure shows that young people are keeping their distance from institutional politics and becoming less and less engaged in both political parties and CSOs.

In terms of political affiliation, the quantitative study starkly highlighted that young people severely mistrust political leaders. In fact, 98.8% of the respondents felt that politicians did not act for the common good, but instead served their own personal interests. All age groups share this negative opinion, although it should be noted that there is a slight dip among the 30–34 age group. The respondents also provided a second explanation for this, saying that they currently have neither faith in nor any influence<sup>34</sup> over politics, with many saying that they had kept away from debates on the constitution at the Constituent Assembly, in particular.

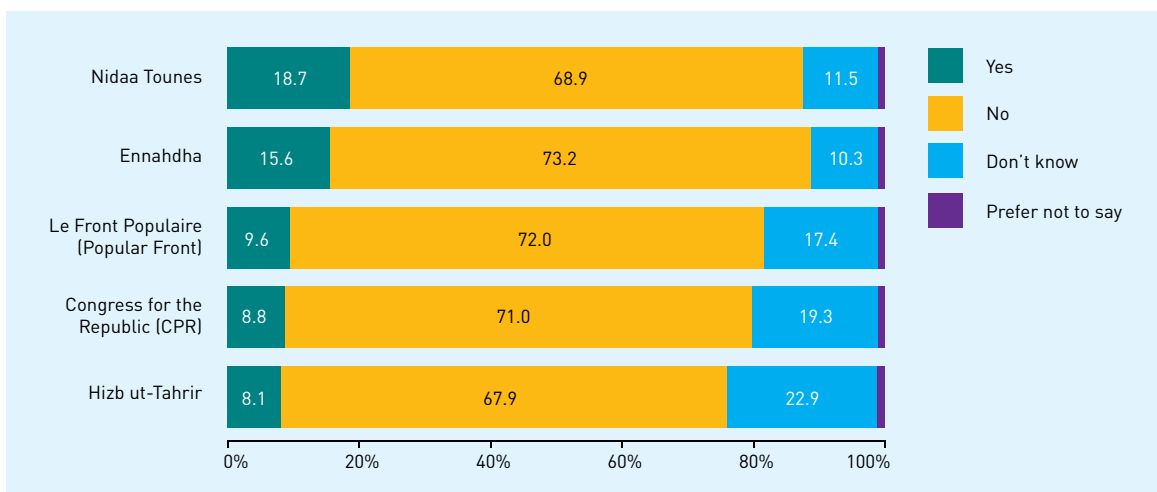
Our results also provide an indication of young people's political stances. They show that Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen, much like the rest of the country, albeit to a lesser extent, are marked by the polarisation between Nidaa Tounes and Ennahdha, the two parties young people trust the most (even if the difference between the two is only very slight, as shown in the tables below). Likewise, the results show that, four months prior to the first round of the presidential elections, people had a positive impression of the outgoing president Moncef Marzouki, who came in second, with the current president Beji Caid Essebsi topping the list.

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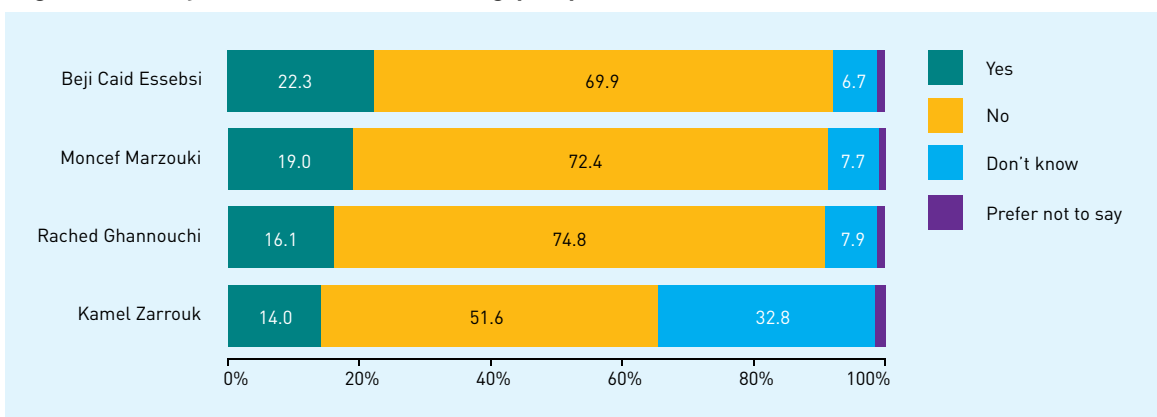
<sup>33</sup> These results confirm those of the opinion poll conducted by the National Youth Observatory in April 2013, which showed that very few young people participated in political life: no more than 2.7% of young people were members of political parties, while fewer than 19% of the respondents expressed a preference for a political party; National Youth Observatory Social Science Forum, Youth and Participation in Public Life, Youth Barometer, Tunis, 2013.

<sup>34</sup> On this topic, see also the most recent report by the World Bank on young people in Tunisia – World Bank, Participation, voix et citoyenneté active de la jeunesse [Participation, voice and active citizenship of the youth], in World Bank, Tunisie: Surmonter les obstacles à l'inclusion des jeunes [Tunisia: Breaking the barriers to youth inclusion], Washington DC: World Bank, 2014, [http://www.banquemondiale.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/MNA/tunisia/breaking\\_the\\_barriers\\_to\\_youth\\_inclusion\\_fre\\_chap2.pdf](http://www.banquemondiale.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/MNA/tunisia/breaking_the_barriers_to_youth_inclusion_fre_chap2.pdf)

**Figure 1: Do you trust the following political parties?**



**Figure 2: Do you trust the following people?**



The quantitative survey indicates that young people's opinions are not significantly different from those of their elders and reflect the political context of the country as a whole. There is very little difference in the levels of support for the left-wing party (*Front Populaire*), centre party (CPR) and Hizb ut-Tahrir, highlighting the rickety balance of power and the fragmentation of party support in the two neighbourhoods.

Nevertheless, the relative popularity of Nidaa Tounes, backed up by the fact that Beji Caid Essebsi was considered by the respondents to be the most trustworthy public figure, reveals that a political reshuffle is under way in the two suburbs. This indicates not only that Ennahdha has lost its hegemonic position in two of its traditional fiefdoms, but more importantly that it is not as effective at appealing to young people as it was in the 1980s. In order to understand this empirical result, which was further validated by the results of the most recent legislative elections in November 2014,<sup>35</sup> it would be useful at this stage to take a brief look at the historical context.

The social and political history of Ennahdha is best understood by first looking at Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen. It was in these suburbs, in the early 1980s, that the first seeds were sown of the *Mouvement de la tendance islamique* (The Islamic Tendency Movement, MTI), the predecessor of Ennahdha, which was mainly formed of students and teachers. Through a range of activities

<sup>35</sup> In Ettadhamen, Ennahdha won 6,288 votes and Nidaa Tounes won 5,147, out of a total of 17,488 votes. In Douar Hicher, out of an estimated total of 17,486 votes, Ennahdha won 5,384 and Nidaa Tounes won 5,280.

based on a ‘bottom-up’ approach to Islamising society, the first generation of young Islamists set to work building mosques, establishing organisations to safeguard the Koran, holding religious sermons and winning sympathisers. Between 1981 and 1987, both neighbourhoods lay at the mercy of President Habib Bourguiba’s policies, which at times attempted to institutionalise them and at others to eradicate them. In April 1986, a bout of repression against the MTI led to the fall of its first martyr, a young student from Ettadhamen named Othman Ben Othman. From then, the police clamped down even further on the two neighbourhoods and the anti-Islamist raids became much more frequent. In 1987, Ben Ali’s coup d’état and the ensuing brief period of calm between the authorities and the Islamists allowed the Islamists to strengthen their stronghold and consolidate their territorial presence in Ettadhamen and Douar Hicher. It was then that both neighbourhoods went through their “golden age” of Islamism, to the extent that “establishments selling alcohol all but disappeared”.<sup>36</sup> In 1990, however, with the end of the ‘grace period’, the security forces brutally regained their control and started stepping up their repression of the Islamist movement.<sup>37</sup> Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen, where part of the leadership of Ennahdha went underground, formed the primary focal point for an unrelenting strategy designed to ‘root out political Islam at its source’. During that period, a total of three activists from the two neighbourhoods died and dozens more were arrested and convicted.<sup>38</sup>

With its status rendered illegal, its activists imprisoned and its structures dismantled, it was then that Ennahdha, despite having lost the battle for legitimate recognition, managed to build up its ‘victim capital’. The path across the desert would be a long one. When the Islamist party executives from Ettadhamen and Douar Hicher left prison in early 2000, their participation in politics was thwarted by heavy police control. Left powerless, they blamed the situation on the ‘disengagement of the new generation’. Members of the new generation who identified with Islam were drawn to a new form of activism, influenced by the attacks of 11 September 2001, and radicalised through Al-Qaeda websites and Salafist television channels. Then, in 2007, with the notorious shooting incident in the town of Soliman, to the southeast of Tunis, the Ben Ali authorities were forced to slightly loosen their police grip on the *Nahdawis* (supporters of Ennahdha), as part of a balancing act to try to quell the rise of Salafism.

The 2011 revolution gave new life to Ennahdha, which quickly set about reactivating its dormant networks and rebuilding its structures. It campaigned in Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen, where it opened offices and started preparing for the legislative elections. With the RCD out of the picture and the security apparatus in tatters, it was able to become a major local player. With the October 2011 ballot, Ennahdha gained electoral legitimacy and took power. In Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen, it soon faced three challenges: to respond to the social expectations of the residents, to manage public affairs despite having no control over local institutions, and to address the radicalisation of the young people who had turned to Salafism or Hizb ut-Tahrir. Being in power proved to be an enormous challenge. The local party officials whom we met frankly acknowledged their failure to overcome that challenge. Ennahdha has clearly disappointed many young people, who hold the party responsible for failing to solve the unemployment problem and bring about change in their daily lives. It is therefore no surprise that 88.9% of the respondents who said that they did not trust the Ennahdha party were from the poorest ranks of society, while 41.1% of those who said they did trust it were middle managers.

Some people criticised the party for compromising the old regime, while others condemned its lenient attitude towards Salafism. A number of respondents also reproached the party for its return to favouritism and cronyism.

36 Local Ennahdha leader, interviews by research team, multiple locations, March 2014

37 For more on these events, see O. Lamoum and B. Ravenel (eds.), *La Tunisie de Ben Ali [The Tunisia of Ben Ali]*, Paris: L’Harmattan, 2003.

38 In Ettadhamen, 92 members of Ennahdha were convicted, three of whom were female. See *Ibid.*

On the other hand, those who supported the party focused on the fact that it had managed to break away from the old order.

*“With Ennahdha, I can tell that they are sincere, they pay attention to the zawali (poor) ... Yes, they are in power because we chose them. I feel like Nidaa Tounes is the party of Tbal’it (they’re all talk), they’re just bringing back people from the RCD.”*

Mohamed, 21, day worker in a bakery, Douar Hicher<sup>39</sup>

At any rate, although the history of the two neighbourhoods – which were severely affected by the confiscation of public space during the Ben Ali years – may be the main reason behind the lack of political engagement among the youth, the politicisation of young people and their improved access to politics since the revolution has failed to make much of a difference. On the contrary, most young people have developed a suspicious attitude towards the established political parties.<sup>40</sup> The Ennahdha party, which nonetheless has the most support in Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen, is barely an exception to that rule.

Let us now look at participation in CSOs. In both Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen, only a quarter of young people can name a CSO that is active in their neighbourhood. Of all the CSOs identified, 55% were sports associations, 18.5% were charity groups, 10.5% were religious groups and 10.3% were cultural organisations. Our results provide a general overview of the range of CSOs active in the two neighbourhoods. On one hand, the results show that there are almost no advocacy groups (with the notable exception of the Ettadhamen-based Tahadi group, which works on human rights through the arts). On the other hand, they show an upsurge in religion-based service associations.<sup>41</sup> It should be remembered, of course, that this hypothesis loses significance when you take into account the low participation rates in such organisations; nevertheless, both the quantitative and qualitative studies arrived at the same result.

The CSOs have taught their young members to contribute to society through solidarity and mutual assistance and provided them with a moral framework of reference. These young people are thus strongly attached to their respective CSOs for a number of reasons. In the interviews, they said that the CSOs provided them with a listening ear, accessible support, a social bond and a feeling of belonging to a group, all of which gave them an identity, a degree of responsibility and access to a form of citizenship. Being involved in a CSO allows them to take ownership of their neighbourhood, reverse the stigma that tarnishes its reputation, distinguish themselves as members of the community and gain a form of social recognition. Girls and young women said that being involved in CSOs allowed them to shake free of the bonds placed upon them by society and offered them a chance to get out of the house, or even the neighbourhood.

*“Personally, I joined the Scouts after the revolution, and it’s thanks to them that I got to know Ettadhamen ... They put me in touch with this suburb. I feel that I am making a contribution to the young people here, I have a relationship with them, as well as with the parents and teachers, it’s great being a Scout in Ettadhamen [laughs].”*

Ghada, member of the Scouts, Ettadhamen<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Interview by research team, Douar Hicher, 2014

<sup>40</sup> This change seems to have also affected young people in other countries of the ‘Arab spring’, as shown by the study carried out by the Al Jazeera Studies Centre. See B. Atassi, Poll: Arab youth feel alienated from politics, Al Jazeera, 29 July 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/%20middleeast/%202013/07/2013729103126233170.html>

<sup>41</sup> This term is translated from the French ‘associations de service à référent religieux’, which refers to the distinction made by Ben Néfissa. See S. Ben Néfissa, ONG et gouvernance dans le monde arabe: l’enjeu démocratique [NGOs and governance in the Arab world: democratic issues, studies and documents], Études et documents, No. 10, Cairo: CEDEJ, 2003

<sup>42</sup> Interview by research team, Ettadhamen, 2014

*“The one thing that gives human beings most hope is a feeling of belonging. For example, you can’t give something to Tunisia if you don’t feel as if you belong to it ... Organisations like the Scouts give you the feeling of being part of something, they expect something from you. It’s a place where you can make friends, make jokes, eat together and have fun. For example I get to the Sahib al-Taabbi’ Islamic cultural centre at 6am and I stay there until 5pm ... And the Nibrass Human Development Association teaches you to be independent and positive. Now and then you might go through a difficult time, and you’ll need some help or guidance.”*

Hassen, *lycée* [upper secondary school] student involved in a number of different activist groups, Ettadhamen<sup>43</sup>

If you look at the facts, of course, the most prominent types of CSOs in Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen are the charities and religious groups, which is the result of the extensive influence of the Islamist party that for over three<sup>44</sup> years has been getting involved in all aspects of society as a way of “reinventing political proximity”.<sup>45</sup> While it may be difficult to understand the exact nature of the links between these groups and the various Islamist groups, or how autonomous they really are when it comes to decision-making and funding, they evidently play a significant role in structuring youth society.

Ennahdha’s work with CSOs in Ettadhamen offers clues to help understand the situation. To compensate for its low popularity rates among young people and overcome what our researchers Haenni and Tammam have dubbed the “socio-theological malaise” experienced by Islamists when it comes to social issues,<sup>46</sup> the party appears to invest in two types of youth group structures: firstly, those that formerly had close ties to the RCD, such as the Scouts or certain sports associations; and secondly, charity-based or religious groups.<sup>47</sup> All these CSOs – some of which have gradually become integrated into the institutions and been granted special status as partners of the local authorities – are effectively a sort of non-political mechanism that provides young people with social structures. Another factor that should be taken into account at this stage is that, alongside the moral values that underpin these groups, a new concept of ‘personal development’ is also emerging. This concept, which stems from managerial culture and promotes an ideology of personal salvation and self-realisation, can be seen as a type of socialisation through what has been termed “*Islam de marché* (Islam market)”.<sup>48</sup>

43 Interview by research team Ettadhamen, 2014

44 As was the case when this text was originally published in early 2015.

45 M. Catusse, *Les coups de force de la représentation* [The coups of representation], in M. Bennani-Chraïbi, M. Catusse and J.-C. Santucci (eds.), *Scènes de coulisses de l’élection au Maroc: Les législatives 2000* [Behind the scenes of the elections in Morocco: Legislation of 2000], Paris: Karthala, 2005, p.97

46 P. Haenni and H. Tammam, *Les Frères Musulmans égyptiens face à la question sociale: Autopsie d’un malaise socio-théologique* [The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood face the social question: Autopsy of socio-theological malaise], Geneva: Institut Religioscope [Religioscope Institute], *Etudes et analyses* [Studies and analyses], 2009

47 Such as *Sanabil Al-Khayr*, *Marhama lil Amal al-Kyariyya* and *Chabab al Sahwa al-Islamiyya*.

48 On this concept, see P. Haenni, *L’Islam de marché: L’autre révolution conservatrice* [The Islam market: Another conservative revolution], Paris: Seuil, 2005

## 4. Salafism: A new form of radicalism among young people in disadvantaged areas

When looking at the relationship between young people and politics in Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen, the issue of Salafism is unavoidable. Our study, with its large population sample and unique context, serves as a sort of ‘in vivo’ observatory that can be used to gain a clear view of how Salafism works in a specific local context.

First and foremost, let us make a note about methodology. When we embarked on our research project in February 2014, Ansar al-Sharia had already been listed as a terrorist group (back in August 2013). Since then, many alleged Salafist activists had been arrested in both neighbourhoods. That context meant that there was a certain feeling of uneasiness surrounding our field study and that people were, understandably, suspicious of us. It is therefore necessary to take a cautious approach when interpreting the information that we have collected.

We refer to Salafism here not as a single concept but rather as a range of different concepts that cover a much broader context than just jihadism.<sup>49</sup> The term ‘Salafism’ refers to a heterogeneous movement that includes both individuals and fairly fluid, loosely structured collectives, some more organised than others, but all essentially advocating a return to Islam in its original root form, untainted by any new, corrupting influences.<sup>50</sup> In Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen, although Ansar al-Sharia is based on a jihadist set of beliefs,<sup>51</sup> it does not encompass the whole range of Salafist tendencies, even if, until it was banned, it does seem to have been one of the most organised and best-known Salafist groups. Moreover, most of the respondents, while describing Salafism each in their own way, did not see it as forming a single cohesive bloc. They spoke of it in the plural, mentioning *salafiyyin* (Salafists) or *awlad al-salafiyya* (the ‘children of Salafism’). They often drew a distinction between those they saw as ‘good’ Salafists and ‘bad’ Salafists, with the latter being labelled as ‘extremist’ (*mutashaddid*) or ‘terrorist’ (*irhabi*).

When the young people were asked if they considered Salafism to be ‘a political party wanting to apply Sharia law’, 63.8% rejected this definition. Salafism seems to be perceived in its local form: an ensemble of different groups drawn together around a young leader or local mosque.

With that in mind, the results of the study tell us that, in order to understand the sociology of Salafism and how people get involved in it, we can look at two factors: territory and age.

If one examines Salafism by looking at how well established it is in different areas, some contrasting results emerge, highlighting differences between Ettadhamen and Douar Hicher. In Ettadhamen, 17.3% of young people trust Abou Iyadh, compared with only 10.3% in Douar Hicher. Similarly, 46.3% of young people in Ettadhamen disagree with the definition of Salafism as an ‘extremist group that wants to impose its views by force’, compared with 32.5% in Douar Hicher. Lastly, two-thirds of those in Ettadhamen were against the classification of Ansar al-Sharia as a ‘terrorist organisation’, compared with 50.4% in Douar Hicher.

At first glance, these results may lead us to believe that the young people of Ettadhamen are more pro-Salafist than those of Douar Hicher. However, this assumption is perhaps undermined by the fact that, according to the study, 69.3% of young people in Douar Hicher think that Salafism is

49 According to a security official in Ettadhamen, quietist Salafism is more prevalent in the neighbourhood than jihadist Salafism.

50 On the definition of Salafism, see B. Rougier (ed.), *Qu'est-ce que le Salafisme?* [What is Salafism?], Paris: PUF, collection Proche-Orient, 2008.

51 Jihadist Salafism is also heterogeneous in itself. See the typology described by Rougier, *Ibid.*, pp.15–17.

essentially “kids from the suburbs (known as ‘*ouled houma*’) who conform to religion”, compared with 56.8% in Ettadhamen.

These ambivalent results are in fact remarkably significant. They show that two concurrent dimensions make up the structure of Salafism among the youth population in the two neighbourhoods: there is both a political dimension, which seems to be predominant in Ettadhamen, and a territorial dimension (i.e. ‘*ouled houma*’), which is more prevalent in Douar Hicher.

So what does ‘*ouled houma*’ mean? The answer to this question is offered by Ali, a young unemployed man from Douar Hicher who has done a number of stints in prison:<sup>52</sup>

*“Whether you’re a zatal (someone who smokes joints), Salafist, bricklayer, painter ... no one is relying on the country any more, everyone has to make their own way in life.”*

The term ‘*ouled houma*’ is thus rooted in a strong sense of proximity and solidarity. Firstly, this indicates a sort of social proximity, since both *Salafis* and *zatal*s – to borrow these two terms, which appear to symbolise ‘good’ and ‘bad’ in the moral compass of many young people – in spite of their conflicting approaches to religion, share the same daily existence full of obstacles, difficulties, hardship and uncertainty. Overlooked by the state, they are all forced to be creative and resourceful, fend for themselves and find their own way; the only option is to come up with strategies for social, economic and symbolic survival. They all share the same universe and develop the same urban practices. In sum, they are bound closely together by a shared fate.

Added to this, there is spatial proximity, based on the *houma* (disadvantaged suburb), a space that is stigmatised, effectively disqualifying all of its young people from society, because in both Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen, where you come from defines your social class. It draws a dividing line between a protective ‘us’ and a hostile, malicious ‘them’, in the form of not only the state and politicians, but also the media. After all, was it not the media that exaggerated the facts in their coverage of the events at Ennour mosque in Douar Hicher, according to 65.9% of young people? And in doing so, were they not tarnishing the image of the neighbourhood, as stated by 89.2% of the respondents?

For the young people who see Salafists as *ouled houma*, a *Salafi* is first and foremost a young person who lives in the same neighbourhood as them. A friend and neighbour, a distant cousin, this person goes to the same cafés, hangs around in the same streets, is part of the same space – that is to say, a space where all the different youth identities merge together on the painful shared ground of deprivation and unemployment. The identity of the Salafist, just like that of any other young person, is primarily an “identity of defiance”, to quote J. C. Scott.<sup>53</sup>

Given that young people’s social identity is marked by the stigma associated with their neighbourhood,<sup>54</sup> it is impossible to discuss Salafism without taking into account this sense of proximity and solidarity that young people feel towards it. Since the revolution, the Salafist movement has successfully harnessed these feelings to win young people’s sympathies.

In fact, although the first signs of Salafist activism in Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen were already appearing between 2000 and 2010, when young people tempted by jihad in Iraq and Mali were arrested,<sup>55</sup> the real rise of Salafism began after 14 January 2011, when it gained visibility not only through its black banners and distinctive dress code, but also by establishing religious propaganda

52 Interview by research team, Douar Hicher, 2014

53 Here we are referring to the French expression “*identité de défiance*” [identity of defiance] used by James C. Scott. See J. C. Scott, *Zomia ou l’art de ne pas être gouverné* [Zomia or the art of not being governed], Paris: Seuil, 2009

54 See Chapter 1 on the neighbourhood, in O. Lamoum and M. Ali Ben Zina, *Les jeunes de Douar Hicher et d’Ettadhamen: Une enquête sociologique* [Youth in Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen: A sociological survey], International Alert and Arabesque, March 2015

55 Imen Triki and Anouer Ouled Ali, lawyers, interviews with the author, Tunis, February and March 2014

tents and gaining control of certain mosques.<sup>56</sup> These features, which have been widely broadcast by the media, are part of a rise in this brand of social activism. The Salafists have been gaining ground by providing useful services for the neighbourhood and its youth population – although this has also resulted in tensions and conflicts with young people. When the National Guard disappeared from both neighbourhoods after the fall of Ben Ali, young Salafists organised patrols and helped to protect residents and their property from *clochards* and other troublemakers. They then started getting involved in charity and social work, which they took care to promote on social media. They invested in mosques, established CSOs, ran Koranic schools, provided a number of social services, distributed food during the month of Ramadan, organised convoys of mobile medical services to help the poor,<sup>57</sup> provided assistance to unemployed young people, for example to enable them to get married or set up a fruit and vegetable stall, and plenty more. According to some accounts, following several altercations with people selling or consuming drugs or alcohol, they even resigned themselves to toning down their strict approach. While their preaching is all centred on the concept of *Tawhid* (unity of God), they carry out a varied range of activities. They present themselves simultaneously as preachers who offer redemption and salvation of the soul, benefactors who help those in need and ‘social workers’ who mediate conflicts between young people and help to prevent youth crime, all of which enables them to win the sympathies of deprived young people.

Two unqualified and unemployed young people from Douar Hicher had the following to say about the social action projects carried out by the Salafists:

*“I think Salafiya is a good thing. When you see them together, they look like brothers, they help one another, they help people who don’t have the means to get married, they don’t force anyone to go and take part in jihad, they explain everything to you and leave you to make your own decision.”*

Abdallah, 21, unemployed male, Douar Hicher<sup>58</sup>

*“The Salafists ... they’re not a problem. Some of the Salafists are nice to us, they see you drinking and they say ‘just don’t go causing any trouble!’ When there is a robbery, for example, they step in and tell us, ‘go on boys, you have to give those things back to their owner!’ They get involved to stop it from getting to the police, there is a good atmosphere (jawhoum bahi) with them. There are no weapons or anything, they just pray and go home.”*

Chiheb, unemployed male, has served a number of prison sentences, Douar Hicher<sup>59</sup>

At the same time, Salafism is portrayed as a useful way to bridge local divides between rival groups that have formed on the basis of a vague sense of solidarity within a certain clan or village. In addition, it takes advantage of the dynamics of the spatial fragmentation fuelled by the underground economy (whereby the *houmas* are divided up and each assigned a specific economic activity), acting as a unifying force that dissipates tension and conflict.<sup>60</sup> Salafist activities draw on a range of levels of solidarity: between neighbours, within a given neighbourhood and within the *Ummah* (Muslim community).

Social proximity and territorial solidarity also seem to be the reason behind electoral affiliations, which link Salafism to the informal economy in the two neighbourhoods.

56 For example, of the 11 mosques in Douar Hicher, the Salafists have taken control of 10, including the famous Ennour mosque. For more on this, see J. El Haj Salem, *Al-Chabab al-jihâdi fi Douar Hicher: Dirassit hala* [Young jihadists in Douar Hicher: A case study], *Al-Ma’had al-tûnsi lil dirâssât al-istratijiya* [Tunisian Institute for Strategic Studies], *Al-salafiyya al-jihadiyya fi Tunis* [Salafism in Tunisia], 2014, p.241

57 One such convoy, organised in November 2012, was named the ‘caravan of the martyrs Aymen and Khaled’, to pay tribute to the two young Salafists who were killed by the police in Douar Hicher.

58 Interview by research team, Douar Hicher, 2014

59 Interview by research team, Douar Hicher, 2014

60 Young rappers, informal interviews with the author, Douar Hicher, March and April 2014



This link can undoubtedly be explained by not only Salafism's firm anti-establishment stance but also the survival strategies developed by young people excluded from the labour market and left to fend for themselves, who tend to be pro-Salafist. The quantitative study shows that 77.8% of illiterate respondents disagree with the listing of Ansar al-Sharia as a terrorist group; this figure falls to 50.9% among young people who are university-educated.

Therefore, in many respects, Salafism can be seen as a backlash to the disintegration of the welfare system over the last 20 years and a type of radical youth movement that tolerates, or even values, the resourcefulness of disadvantaged young people. It thus offers a platform for action that takes into account young people's needs, not only for survival but also for recognition and distinction. This hypothesis is backed up by the comments that we received about the period when young Salafists controlled the Ennour mosque in Douar Hicher. The political activism during that period also served to polarise many different economic activities (such as stalls and other forms of trade).<sup>61</sup>

What remains to be explained is why the '*ouled houma*' reference is more prevalent among the young people from Douar Hicher than among those from Ettadhamen. In other words, why do the Salafist-leaning young people of Ettadhamen have more political influence? While our quantitative and qualitative data do not offer a definitive answer to this two-fold question, they do point to two theories to do with context and structure.

At the end of 2012, Douar Hicher witnessed three incidents that were often cited by the respondents during the interviews and FGDs. On 29 October, a National Guard commander was killed as he attempted to intervene in a violent clash between Salafists and alcohol vendors. The next day, two young Salafists died, one of whom was the imam of Ennour mosque, and 13 others were arrested following clashes between the National Guard and young Salafists protesting against the arrest of their 'brothers' the day before. At the end of December 2012, the security forces attacked the home of an alleged jihadist, resulting in his arrest and the death of his wife.

These three outbreaks of violence appear to have sparked two opposite reactions among Salafists. On one hand, the experience of Salafist violence prompted some young people to distance themselves from Salafism, as testified by the 32.5% of respondents in Douar Hicher who saw Salafism as an 'extremist movement' and, on the same basis, contested what they called its self-appointed status as the guardian of moral and religious order. On the other hand, the violent reaction of the police and the fact that the authorities responded to the three incidents with nothing but heavy-handed security served to reignite and consolidate some people's attachment to Salafism, based on shared feelings of resentment towards the forces of law and order. Let us not forget that 67.5% of the respondents in Douar Hicher said that Salafists had been "victims of injustice" in the Ennour mosque incident. These circumstantial events aside, the disparity that we have identified between the perceptions of Salafism in the two neighbourhoods highlights the difference in their social make-up. This seems to support the theory that the relatively large proportion of mid-range social classes in Ettadhamen tips the scales further away from territorial solidarity and towards political solidarity.<sup>62</sup>

In addition to territory, age is also an interesting factor to consider when examining Salafism.

The quantitative study shows that the proportion of people who agree with the classification of Ansar al-Sharia as a terrorist organisation increases with age.<sup>63</sup> Clearly, as noted by M. Ayari and

<sup>61</sup> It would, of course, be very useful to carry out a separate study on the political economy of Salafism. In our study, we only scratched the surface of this topic.

<sup>62</sup> See Chapter 1 on people's relationships with their neighbourhoods, in O. Lamoum and M. Ali Ben Zina, 2015, Op. cit.

<sup>63</sup> 41% of those aged 18–24, 44% of those aged 25–29 and 47.1% of those aged 30–34.

F. Merone, Salafism is a generational phenomenon.<sup>64</sup> It attracts a ‘distanced’<sup>65</sup> type of engagement, which is fluid and changeable in terms of both duration and intensity. Some young people spoke of their Salafist “experience”, admitting that they had just “tried it out” after the revolution for a very short time. They reported having adopted certain hair and dress codes (such as beards and *qamis* [tunics] for boys) and taken part in some form of preaching activity (mostly girls)<sup>66</sup> or group prayers at the mosque. All these young people, it would seem, are venturing into Salafism as part of a search for themselves. At an age when constructing one’s identity is crucially important, they are striving to reaffirm their personality and understand the world around them. While they realise that there are many other platforms for collective action, Salafism has some unique advantages. Firstly, it offers a sort of protective, cross-generational framework. This is symbolised by the religious propaganda tent. These tents, erected in public squares right in the centre of the neighbourhood and run by eloquently passionate young people, are a kind of ‘reinvented’ space that appears to have served, until July 2013, as an influential platform for Salafism and youth recruitment in the two neighbourhoods. Furthermore, Salafism offers these young people certainties and the chance to fall back on a dogma that claims to have the answers to all the questions that torment them.

The generational factor is most significant when it comes to the issue of ‘jihad in Syria’. When the respondents were asked ‘if they knew young people in their neighbourhood who had gone to Syria’, 80.5% said they did, with an even split between Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen. Needless to say, this figure should be taken with a large pinch of salt, since this is by no means a reliable quantitative indicator.<sup>67</sup> Nonetheless, it does give an idea of the extent to which this phenomenon affects the daily lives of young people and their representations of their environment. It is also worth noting that the majority of respondents in the interviews said they disagreed with jihad. Some said it was not a religious duty and were more in favour of “jihad on souls”. Others mentioned the dangers posed by the complex situation in Syria. Some respondents, describing themselves as independent Salafists, condemned the ‘discord’ brought by jihad to the lands of Islam. Many deplored the suffering of mothers who lost their children in Syria. The fact that very few respondents expressed clear support for jihad is certainly due, at least in part, to the sensitivity of the issue and fears of the possible consequences of admitting to such an opinion. Any respondents who did admit to supporting jihad justified themselves based on Salafist beliefs:

*“Jihad is mentioned in the Koran! So is terrorism. God said to terrorise the tyrants. The people who are in Syria are Muslims, and so are our brothers, the Salafists. In principle, two Muslim brothers should not kill each other. But they have become tyrants.”*

Mohamed Sadok, 21, upper secondary school student<sup>68</sup>

Our discussions of the issue of jihad in Syria during the interviews and FGDs allowed us to gain a better understanding of the motives underlying this phenomenon. People’s motives are very diverse and it would be overly simplistic to provide an explanation based on the psychological fragility of young people.

The most common reason given was a social one. Most young people were certain that those who had gone to Syria for jihad had been recruited, but thought that they were mainly driven by ‘desperation’ and a lack of prospects. In that sense, their choice was similar to that of the

64 M. Ayari and F. Merone, *Ansar al-Sharia, Tunisie: Une institutionnalisation à la croisée des chemins* [Ansar al-Sharia, Tunisia: Institutionalisation at a crossroads] [not yet published]

65 On this notion, see J. Ion, *La fin des militants?* [The end of militants?], Paris: L’Atelier, 1997

66 Let us recall here that 11% of the respondents said that they had been to a religious propaganda tent after the revolution.

67 According to official figures from the Minister of the Interior Lotfi Ben Jeddou, 8,800 Tunisians have been prevented from leaving to fight in Syria and 2,400 are already there. Furthermore, according to several Western sources, in terms of numbers, Tunisians top the list of foreign fighters in Syria (3,000), ahead of the Saudi Arabians (2,500), Moroccans (1,500), Russians (800+) and French (700+). See R. A. Greene and I. Torre, *Syria’s foreign jihadis: Where do they come from?*, CNN, 1 September 2014, <http://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2014/09/syria-foreign-jihadis/>

68 Interview by research team, 2014

many other young people who had taken advantage of the porous borders in the aftermath of 14 January 2011 and opted for illegal immigration.

*“For most of the people from Ettadhamen who go to Syria, their problem is poverty or unemployment ... and on top of that there is the brainwashing. They think that over there they will find respite, but instead they find destruction. I hope that they come back to Tunisia and that the state will look after them; they are the sons of the people.”*

Jihad, 18, male upper secondary school student<sup>69</sup>

Some other young people mentioned the attraction of the spoils of war or celestial reward.<sup>70</sup>

The young Salafists whom we were able to meet believed that leaving for jihad to support “Muslims who are being massacred by a dictator” was a religious duty, especially because several hadiths, according to them, stated that Syria was “the final battlefield” against the “armies of the antichrist”.<sup>71</sup>

Regardless of their various motives, what the fighters or aspiring jihadists in Syria all have in common is that they are very young, a fact confirmed by the reports we collected. Often, they are between 18 and 24 years old, have been radicalised over a short period of time, and their religious education is limited.

It is also worth noting that, regardless of the exact number, many young people seem fascinated by this choice.<sup>72</sup> Some people see the clear-cut decision of going to war as proof of extraordinary courage, resolve and strength of faith.

A number of young people admitted to us that they were in contact via Skype with friends, neighbours or relatives who had gone to Syria. They recounted extraordinary stories that were doing the rounds in the two neighbourhoods, telling of “divine assistance” given to these young fighters in the form of “supernatural apparitions and interventions” on the battlefield.

So what about the gender variable? Our semi-structured interviews gave young women the chance to state their opinions about Salafism relatively freely.<sup>73</sup> Some of them criticised the strict moral order advocated by Salafists. Others described the intimidation and pressure to which they had been subjected for dressing in a certain way, going to school, or taking part in certain leisure or professional activities judged to be in breach of Islamic law.<sup>74</sup> We therefore might expect gender to be a discriminating factor when it comes to perceptions of Salafism. The quantitative study shows, however, that gender cannot be used as a predictor variable. For example, both females and males expressed the same level of sympathy for Abou Iyadh, the leader of Ansar al-Sharia, and had the same views on the listing of the group as a terrorist organisation. We believe the most plausible explanation for this is that territory and age play a greater role than gender in defining young women’s identities.

69 Interview by research team, 2014

70 On many occasions, we heard people say that, if a young person died as a martyr in Syria, 70 people from their family would go to heaven.

71 Burgat and Caillet also mention this belief: the battle against *al-masih al-dajjal* would take place “the day after Jesus returned to Earth on a ‘white minaret’ located in the east of the city of Damascus”. See F. Burgat and R. Caillet, *Une guérilla “islamiste”? Les composantes idéologiques de la révolte armée [An “Islamic” guerrilla? Ideologies of the Syrian Army revolt]*, in F. Burgat and B. Paoli (eds.), *Pas de printemps pour la Syrie: Les clés pour comprendre les acteurs et les défis de la crise [No Spring for Syria: The key to understanding the actors and challenges of the crisis (2011–2013)]*, Paris: La Découverte, 2013, p.74

72 Young people in cafés, informal interviews with the author, Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen, March, April and June 2014

73 We say “relatively”, because we must remember that the answers given by the respondents also depend on the impression they have of the interviewer.

74 As in the case of a hair salon owner.

Now that we have examined the origins of this new form of Islamic radicalisation, how can we gain an overall picture of the relationship between young people and Salafism in the two neighbourhoods? How can we assess its capacity to mobilise people, over a year<sup>75</sup> after the ban was imposed on Ansar al-Sharia? We must take a cautious approach when answering these questions, in view of the extent to which the effects of repression can blur and mask the social and political dynamics at play in these two neighbourhoods. With that in mind, we believe that the characteristic that best defines the relationship between these young people and Salafism is ambivalence. This is because, although most young people (59.8%) in both Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen define Salafism as an ‘extremist group’, a significant number (57.3%) also reject the classification of Ansar al-Sharia as a ‘terrorist group’. The way we see it, this contrast reveals that, while people may not agree with the strict religious practices advocated by Salafism, they do not think that Salafism should be excluded from the legitimate political scene. It thus underscores that most young people now recognise the legitimacy of Salafism, including jihadism (14% trust Kamel Zarrouk), and that some of them – although the real number is, of course, impossible to gauge – subscribe to its principles. Statistics aside, the fact remains that Salafism, despite having been weakened and outlawed, continues to exert an influence on the “politics of conflict”<sup>76</sup> in the two neighbourhoods and has made the most gains through capitalising on the disillusionment of young people from working-class backgrounds. For many young people, Salafism gives them a sense of higher purpose; indeed, 42% of young people believe that visiting holy shrines is a forbidden *bid’a* (heresy), using Salafist terminology to express their opinions on this popular practice.

In order to express themselves, talk about their lives and build their own identities in relation to their surroundings, young people draw on a range of rhetoric based on Salafism, demands for social justice, Sharia law, language popularised by the media, urban culture and other frames of reference. This patchwork of discourse, which is based on the constant flow of interaction between both traditional and newly emerging frames of reference, is underpinned by a running theme of ambivalence, and what it demonstrates most clearly are young people’s uncertainties and the difficulties they face in finding their place in society.

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<sup>75</sup> As was the case when this text was originally published in early 2015.

<sup>76</sup> C. Tilly and S. Tarrow, *Politique(s) du conflit: De la grève à la révolution [Politics of conflict: From strikes to revolution]*, Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2008

## 5. Conclusion

On the basis of extensive fieldwork in Argentina and France, the French sociologist Denis Merklen offers a subtle analysis of what he calls the new “*policité*” in working-class areas.<sup>77</sup> This term is defined as the specific combination of practices, mobilisation methods and relationships with institutions that are inherent in the new social and economic context in working-class areas, where working conditions are deteriorating, and precarity and poverty are on the rise. It reflects a shift in perception, whereby people formerly seen as ‘workers’ are now viewed simply as ‘poor people’, and the emergence of the working-class neighbourhood as the main platform for collective action among poor people.<sup>78</sup> The example of the two working-class suburbs of Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen demonstrates that, all other factors being equal, the Tunisian context is consistent with this notable overall trend. With the erosion of the social bonds formed by work, territory is now the main factor that creates bonds between young people and shapes their social identity. The revolution, which was spearheaded by young people, has not changed this reality. But what it has achieved is the shaping of their hopes and expectations and, in their eyes, has granted a great deal of legitimacy to their demands for inclusion, justice and recognition.

Nearly four<sup>79</sup> years after the extraordinary social and political movement that rocked the very foundations of Tunisia in 2010–2011, the young people of Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen feel cheated by the elections and political parties, ignored as usual by the state and sidelined from the ‘democratic transition’. As a result, young people are turning to their local neighbourhoods more than ever, as the only basis on which they can build links with political or civil society groups. Even then, there is little on offer except charity-based groups, which are most prevalent, and Salafist groups.

This report is not intended to close the debate on the relationship between young people and politics in Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen, but rather to lay the groundwork for further reading on the topic and offer a shift in focus when analysing the social and political dynamics at play in working-class society.

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<sup>77</sup> D. Merklen, *Quartiers populaires, quartiers politiques* [Popular districts, political districts], Paris: La Dispute, 2009

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> As was the case when this text was originally published in early 2015.

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