"Securing the state" in post-transition Tunisia: performativity of the (authoritarian) neoliberal state

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Abstract:

In this article I adopt the theoretical lens of authoritarian neoliberalism (Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017) coupled with the concept of performativity (Butler 1998; Lister 2018) to analyse post-transition Tunisian security politics. In doing so, I argue that "securing the state" from discursively constructed "threats" such as terrorism, political Islamism and instability can be understood as a performative enactment of statehood in the context of reduced sovereignty associated with neoliberal deregulation as well as a crisis of legitimacy faced by successive post-transition governments in Tunisia. However, performative counterterror discourses and practices are aimed not only at "flexing the muscles" of the state. They also seek to construct moral panic surrounding certain marginalised groups and thus "justify" the roll out of repressive policing of already marginalised communities rather than merely suspected terrorists. This performance is intended to distract from some of the root causes of radicalisation in contemporary Tunisia: economic inequalities and dispossession linked to failed neoliberal deregulation. Thus, through the exploration of the Tunisian case between 2014-2021, I contend we can best understand (in)security in the MENA when adopting an analytical approach bringing together security studies and International Political Economy (IPE).

Key words:
Tunisia, authoritarian neoliberalism, performativity, security, counterterrorism, legitimacy

Introduction

In this article, I analyse Tunisian security politics from the promulgation of the January 2014 Constitution until Kais Saied's authoritarian power grab in July 2021. Adopting the theoretical lens of authoritarian neoliberalism # coupled with the concept of performativity #,

and incorporating data from interviews conducted between July 2019 and July 2022[1], I argue that "securing the state" from discursively constructed "threats" such as terrorism, political Islamism and instability more broadly can be theorised as a performative enactment of statehood in the context of reduced sovereignty in certain areas and a crisis of legitimacy faced by successive post-transition governments in Tunisia.

This paper, through its exploration of the Tunisian case, aims to contribute rich empirical analysis to the existing theoretical discussions regarding counterterror politics as performativity of the ~~(authoritarian)~~ neoliberal state #. I also seek to contribute to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism by exploring the additional conceptual tools, in this case performativity, with which the concept can be deployed in research which goes beyond political economy. The incorporation of performativity into the conceptual framework of authoritarian neoliberalism enables me to better understand the link between contemporary neoliberalism and performative counterterror politics. Indeed, through employing these concepts we can see that the purpose of this "roll out" of the coercive apparatuses of the state is to "mop up" and police the dislocated populations "left behind" by neoliberal restructuring # - in this case the urban poor and those living in Tunisia's marginalised regions. It also serves to performatively distract from government's growing inability to assert its statehood in a multitude of areas and provide for a basic level of economic and social security #. Finally, by mobilising the work of Stuart Hall et al # within this framework, we can see how policy makers mobilise consent for the repressive policing of these marginalised groups: whipping up moral panic surrounding certain "law and order crises" or "security threats" – in the Tunisian context such threats include radicalisation, terrorism and the broader instability they are perceived to engender.

Thus, this paper will be elaborated as follows. Firstly, I will outline this paper's use of the concept of performativity within the theoretical framework associated with authoritarian neoliberalism (1). Then I engage with the particularities of authoritarian neoliberalism in the post-transition Tunisian context as they enable us to better understand the political motivations of performative security politics (2). Following on from this, using the concept of performativity, I analyse examples of contemporary counterterror politics which I argue can

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[1] I interviewed Tunisian policy makers, security specialists, NGO workers and journalists as well as foreign diplomats and CSO workers. The interviews were conducted in Tunis prior to the onset of the pandemic and then online from March 2020. Interview data has been anonymised for the personal safety of the participants and in line with the recommendations of the relevant ethics committee

be theorised as a performative enactment of sovereignty and reassertion of statehood (3). I argue that performative counterterror politics aims to construct moral panic surrounding particular marginalised communities rather than merely proven terrorists thus "justifying" the rollout of repressive policing of such communities (4). Furthermore, as I argue in the final section of the paper (5), it also serves to distract from one of the root causes of radicalisation and extremism in contemporary Tunisia: economic inequalities and dispossession linked to decades of failed neoliberal deregulation.

1 The case for performativity in the study of authoritarian neoliberalisms

The connections between neoliberalism, security politics and regime legitimacy in the post-transition Tunisian context may seem somewhat tenuous at first glance. However, neoliberalism so often conceptualised as involving the retreat of the state, is somewhat paradoxically, conducive to "greater emphasis on coercive control and repertoires of domination" (Hall 1978 et al cited in Lister 2019 p.19). In other words, the roll back of the state in certain areas, including macroeconomic and budgetary policy, is coupled with the roll out of the state in other areas such as policing, incarceration, border regimes # and, as scholars have increasingly argued, counterterrorism #. While scholars have been analysing the illiberal manifestations of neoliberalism since the 1970s, those mobilising the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism argue that there has, since the 2007 financial crash, been a qualitative shift in the illiberal propensities of neoliberalism #.

Indeed, it is argued "contemporary neoliberalism reinforces and increasingly relies upon 1) coercive state practices that discipline, marginalise and criminalise oppositional social forces and 2) the judicial and administrative states apparatuses which limit the avenues in which neoliberal policies can be challenged" (Tansel 2017, p.2). Although the concept should not be used "to formulate strict typologies and models" #, there are two main sets of strategies through which the state aims to limit the space for social contestation of neoliberalism (Tansel 2017). Firstly, authoritarianism neoliberalisms function through a range of formalised mechanisms including legal, administrative frameworks as well as coercive mechanisms which constrain the spaces for contestation of neoliberalism (Bruff 2014, p.116; Tansel 2017, p.3). Secondly, authoritarian neoliberalisms are characterised by a readiness to utilise coercion to reinforce already "intensified state control over every sphere of social life and the draconian and multiform curtailment of so-called formal liberties" #. In author (date), I

explore post-2011 Tunisia as a site of authoritarian neoliberalism. However, in this paper, I focus on the later of these two strategies.

The research agenda of authoritarian neoliberalism has furthered our understanding of the links between neoliberal policies, declining standards of living, eroding regime legitimacy, and the rise of neoliberal security states. However, this work, it is argued, is characterised by a conjunctural reading of contemporary neoliberalism as being discontinuous from other forms of capitalist accumulation and security governance (Ryan 2019). While I do not agree with this critique, as I am convinced by Bruff and Tansel's argument (2019) that post 2008 neoliberalism is characterised by novel, authoritarian and increasingly pre-emptive state strategies, I do concur with those argue that capitalism has long relied on repressive security practices to maintain societal cooperation with exploitative and extractive economic models #. Thus, in contrast to seeking to identify a "starting point" at which neoliberalism became "more" authoritarian, I argue that there are periods characterised by an *intensification* of the recourse to coercive state power to insulate neoliberalism, including authoritarian neoliberalism, from contestation and quell dissent that does emerge. In the Tunisian case, this intensification can be theorised, as per conjunctural analysis associated with Stuart Hall (Hall et al 1978), as a response to the contemporary context of insecurity, reduced sovereignty and eroding legitimacy associated with the so-called 2015 security crisis #.

Furthermore, regardless of the recent explosion of academic literature mobilising authoritarian neoliberalism as a concept (including that which focuses on the Middle East an North Africa (MENA) region #, there is a need for further research to reflect upon the additional conceptual tools with which it can be applied particularly in research which goes beyond the disciplinary boundaries of IPE. This paper makes the case for the incorporation of the concept of performativity within the conceptual framework provided by authoritarian neoliberalism. By mobilising performativity to analyse counterterror politics of authoritarian neoliberal states, we can better understand the performance of statehood enacted through security in the context of reduced sovereignty linked to neoliberal deregulation.

Performativity is illuminating for those wanting to understand the implications of neoliberalism on security policy because "performativity (of sovereignty) often takes strongest form when the state appears to be the least sovereign, taking place when "states traumatically confront the impossibility of "being sovereign" and this insist upon their

sovereign subjectivity all the more"#. Thus, performativity of the neoliberal state is aimed firstly at i/ demonstrating that the state is real, concrete doing something in a time of limited economic governance and ii/ to reconfigure regime legitimacy when it is being challenged (Lister 2019). The Tunisian case is an extremely pertinent context in which to reflect on the incorporation of performativity within the framework provided by authoritarian neoliberalism. This is because the neoliberal state, already deprived of its sovereignty in certain areas, faces far more constraints to its sovereignty in the Tunisian context because of the influence of external actors #. Furthermore, the post-revolutionary context which requires a reconfiguration of the foundations of regime legitimacy, makes for a fruitful terrain in which to explore the connections between security politics, neoliberalism, and regime legitimacy. I contend that the concept of performativity helps draw out these connections.

In a similar vein, this paper builds upon the ground-breaking theoretical arguments of Lister (2019) surrounding counterterrorism as performativity of the neoliberal state. While Lister's article provides a convincing theoretical argument, I ground my discussion of the Tunisian case in rich empirical analysis. Furthermore, in contrast to Lister's (2019) theorisation of the neoliberal state, I characterise the contemporary Tunisian context as one of authoritarian neoliberalism (see Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017) as I elaborate in the following section. Employing authoritarian neoliberalism allows us to explore the connections between neoliberalism and security politics in a far more holistic way – thus underscoring the analytical utility of an approach bringing together security studies and IPE to better understand (in)security in the MENA.

2 From neoliberal authoritarianism to authoritarian neoliberalism

The transformation of the Tunisian capitalist state did not happen overnight following the abdication of Ben Ali. Current manifestations of neoliberalism in Tunisia are fundamentally connected to, and yet different from, neoliberalisation under the former authoritarian regime # The former regime was characterised by a kleptocratic form of neoliberalisation which enriched Ben Ali's inner circle whilst the pursuing his ultimate objective: his own survival #. Consequently, scholars have argued Ben Ali's Tunisia was defined by neoliberal authoritarianism #[2]. In contrast, I argue that the post-transition environment is characterised

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[2] Neoliberal authoritarianism is used with reference to states where "neoliberalism has been introduced and functioned hand in hand with authoritarianism"

by authoritarian neoliberalism – in which pre-emptive and coercive mechanisms insulate neoliberalism, rather than authoritarianism, from contestation.

Rather than representing a radical overhaul of economic policy in Tunisia, the Tunisian transition led to a continuation and consolidation of the process of neoliberalisation #. In a similar fashion, although attempts were made to reform the security services in the early years following the Tunisian transition, repressive security practices have failed to disappear, and illiberal policies have remerged under the guise of the state of emergency particularly since 2015 (Amnesty International 2017). Consequently, certain coercive security practices continue to limit the space for contestation of neoliberalism particularly in terms of the repressive policing of anti-austerity protests #. The reversion to repressive security practices and the politisation of the apparatuses of state security have only worsened since the authoritarian drift associated with President Kais Saied #. Thus, I argue in contemporary Tunisia, authoritarian neoliberalism is becoming increasing disciplinarian and at times, violent.

It is not the purpose of this paper to explore the manifestations of authoritarian neoliberalism in contemporary Tunisia (see author 2023), nor to recreate perspectives that focus exclusively the role of external actors in neoliberalisation thus neglecting the agency of global southern actors (Bruff & Tansel 2019). However, it would be impossible to understand "securing the state" as performativity of the (authoritarian) neoliberal state without an account of the constraints that manifestations of authoritarian neoliberalism place on its sovereignty. Since 2011, financial assistance packages with external actors have made it de-facto impossible for Tunisian policy makers to pursue economic models which deviate from the neoliberal agenda upon which such assistance is conditional #. These assistance packages come with regular monitoring and rounds of disbursements that act as mechanisms of surveillance and discipline # to ensure mandated reforms are implemented. Such mechanisms allow external actors to refuse or delay funds in instances where reforms are deemed to have not been implemented. It is only within this context of reduced sovereignty, that we can fully understand the political motivations of performative security politics. In other words, the state, robbed of its sovereign functions in certain areas associated with neoliberalisation, uses performative security politics to flex its state like muscles – thus reasserting itself.

Significantly, performativity of the authoritarian neoliberal sate is not just about reasserting the sovereignty of the state but also represents, I argue, an attempt by policy makers to reconfigure their claims to legitimacy around the notion "securing the state" from certain securitised threats. The inability of the former regime to provide economic security of vast swathes of the population, while the inner circle of Ben Ali amassed vast quantities of wealth, acted to erode the legitimacy of the government contributing to Ben Ali's fall #. Given this, it seems clear that reconfiguring the legitimacy of the new regime would require tackling the socio-economic concerns of the population #. However, the Tunisian economy today is in a far worse position than it was in January 2011 despite, or rather because of, successive governments having pursued the "reform agenda" imposed by external actors #. In short, "Externally dictated 'reforms' contradict the mantras of Tunisia's revolution: freedom, dignity, employment, social justice" # thus eroding the legitimacy of Tunisia's transition and arguably it's democratic system.

However, successive governments' attempts to reconfigure their legitimacy has also been hampered by political instability and successive terrorist attacks. It has long been theorised that the nation-states' primary role, in its most basic form, is to guarantee the security of its population from existential threats. In the post-transition context, a series of terrorist attacks, particularly in 2015, posed significant questions to the state's ability to do this[3]. Indeed, in November 2015, 47% of survey respondents stated that terrorism was the single biggest problem facing Tunisia: a stark rise from the percentage who expressed this view in 2011 #. By 2015, public opinion was increasingly accepting the idea, be it true or not, that reforming the security services following the revolution had left Tunisia vulnerable to terrorist attacks[4]. Therefore, I argue the post-transition regime, unable to provide economic security due to over a decade of stagnation and worsening standards of living and faced with an existential security "crisis" in 2015, uses performative counterterror politics, framed as "securing the state" from certain securitised threats to both perform its sovereignty and reconfigure its legitimacy as a expand below.

3 - Securing the state: performing sovereignty and reasserting statehood

[3] Interview with head of Tunisian security focused NGO, Tunis, January 2020
[4] Interview with security practitioner, January 2021

While there are many examples of performative counterterror politics in the post transition period, I have limited the analysis of this paper to three examples: articulating the need to secure the state (2.1), declaring war on terror (2.2) and the repeated declaration of the state of emergency (2.3). I also briefly reflect upon the way in which such discourses and practices helped pave the way for Kais Saied's authoritarian power grabs (2.4). While the early drafts of this paper were written long before President Saied's dissolution of Parliament on the July 25, 2021, his (mis)use of security powers only underscores the significance of the discussions explored in this paper.

Articulating the need to secure the state
From 2015 onwards there are many examples of elite discourse which underscore the scale and significance of the threat of terrorism and the need to secure the state from this threat. So how can we understand this "garish law and order spectacle" #, through the lens of performativity? Weber asserts that it is particularly illuminating to study foreign policy speeches, cables and press conferences # as such examples enable us to see how states insist on their sovereignty when faced with the impossibility of being sovereign[5] #. Accordingly, I engage with performative discourses, policies and practices situated within the realm of *internal* security to understand how policy makers perform the role of the state in terms of the monopoly of legitimate violence within their territory # and thus insist of their sovereignty through their *internal* security politics.

For example, on July 4, 2015, just eight days after ISIS claimed responsibility for a terrorist attack which targeted tourists at the Sousse beach resort, former President Beji Caid Essebsi (BCE) declared a state of emergency stating "these difficult conditions can be described as exceptional conditions which therefore require exceptional measures" #. Through the lens of performativity, we can think of these sorts of speeches as moments in which the state (and its policy makers) is insisting on its sovereignty when it is being most challenged (Weber 1998). Indeed, the security forces were deeply criticised for their failings during this attack[6] # – thus undermining notions of both internal security and sovereignty. Furthermore, feminist scholars have shown us how, particularly in the context of the Global War on Terror (GWOT), elites,

[5] For example, when announcing a military intervention in another state, a state is both performing their sovereignty through intervening in another state's domestic affairs while illuminating the impossibility of being sovereign in the sense that the other state's sovereignty is mere idea to be violated (1998)
[6] The gunman was able to walk over 2 miles along Sousse beach killing 38 people before being "neutralised". 13 security agents were charged with negligence or cowardice in the weeks following the attacks.

such as President BCE, seek to present themselves, through their performative security discourses, as hypermasculine warrior-like decision-maker figures and thus insist on the sovereignty of the state and their ability to mobilise the forces of state security accordingly #.

President BCE, now deceased, was one of the most significant figures in security politics in the post-transition period. This is because the President, as per the Constitution of 2014, has responsibility for national security, defence, and foreign policy. Given both his constitutional powers, and his popular mandate as the first democratically elected President of Tunisia, the President made several security focused official statements and speeches which fall into the notion of this "garish" national security "spectacle" (Wacquant 2014, p.1695). Significantly, as with the example above, many of these discourses which articulated the scale of the threat posed by terrorism also emphasised the need to introduce certain exceptional policy responses to "secure the state". The notion of "securing the state" is - in itself - a performance, as policy makers are unable to ever eliminate risk fully in a given society #. However, as I argue, the notion of the need to secure the state is used to justify the roll out of the coercive apparatuses of the state supposedly to respond to this security "crisis" #. In the context of the crisis of the contemporary neoliberal state, it is also used to shore up the legitimacy of the state as the provider of security from such threats to police the left behind groups or edge populations of contemporary neoliberalism and "serves as a bait and switch for the (deeper?) socio-economic forms of inequality (and resultant insecurity)" (Lister 2019 p.428).

Declaring "war" on terror

At 8.17pm on the night of the Bardo museum attack former President BCE made a televised public announcement in which he promised to engage in a "war against terror without mercy" # – one of his many references to being a war with terrorism during this period. The then Prime Minister, Habib Essid, reiterated the President's sentiment when he stated "we are engaged in a ferocious war against terrorism to protect lives and property, defend the republican regime … the civil state and its institutions…We would not have felt obliged to decree the state of emergency if we were not convinced that our country was facing numerous terrorist plans" #. I argue that declaring "war" on terror can be understood as a performance of statehood in the context of reduced sovereignty and overlapping security, economic and political crises. In such a context, this hyper masculinise militarised performance of statehood

seeks to reassert the sovereignty of the state as well as reconfiguring the legitimacy of the executive and its policy makers are "warrior like decision makers" #.

Those employing the concept of performativity have noted the significance of both declaring of war on terror and likening a particular security threat to being at war #. Baker-Beall (2011) and Jackson # have argued that the expression "war on terror" is used to justify more coercive and military minded policy responses than may be used to deal with other domestic security issues #. Theoretically, the act of declaring war is one of the unique functions of a sovereign state. However, it is also a performative enactment of the sovereignty of the state (Baker-Beall 2011; Jackson 2005) which mobilises militarised masculine notions of power and urgency associated with performative states (Weber 1998). Of course, a state cannot truly declare war on terror. For example, in terms of the UN Charter it does not fulfil the conditions under which a state can legally declare war. Furthermore, attempting to tackle terrorist organisations does not fit within traditional understandings of being at war (Baker-Beall 2011). While declaring war on terrorism may enable policy makers to mobilise consent for a certain set of "exceptionalised" policy responses, it is virtually impossible to ever declare a victory, defeat, or announce the end to the war on terrorism. This means that supposedly exceptional measures, associated with the GWOT, become long term and increasingly "normalised" aspects of policy frameworks #.

The performative nature of declaring war on a security threat that does not fall into the remit of traditional military security threats was further underscored in March 2020 when the Prime Minister declared "war" on the coronavirus #. Significantly, the security-oriented discourse surrounding the pandemic was used to justify the expansion of emergency security frameworks, many of which were initially enacted in the name of counterterrorism, to respond to the threat of the pandemic and even repress social movements #. For example, on January 13, 2022, the President used emergency security powers to ban protests citing the threat of coronavirus which had first reached Tunisia almost two years previously #. For many, this ban was a cynical attempt to prevent protests due to take place the next day, on the anniversary of the 2011 Revolution, which have become a platform to denounce the failure of successive governments to deliver on the demands of the revolution #. This is indicative of the way in which performative security discourses and practices serve to both clamp down on contestation of neoliberalism (Tansel 2017) as well as serving to distract from the "real" causes of instability and security; neoliberal deregulation and austerity #.

Significantly, in the Tunisian context, the notion of being at war with terrorism would suggest policy responses which would fall into the remit of the executive branch of government as opposed to requiring a greater level of Parliamentary scrutiny as would be necessary under a criminal justice approach #. By performatively declaring war on terrorism, policy makers seek to Presidentialise policy responses to terrorism taking such policy areas AWAY from legislative and Prime Ministerial areas of competence #. The attempt to circumnavigate Parliamentary scrutiny and deliberation of counter-terror and security policy through the Presidentalisation of competency areas is a phenomenon witnessed globally in the post 9/11 including in non-Presidential systems #. Often this performance rests on a binary distinction between the hyper-masculinise warrior-like decision-maker executive able to take swift and decisive action and weak effeminate Parliamentary procedures presented as impeding and slow down necessary actions #. Nonetheless, the attempt to circumnavigate Parliament is not just about amassing Presidential power. It also aims to take powers away from the political Islamists who were the strongest political force in Parliament between 2014 and 2021 while having never held the Presidency in this same period. Indeed, since 2011 there has been an attempt by political and security elites to keep Ennahda away from security politics based on the idea that they were "illegitimate political force that was allegedly operating against the interests of the state and pursuing partisan Islamic security agenda" (Santini 2018 p.88).

Thus, declaring war on terror is performative. It is about insisting on the sovereignty of the state in those moments when the sovereignty of the state is most challenged. Vitally, for this paper's broader discussion of authoritarian neoliberalism, it is neoliberalism itself, which constrains the ability of policy makers to performatively enact their sovereignty in other areas.

Declaring and redeclaring state of emergency
On July 4, 2015, former President BCE declared a state of emergency following a high-profile terrorist attack targeting tourists on a beach in Sousse #. The declaration and repeated renewal of the state of emergency is an element of counter-terror policy in nations in both the Global North and Global South which has garnered much academic interest in the post 9/11 era #. It provides governments with a framework with which to monitor, police and repress their populations #. In many cases, such frameworks have been used to target particular marginalised communities beyond those suspected of terrorism #. The state of

emergency, first declared in July 2015, has been renewed several times and is still in place at the time of writing. I argue that the very "garish" spectacle (Wacquant 2014, p.1695) of publicly declaring and repeatedly renewing the state of emergency can be understood as performativity of the militarised hyper-masculine state #. This is all the more significant as the state of emergency also empowers the executive branch of government[7] # enabling it to circumnavigate normal Parliamentary procedures. The argument in favour of the state of emergency is that when the state is faced with an immediate and pressing threat, it needs to act swiftly and unilaterally to respond to that threat. Once again, Parliamentary deliberations surrounding counter-terror policy are discursively constructed as weak, slow, and effeminate #. Whereas the bold, swift, and relatively unaccountable action by the executive, enabled by the state of emergency, can be understood as a performative enactment of masculinised-militarised statehood #.

The declaration of the state of emergency also enables certain supposedly "exceptional" security practices that would not be considered legal nor legitimate outside of the state of emergency[8] (see Article 80 of the Constitution of The Tunisian Republic 2014). For example, the state of emergency gives the police exceptional powers, such as the ability to impose curfews, special powers to guard important buildings and gives the armed forces the power to carry out certain police duties (to reinforce police numbers) #. It has provided Tunisian security services with the tools to target and monitor political Islamist groups, or individuals perceived to belong to them, with little evidence and in a manner which circumvents civil liberties and rule of law provisions outlined in the 2014 Constitution[9] #. It has also been exploited by policy makers to crack down on resistance of neoliberal policies and austerity measures. For example, when declaring the state of emergency in July 2015, President BCE acknowledged that one of its main purposes was "to limit strikes and protests" (cited in Han 2021, p.163).

As alluded to above, further evidence of the declaration of the state of emergency as evidence of the performativity of the authoritarian neoliberal state came in with the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020. Tunisian policy makers pursued a "national security"

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[7] Under the provisions of the 2014 Constitution, the President and executive have overarching competency on security matters and Parliament plays a somewhat minimal role on security matters . However, the state of emergency further emboldens the executive's supremacy in this area .
[8] Here I refer to the constitutional frameworks between January 2014-July 2022 prior to the constitutional referendum which cemented Kais Saied's authoritarian rule
[9] Interview conducted with security focused NGO, Tunis, January 2020

response to the pandemic using the framework of the state of emergency, already in place since 2015, to rush through a public health response, crack down on any resistance to the curfews and restrictions imposed to respond to the pandemic and to push through neoliberal reforms #. Furthermore, the coronavirus pandemic enabled the President, with his competence in national security and his role as head of the National Security Council #, to consolidate power within his hands and at the expense the legislature # as I explore further in the section below.

July 2021: exceptional powers or constitutional coup?

In the sections above, I demonstrated how policy makers, including President Saied, in the period between 2014-2021, used performative security discourses and practices coupled with an expansive interpretation of "security" to justify expansive security powers and repressive security practices to expand their own competency areas and legitimise themselves as the providers of state security. However, Saied's elastic interpretation of national security and instrumentalisation of the state of emergency, was taken to new realms when the President used a particularly creative reading of Article 80 of the 2014 Constitution, the same article which outlines the procedures for the state of emergency, to suspend Parliament in July, 2021 #. It is argued this was a reactionary response to critique of the government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic and mounting socio-economic grievances[10] which were leading to successive anti-austerity and anti-government protests[11].

However, this "exceptional" closure of Parliament in July 2021 remained in place until January of 2023. Indeed, President Saied added to this "suspension" of Parliament, by pushing through neoliberal reforms # which would have normally had to go through Parliament had it not been closed, suspending the Constitution, dissolving the supreme judicial council # and finally holding a highly problematic, but ultimately successful, referendum on a new Constitution in August 2022 #. In fact, Saied only reopened Parliament in January 2023, following widely contested elections in which many candidates were banned from standing, and after its role and structure has been radically redesigned as part of his new Constitution #. The role of exceptional security measures in Tunisia's authoritarian drift is not the focus of this paper but it merits further research. Saied's use of performative discourses and exceptional measures to enact measures such as the closure of Parliament demonstrate

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[10] Interview with Tunisian political commentator, October 2021
[11] Interview with Tunisian political commentator, October 2021

that performative security discourses, policies and practices have real political impacts. The President here is using a constitutional article designed to deal with existential threats to national security to navigate a political crisis and ultimately empower his own office at the expense of the Tunisian Parliament: the institution in which his political opponents, Ennahda, were strongest.

The performative use and abuse of supposedly exceptional security measures is not unique to Tunisia. Indeed, this forms part of a larger trend of normalisation of exceptionalism and urgency # which means that supposedly "exceptional" measures become de-facto permanent aspects of security and legislative frameworks #. However, such discussions are particularly pertinent in the post-transition Tunisian context because the former authoritarian regime used counterterror frameworks to repress political opponents and activists #. In a similar vein, counterterror measures enacted since 2015 have been used for political purposes such as the repression of social movements and protests #. In the following section, I analyse moral panic constructed around the terrorist threat. I argue this moral panic is used to portray Islamism, as well as social movements and sites of protest, as synonymous with terrorism and thus "justify" a set of policy responses which target particular groups rather than just those directly responsible for terrorism.

4 Policing the Islamists

Before we are able to theorise the significance of moral panic surrounding political Islamism in the period between 2014-2021 and policy responses such panic seeks to justify, we must first explore the historical significance of these discourses in Tunisia. Performative security cannot be fully understood without grappling with cultural and historical contexts because "audiences interpret certain practices as providing security only if they conform to pre-existing sociocultural ideas of "suitable" security activities and capabilities" #.

During French colonial rule, Islamism was constructed as a threat to modernity, civilised society as well as to French rule because of Islamist movements' perceived ability to mobilise the Tunisian population (Willis 2012). Consequently, such groups were closely monitored and disproportionately targeted by security services #. Although Islamism served effectively as mobilising force in the fight against colonialism (Willis 2012), Tunisia's first post-independence government did not break radically with the discourse of the need to

protect the state from the threat of political Islamism. Bourguiba perceived Islam as a threat to Tunisia's "modernisation" and economic development as well as his own personal grip on power (Willis 2012). Consequently, his government pursued harsh security crackdowns on political Islamist groups #.

Arguably, Ben Ali's regime which instrumentalised the GWOT #
to repress opponents including Ennahda, represented an even tougher stance on political Islamism #. Thus, throughout French colonial rule and Tunisian independence Islamism was presented as a both an economic and existential threat. Vitally, successive regimes attempted to construct their claims to legitimacy upon the notion that they were protecting the state from this threat. Indeed, Beatrice Hibou (2006) argues that the longevity of the post-colonial authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, was based upon an implicit security pact in which lack of freedom was presented as the price to pay for security from discursively constructed threats. This brief but relatively in-depth discussion of the politisation and the subsequent securitisation of political Islamism since the end of the 19th century through to the fall of the Ben Ali regime in January 2011 may seem somewhat out of place in contemporary IR research. However, I argue that an understanding the historical significance of "securing the state" and its links articulations of regime legitimacy in Tunisia is fundamental to understanding the contemporary security environment.

Policing the Islamists or delegitimising Ennahda?
Thus, "securing the state" from the threat of political Islamism is not entirely novel in Tunisian political history. Indeed, nor is the use of performative security discourse surrounding terrorism to create moral panic to delegitimise particular social groups unique to the contemporary Tunisian context. Lister's (2019) work on UK counter-terror politics suggests that if you replace the words "mugging" with "terrorism" and the words "1970s" with "2000s" in Stuart Hall's et al's 1978 classic *Policing the Crisis,* we can understand how UK counterterror policy has disproportionately targeted and discriminated against British Muslims in ways not dissimilar to the racialised policing of black Britons in the 1970s #. Significantly, both authors argue coercive policing of marginalised groups, be they British Muslims since 9/11 or black Britons in the 1970s, is a reactionary response to security "crises" which are amplified to distract from the more pressing "crisis" associated with the fallouts of neoliberal deregulation. In Tunisia, moral panic is similarly constructed to mobilise consent for the policing of particular marginalised groups. However, rather than

placing the "blame" for terrorist attacks solely at the door of the terrorists, elite discourse depicts political Islamism as synonymous with, or at least partially, responsible for Islamic extremism to delegitimise it and justify measures which disproportionately target such groups.

One of the clear political purposes of this is to delegitimise Ennahda as a political force. Ennahda, who were banned under the Ben Ali regime, have consistently been one of the most dominant political forces in Tunisia since 2011. Since 2015, there have been many attempts to delegitimise Ennahda through discourse that presents them as synonymous with terrorism. For example, when asked if there had been negligence in the initial years following the revolution regarding radical Islamists, former President BCE replied "the government, aware of the dangers, allowed it happen. Could you say 'encourage'…. The heads of political Islamism were lenient with the terrorists and extremist groups" #.

Given that Ennahda led the government in this two-year period, as well as the clear references to political Islam, the former President of the Republic is suggesting that Ennahda did not take the threat posed by Islamic terrorists seriously and that their leniency with the extremists in their movement enabled these attacks to take place. Regardless of the reality of Ennahda's security policies in these initial years, this quote is demonstrative of the widely accepted view among Tunisians that this initial government led to weak and ineffective security governance (Santini 2018). "Ennahda did not take young Salafis in their movement seriously, they thought they could control them… they thought they could contain them…but these are young angry men who have few options and opportunities… this failure of judgement risked Tunisia's security"[12].

In a similar vein, since his accession to Presidency in late 2019 until his authoritarian power grab in July 2021, President Kais Saied used vague accusations when referring to security threats # often focusing on the notion of Ennahda as being "traitors" or "conspiring with external forces" or "plots" being "hatched" abroad #. Participants suggested that these were deliberate, and yet intentionally vague, references to Ennahda, who allegedly have international connections to Islamist parties across the Gulf and Middle East[13]. However,

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[12] Interview with prominent political commentator, January 2019
[13] Interview with Tunisian political commentator, May 2021; Interview with security concerned NGO worker, January 2020

other politicians were far less subtle in their attempts to portray Islamism as synonymous with terrorism. MP Abir Moussi, suggested that Ennahda, who she labelled as the "Brothers" in a clear reference to the more radical Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, were aiming to destabilise the legitimacy and sovereignty of the government in a similar fashion to that witnessed in Libya (Guesmi 2020). Furthermore, Moussi claimed that under Ghannouchi's reign, the Tunisian Parliament had become "an incubator of terrorism and violence and serves as the operations control room (for the Islamists) from which relations with terrorists and those returning from hotbeds of tension are managed" (Guesmi 2020).

Attempts to delegitimise political Islam through performative security discourse and practices have political motivations given that Ennahda have been one of the most dominant political forces in the post-transition period. However, such discourses have taken a more sinister form since July 2021 coup with Saied using accusations of terrorism to arrest, charge, harass and detain political opponents including Ennahda figures. Given that Ennahda were the dominant political force both within the former Tunisian parliament and their vocal critique of his attempts to seize authoritarian control of Tunisia, it is unsurprising that this rhetoric and repressive policing of such groups has intensified under his rule.

Delegitimising the unemployed and policing protest

As I have shown through the concept of performativity, political elites in the period between 2014-2021 constructed moral panic around Islamism as an attempt to 1/ "flex their state-like muscles", 2/ present themselves as the providers of security from certain "existential threats" and 3/delegitimise their political opponents. However, these very same discourses also acted to demonise young men from poor urban and economically marginalised regions of Tunisia. While these individuals are statistically more vulnerable to radicalisation # they are also more likely to be involved in "street politics" contesting the neoliberal consensus[14].

In fact, Han (2021) writes "Tunisia's ruling elite attempted to marginalise the unemployment issue and regulate the protests of the unemployment, partly, and significantly, through their (ab)use of the threat of terrorism" (p.157). In other words, protestors, including those protesting unemployment, lack of economic opportunities and austerity, were presented by policy makers as both intentionally and unintentionally helping terrorists infiltrate Tunisia

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[14] Interview with Tunisian academic specialising in CVE in marginalised regions of Tunisia, May 2021

(Han 2021, p.161). For example, on February 9, 2018, President BCE said, when referring to anti-austerity protests, "there are who tried to hijack this protest and spread terrorism" (Han 2021, p162). This comment came just six days after leading Nidaa Tounes figure, Farid El-Baji, stated "it is the terrorists in Tunisia who enjoy these acts of subversion and chaos, because acts are the only way they can overthrow the state… the security forces were overwhelmed by domestic protests. It makes it easier for terrorist to cross the borders with weapons" (2018 cited in Han 2021, p.162). Thus, the purpose of such discourses was to both delegitimise these protests and their contestation of the neoliberal consensus constructed at elite levels as well as justifying their harsh repression as necessary from a national security perspective.

As I have shown, political elites constructed moral panic around Islamism. However, these very same discourses also acted to demonise young men from poor urban and economically marginalised regions of Tunisia, who have been statistically shown to be more vulnerable to radicalisation[15]. Significantly, poor urban neighbourhoods and marginalised regions, particularly those in the South, have been the backbone of much of Ennahda's electoral support #. Therefore, attempts to portray certain marginalised groups as synonymous with the threat of Islamism and terrorism clearly have political motivations. For example, former President BCE, accused voters of Moncef Marzouki, his opponent and native of the South, of being terrorists since being Islamists.

It is true that certain southern regions have been characterised by higher-than-average rates of terrorist activity and racialisation in the period since 2011 #. Nonetheless, these very real threats have been capitalised upon to further delegitimise and police these communities. Santini (2018) writes, "the narrative construction of a backward and threatening south has remained and has received new force" (Mejri 2014 cited in Santini 2018, p.69). Therefore, the political expediency of "securitising" such communities combined with terrorist activity in some of these areas has made already marginalised communities easy targets for delegitimising discourses. These discourses also seek to mobilise consent for a particular course of action. According to Hall et al (1987), mobilising consent is about constructing a consensus that the subversive group identified is a threat and that certain measures must be

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[15] Interview with Tunisian academic specialising in CVE in marginalised regions of Tunisia, May 2021

taken to deal with the threat (Hall et al 1987; Lister 2019). Thus, I analyse the measures that such discourses seek to justify.

Policing the subversive minority

From 2015 onwards, Tunisian security policies and practices became increasingly repressive and illiberal. The state of emergency provided Tunisian security services with the tools to target and monitor political Islamist groups, or individuals perceived to belong to them, with little evidence and in a manner which circumvents civil liberties and rule of law. Furthermore, on the 25th of July 2015, the Anti-Terrorism and Money Laundering law was approved by the Tunisian parliament by a landslide majority (Bras 2016, p.309-323). The law created several exceptional measures and powers that would have not have been legal prior to its adoption including; the re-establishment of the death penalty for terrorist activities or the murder of people protected under international law, granting the authorities the right to detain people suspected of terrorist activities for up to fifteen days without access to a lawyer or being brought before a judge, allows authorities to increase controls on the media and ban strike action or social mobilisation deemed dangerous to public order #. One of the most worrying aspects of the 2015 Anti-Terror law is that it recreates many of the structures of the 2003 Anti-Terror law, enacted during the Ben Ali regime (Bras 2016). The 2003 law was one of the key institutional frameworks exploited by the former regime to impose harsh authoritarian oppression of political opponents including Ennahda (Hibou 2006; Phillippe Bras 2016).

Significantly, NGOs and journalists have argued that the Anti-Terror Law of 2015 is being misused to target those believed to sympathise with political Islamism often without evidence or trial . Amnesty International (2017) claims that the misuse of house arrests against individuals accused, somewhat vaguely and without any evidence, for being "Salafists" is one of the most worrying examples of the re-emergence practices during the former regime. There are reports of individuals being detained because the length of their beards caused security officers to believe they were radicalised (Amnesty International 2017, p.25) or because they had travelled to Turkey (Amnesty International 2017; Human Rights Watch 2016). Furthermore, torture against those accused, not convicted of terrorist offences, is a widespread phenomenon (Amnesty International 2017; Human Rights Watch 2016). Tunisian Human Rights lawyer, Radya Nasrawi, claims "They use electric shocks… and prisoners are being raped.. (..) We thought such methods had disappeared with the fall of President Ben Ali"s dictatorship. But these savage methods are still being used in Tunisia" #.

Thus, performative security discourses which present political Islamism and terrorism as synonymous with one another have been used to 'justify' increasingly illiberal policies and repressive security practices levied against both accused terrorists and those suspected of being political Islamists. However, they have also been used, at points, to stifle protests and social movements.

5 Counterterrorism as a means to repress contestation of neoliberalism

Significantly, particularly for scholars of authoritarian neoliberalism, heavy handed and illiberal security policy responses do not just serve to perform statehood, nor to police the subversive minority, they are also about cracking down on sites of contestation and resistance of neoliberalism that do emerge (Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017). Indeed, the Head of a security concerned NGO in Tunis argued that "declaring the state of emergency and the war on terror was linked to an attempt to criminalise social protests"[16]. This criminalisation of protest was enabled, for example, by the 2015 Anti-Terror Law's notably broad definition of terrorism which "leaves the door open to political interpretation of who is a terrorist or belongs to a terrorist organisation or is involved in a terrorist activity" #. The law was also used stifle popular movements as it does not distinguish between acts of social mobilisation or terrorist act (Alzubairi 2019, p.1). Evidence of this came in September 2015 when, using the exceptional powers created by both the state of emergency and the 2015 Anti-Terror law, the government banned organised protests #. This is indicative of how the neoliberal security state relies upon an intensification of the coercive apparatuses of the state to insulate neoliberalism from contestation (Tansel 2017).

Furthermore, the use of counterterrorism laws and the state of emergency to ban protests, including those contesting neoliberalism, austerity and extractive economic relations, can be thought of as an example of pre-emptive mechanisms of authoritarian neoliberal governance (Bruff 2014). Further evidence of the pre-emptive use of emergency security powers to insulate neoliberalism from contestation came in January of 2022, when Saied used counter terror and anti-coronavirus measures to ban the political protests which take place on the anniversary of the revolution each year. In recent years, these protests have become significant sites of contestation of the neoliberal consensus where Tunisians have voiced their

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[16] Interview with Head of security concerned NGO, March 2020

dismay at the lack of economic reform since 2011 #. The anniversary protests took place despite the ban and were met with some of the most overt police brutality seen since the revolution of 2011[17].

Furthermore, we can think of the use of repressive policing under the guise of counterterrorism as a means to clamp down on sites of resistance that do emerge (Tansel 2017). In January 2018, protests erupted surrounding the Finance Law which sought to put in place debt ceilings and cement austerity measures #. I argue these protests represented a contestation of neoliberal consensus in Tunisia and anger at the level of influence of external actors, including IFIs, in shaping Tunisian economic policy #. These protests, in which hundreds were arrested and many were beaten, are just one example of the many occasions when anti-austerity protests have been very harshly repressed. Although many of these repressive practices are criminalised under Tunisian law, there is a growing disparity between Tunisia's legal frameworks and the practices of the security services[18]. This is indicative of the way in which we have seen the re-emergence of repressive security practices, associated with the former regime, particularly in terms of the policing of protests and police brutality levied against deprived communities and those contesting austerity under the guise of counterterror frameworks.

Similarly in the previous section, I argued that Tunisia's marginalised regions – such as the so-called "backward South" – have been discursively constructed as hotbeds of radicalisation in part due to their electoral support of Ennahda and more socially conservative views. Significantly, many of these marginalised regions, including but not limited to the South of Tunisia, have also become significant sites of contestation of the economic status quo – in other words, contestation of neoliberalisation, austerity, economic inequalities and dispossession #. For example, the Kamour movement in Tataouine has occupied and blockaded an oil and gas facility in the region several times since 2017 in protest at the way in which the resource rich region was often left out of development policies and did not see the benefits of its extracted resources #. In many of these resource rich areas we have seen an intensification of security personnel presence and even the establishment of militarised zones (Mullin 2023). While such personnel are theoretically there protect Tunisia from the threats of smuggling and terrorism, there have been many occasions where these security forces have

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[17] Interview with freelance journalist, May 2022
[18] Interview with worker at Security Sector Reform NGO, Tunis, January 2020

been sent in to repress sites of resistance by marginalised communities in Tunisia's borderlands or resource rich but economically deprived regions who are contesting their economic conditions #. For example, November 2021, one man died in Agareb after security forces struck him with tear gas and another died from inhaling massive amounts of the same tear gas during a mass protest against the lack of economic development and at the environmental impacts of a massive landfill site #. This incident took place less than two years after Agareb had been visited by President Saied who had promised significant investment and development in the region during this visit. One protester summarised people's frustration in stating "Thank you Mr President, for the tear gas you use to attack us instead of offering the development you promised us when you visited Agareb" #. And thus, the threat of terrorism has been used to justify the roll out of the coercive apparatuses of the state in ways that act to repress contestation of the economic status quo as well as to ensure the continuation of economically lucrative resource extraction from these often resource rich but impoverished areas #.

"The bait and switch": distracting from dispossession and inequalities

While repressive security practices and exceptional security measures "clamp" down on contestation of the neoliberal consensus (Tansel 2017), constructed moral panic surrounding Islamism aims to distract from some of the genuine contributing factors in radicalisation and insecurity in Tunisia. These include, I argue, the negative social consequences of neoliberal reforms. In the words of one CSO worker, "marginalisation and underdevelopment are among the main reasons why people have turned to violence and are easy prey for violent groups"[19]. In other words, the moral panic surrounding political Islam and radicalisation is used to distract from the clear evidence that radicalisation and thus terrorism in Tunisia is linked to dispossession, inequalities, and lack of opportunities – all of which are fundamentally connected to and reinforced by the negative social consequences neoliberal policy #. Lister refers to this process as "bait and switch" (2019 p.428). Indeed, a prominent political commentator interviewed for this paper stated

> *I think in the case of Tunisia and the jihadi threat has been blown up by elements of the state itself to distract from questions of social economic justice. Because of neoliberal policies there are people in Tunisia that are suffering from poverty and are desperate…. I think some people in the security forces or some people in the state*

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[19] Interview with CSO worker in Tunis, January 2020

were very happy to talk about the problem of jihadism to really lay the blame on
Ennahda. For me, this was about trying to distract from socio-economic issues and
say the challenge right now is terrorism and not necessarily focus on trying to meet
the demands of the revolution… and the need for a fairer and more equitable Tunisia[20]

In a similar vein, Fadhel Kaboub, a prominent Tunisian economist, wrote "it is insane how quickly the media & political class narrative of the crisis of #Tunisia has shifted to security, terrorism and parties blaming each other. The fundamental problem is the #neoliberal economic model that is designed to punish Tunisia" #.

It is true that various studies suggest that those living in deprived urban areas as well as economically marginalised regions of Tunisia are more likely to turn to violence and radicalisation because of lack of economic opportunities and the disillusionment this causes #[21]. These studies are not about making predictions nor suggesting that there is a definitive causal link between economic deprivation and radicalisation. Nonetheless, economic insecurity and marginalisation are contributing factors in the insecurity which can lead to radicalisation #. Perhaps more importantly, moral panic surrounding terrorism and repressive security practices and the construction of the subversive minority act to distract from open discussion about the impact of neoliberal policies and their negative social consequences including radicalisation among marginalised groups.

Therefore, the analysis of this paper suggests that insecurity in Tunisia is fundamentally linked to neoliberalism and its increasingly authoritarian manifestations in post-2011 Tunisia. Speaking to me in October 2021, prominent Tunisian academic and political commentator suggested "what truly threatens Tunisia today is not the relatively well contained threat of radicalisation, but the ever-present danger of despair caused by the devastating social and economic effects of neoliberal policies and austerity politics". One cannot theorise the attempts by contemporary policy makers to reconfigure their claims to legitimacy without an understanding of the way in which performing statehood through "securing the state" acts to distract from some of socioeconomic concerns. Significantly, these socioeconomic concerns, caused by the fallout of decades of failed neoliberal policies, are linked to both the

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[20] Interview with prominent Tunisian political commentator, May 2021
[21] For example, a report authored by Aliaga and O''Farrell found that those living marginalised regions and urban areas characterised by lack of economic opportunities were more likely to turn to extremism.

contemporary crisis in which Tunisia finds itself as well as the context of insecurity in the MENA more broadly.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that counterterrorism discourse and security policies and practices in contemporary Tunisia can be understood as performativity of the authoritarian neoliberal state. This is because the state, deprived of its sovereignty in certain areas associated with neoliberalism and faced with challenges to its legitimacy, uses performative security practices to reassert its sovereignty and attempt to reconfigure its legitimacy. Performative security politics is aimed at delegitimising political Islamism and societal opposition to the neoliberal consensus constructed at elite levels. Moral panic constructed around marginalised groups and broadly defined "Islamists" is about justifying the rollout of repressive policing of such communities. Furthermore, by delegitimising societal contestation of the so-called Tunisian consensus, political elites are seeking to distract from poverty, dispossession and the failure of neoliberalism as very real contributing factors in the insecurity that pushes individuals to radicalisation.

Thus, through its exploration of the Tunisian case, this article makes an empirical contribution to the theoretical arguments of Lister (2019) regarding counterterrorism as performativity of the authoritarian neoliberal state. Furthermore, by mobilising the concept of performativity to analyse the authoritarian neoliberal state, I seek to make a theoretical contribution to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism – reflecting upon the additional conceptual tools with which we can think beyond political economy in study of authoritarian neoliberalisms. Thus, with its empirical focus on the Tunisian case between 2014-2021, this paper has demonstrated that the critical security studies scholar can best conceptualise in(security) in MENA when thinking both with and beyond political economy. In doing so, I make the call for the breaking down of the illusionary interdisciplinary disassociations between security studies and international political economy in research about repressive state practices in the context of contemporary and increasingly authoritarian neoliberalism.

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