

Tunisia: PREVEX during the Covid-19 pandemic -

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Just when Tunisia's new coalition government got a vote of confidence from the parliament, the country started to face a new challenge in early March: Covid-19. Tunisia's health care infrastructure is [poor and unevenly distributed](#) over the country, with the capital and coastal regions better off than the country's interior. To prevent a health emergency from spiralling out of control, the president imposed a nation-wide lockdown. The numbers of new infections have in recent weeks been slowing down and remain limited compared to Tunisia's European and North African 'neighbours' (1051 registered cases, 48 deaths). The country is now gradually unwinding its lockdown in a phased manner.

The long-term economic repercussions of the pandemic will likely be more critical than the health emergency in Tunisia. Tunisia has been facing [key socio-economic challenges](#) for years, and the lockdown made matters worse as it led to a (partial) shutdown of informal activity (which accounts for 40% of GDP in Tunisia), the tourism sector and industrial jobs. The government [rolled out a series of socio-economic measures](#), but it is unlikely that they will be enough.

All this raises questions about the future security situation in Tunisia. As unemployment and poverty are potential push factors of violent extremism, the current pandemic may eventually increase Tunisians' attraction to joining extremist groups. In the aftermath of the 2011 uprising, Ansar al-Sharia, Tunisia's leading terrorist organization at the time, managed to recruit new members in the poorer interior regions of the country and marginalized suburbs of Tunis. These less-developed regions are [disproportionately affected](#) by the Covid-19 health emergency and subsequent economic crisis.

Covid-19 has also affected and sometimes emboldened Tunisian security and police forces. While [counter-terrorism](#) operations continue as planned and while terrorist plots are still uncovered, Tunisian police and army have also been deployed across the country to implement the lockdown and are called upon to deal with increased socio-economic protest. A part of the Tunisian public has in recent weeks embraced the [old adage](#) 'Don't mention human rights when it comes to fighting terrorism', with terrorism being replaced by the novel coronavirus. The latter approach holds risks for the battle against violent extremism, as repression was [one of the factors](#) that caused ideological radicalization in the past, for example, in Ben Ali's prisons. Authoritarian reflexes, and socio-economic discontent, will have to be kept at bay if Tunisia wants to prevent and counter violent extremism in the future successfully.