

Emotional Intelligence as an Approach of Preventing Extremism in the Tunisian Educational System

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These are times when the fabric of society seems to unravel at ever-greater speed, when selfishness, violence, and a meanness of spirit seem to be rotting the goodness of our communal lives. Here the argument for the importance of emotional intelligence hinges on the link between sentiment, character, and moral instincts. (Daniel Goleman)

1. REVOLUTION, EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM – WHAT HAS EDUCATION TO DO WITH IT?

After the revolution of 2011, Tunisia witnessed many terrorist attacks that have put the safety and well-being of this country into question. The attacks took various aspects and targeted different places in the country. At that epoch, Tunisia was supposed to go through one of its flourishing historical moments. Having been under dictatorial rule for decades, the revolution was perceived as a turning point and a catalyst event not just in Tunisia, but also within the whole MENA region context. However, unexpectedly, violent extremism and terrorism started emerging in the realm of the democratic transitional period.

In today's society, fear from terrorism comes in second just after unemployment. Thus, the proximity to national anxiety cannot be ignored. People's agonies and perceptions are equally important in determining which mechanisms have to be adopted to prevent any society from internal division.

During these years, an estimated number of 3000 Tunisians have joined ISIS to fight in Syria. An astounding aspect was that, regardless of their social backgrounds, around 40 percent of them had college degrees. If we were to take Nelson Mandela's quote as a reference in which he asserts that education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world, what could, then, drive an educated person to kill civilians and execute suicide bombings in the name of justice?

This sheds clouds of doubt on the psychological approach in the Tunisian educational system. Unexpected was the Tunisians' inclination to join, voluntarily, terrorist organizations despite being educated. Actually, this has been an area of many sociological studies in Tunisia and the world. Internal factors are mainly political and social dire conditions in Tunisia. Apart from having been under the same political rule for more than 23 years, other reasons have deepened the sense of denial among the emerging generations. Widespread unemployment was a direct factor of paramount anger among youth. In 2011, Tunisians resorted to many slogans to describe their psychological trauma. This aspect ignited the climax of national alienation. Such factors nurtured the vulnerability of the Tunisian psyche. Seeking belonging and recognition have been ultimate objectives for the majority of the Tunisian youth as it is for any youth worldwide. Besides, there was an external factor culminated the whole situation in the MENA region. It was the outbreak of conflict in the neighboring country of Libya. At that time, ISIS established their "state" in the region in Syria first, and in parts of Libya subsequently, by playing the role of the refuge for people who seek belonging, recognition, psychological shelter through "jihad" as freedom fighters or martyrs in the name of realizing justice. As an embodiment of their anger, thousands of Tunisians did not hesitate to join those organizations in Syria and Libya. In this sense, Tunisians have been "emotionally" driven to join violent extremist organizations. Indoctrination took place mainly between 2011 and 2014.¹ At that time, the youth objective was to realize social recognition and psychological belonging. Under the rule and protection of extremist organizations, that objective could only be achieved through acts of terror believing in the legitimacy of violence.

After the Bardo and Sousse terrorist attacks, the government declared a "war on terror" in which it has resorted to military measures and political action. But unfortunately, this vision has fostered a sense of national discontent as state authorities were criticized for the lack of a preventive long-term approach. Preventing terrorism, violent extremism, and radicalization could not be fully and solely approached through military and political actions. State authorities are called to consider intervention at an earlier stage on a different level.

As schools and universities are the places where the youth spend most of their time, therapy should start from there. Implementing an educational construct that can save the psychology and

¹ This period marked the rise of the Islamist movement Al Nahdha to power.

build a balanced national identity could be seen as an urgent vital approach to prevent the youth inclination to seek recognition through extremist or violent means. As, again, resorting to terror and terrorism could come only from a vulnerable psyche that lacks empathy.

Within this context, this paper aims at pushing the concept and approach of “emotional intelligence” to be considered a highly valuable contribution to building a stable youth psyche at school and the social life in general and to preventing extremism, radicalization and, finally, terrorism. “Emotional Intelligence” is presented as a promising perspective for the Tunisian educational system; starting from the primary schools and heading to the last stages of college and university.

2. DEFINITION OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE (EI)

There exists an array of definitions of Emotional Intelligence (EI).² According to Mayer and Salovey, “EI involves the ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotion; ability to access and/ or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth.”³ Goleman defines it as the ability to reasonably and effectively control and express emotions in order to encourage people to cooperate for general objectives.⁴ Bradberry and Greaves confirm that emotional intelligence is your ability to recognize and understand emotions in yourself and others, and your ability to use this awareness to manage your behavior and relationships.⁵ Also, Stein and Book assert that emotional intelligence is “a set of emotional and social skills that influence the way we perceive and express ourselves, develop and maintain social relationships, cope with challenges and use emotional information in an effective and meaningful way.”⁶

Generally speaking, there is a consensus that EI is the ability to recognize, understand, manage, and effectively use emotions in order to develop oneself and accept otherness in order to obtain the intended aims.

2 For a discussion of emerging research and approaches to EI, see J. Mayer et al., “Human Abilities: Emotional Intelligence”.

3 J. Mayer/ P. Salovey, “What is Emotional Intelligence”, p. 10.

4 See e.g. D. Goleman, Emotional intelligence. Why it can matter more than IQ.

5 T. Bradberry/ J. Greaves, Emotional Intelligence 2.0.

6 S. J. Stein/ H. Book, The EQ Edge: Emotional Intelligence and your success, p. 13.

3. THE SCIENTIFIC IMPORTANCE OF THE EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE DRIVE

Emotional Intelligence is seen as the interconnection between emotions and reasoning.⁷ It emerges from the premise that emotions have an impact on almost every aspect of human experience. EI refers to the ability to use emotions effectively and productively without being abused or abusive. Consequently, it challenges and revolutionizes the old understanding of reason-emotion relationship as adversaries. In the same context, research assumes that a high intelligence quotient guarantees not only happiness, but mainly collective virtue and national well-being.

From a scientific perspective, 80 percent of human beings’ actions and social behavior relies on one’s Emotional Intelligence; whereas only 20 percent is the outcome of rational intelligence. In other words, as human beings, we are emotional creatures. External factors are important in understanding and dealing with life issues but an essential job must be done to contain people’s anxiety and fear.

It is in this way in which terrorist demagogues always tap on the youth’s psyche, giving them the recognition they seek as “heros” or “freedom fighters” as they – not necessarily emerging from a deteriorated social or financial backgrounds – may simply seek recognition. This is their common feature and objective.

4. EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AS AN EDUCATIONAL SKILL TO PREVENT VIOLENT EXTREMISM

While the emphasis on the importance of developing social and emotional learning has been present for quite some time within global education,⁸ the ability to describe skills that are needed in the workforce or for successful citizenship (such as self-awareness, emotional intelligence, collective

7 The mind’s physiology and anatomy do not only enable individuals to grasp the very meaning of its process and structure but reveal that human beings have what is called a triune brain. This triune brain consists of three parts. Firstly, the primate neocortex or thinking brain; secondly, the midbrain or emotional brain and thirdly, the reptilian brain stem. It was firstly devised in 1990 by US neuroscientist and emotional intelligence pioneer Paul Donald MacLean.

8 See e.g. UNESCO’s mission statement according to its current education strategy: “fundamental objective of education is to promote values, attitudes and behaviors that empower learners to be proactive contributors to a more just, equal, peaceful and sustainable society. UNESCO, with its interdisciplinary mandate, is uniquely placed to promote global citizenship through education.” (UNESCO (2014): Education Strategy 2014–2021. Paris: UNESCO, p. 30.)

responsibility, effective group work, and communication skills) does not necessarily align with the curriculum that gets implemented into schools and colleges.

The young generation cannot afford to fail again. And, as long as the social fabric of Tunisia is capable of coping with emerging paradigms, treating the youth problems from a purely political or economic perspective would not make them profoundly immune to extremism. From a simple glance at the extremists' discourse as it appears on many Youtube channels, one could easily infer that they resort to pathos as a linguistic approach to gain the youth's sympathy. They always focus on orienting people's emotions and they concentrate on the youth's vulnerability to resist psychological weakness, failure, despair, unemployment dire conditions, and unbearable social marginalization. Thus, people with a vulnerable psyche are more likely to be driven within that stream of extremism to become real perpetrators.

This implies that there is no single factor leading to extremism. It is a multilayered combination of socio-economic, institutional, and ideological reasons. Push factors are mainly vulnerability and fragility; i.e the fact that someone feels alienated or that s/he lacks a sense of belonging. Taken for granted that the majority of perpetrators are either seeking leadership and/ or belonging, services, revenue, and employment; terrorist organizations claim they are able to provide them with the support they are in need for.

Contextual factors are the existence of a fragile state and the lack of the rule of law, corruption, and criminality. The Tunisian community is in need for a bottom-up approach to design to heal the national internal turmoil. This is why educational institutions are deemed to be the most appropriate and practical context to prevent extremist orientation and radical inclination on the Tunisian youth.

EI, then, as an educational skill can enhance the youth's awareness and teach them how to be self-aware and how to manage their anger and anxiety in a well-mannered, socially-acceptable and moderate way.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Many scholars in Tunisia, such as Monia Arfaoui or Hedi Yahmed, have written about and addressed extremism and terrorism from various perspectives. The neuroscientific perspective could be another approach to examine this social phenomenon. In Tunisia, topics of and perspectives on diversity and inclusion should be taught at schools because it is the feeling of being persecuted or marginalized that pushed many youths to join violent extremist groups.

ISIS did not recruit simple combatants and soldiers. Their recruiting model was specific. They needed architects, engineers, accountants, etc. Henceforth, they recruited well-educated people but they targeted those with a vulnerable psyche. This is why it is recommended that schools take the mission to prevent extremist orientation among pupils and students using Emotional Intelligence as one of the main educational drives from primary schools until higher education, adjusting its focus and implementation according to the youth different ages and with the assistance of medical observation.

This could be achieved via the following recommendations:

In primary schools (6-11 years)

- Building emotional literacy through active listening recognizing the pupils' feelings through talking and listening to them and giving them the opportunity to name those emotions (happiness, sadness, frustration, anger. etc.) and letting them know that their teachers and their parents know what they feel and how they feel it.
- Practicing self-regulation through reflection and through giving the pupils the time to find out why they feel that and how they can overcome any negative or extremist emotion(s).
- "Leading by example" through telling them how their teachers have gone through the same feelings and how they have overcome that.
- Developing the kids' empathy through exercising sharing with their classmates.
- Directing the kids to discover their intrinsic motivation to meet their objectives.

In high/secondary schools (12-18 years of age)

At this age, the teenagers' brains and bodies go through a lot of change. So, they naturally experience mental frustration. In this way, their emotions are not balanced. It is estimated that one out of three boys experience stress, and the number could be doubled with girls. Thus, teenagers need to be balanced by school subjects or activities related to EI to avoid their inclination towards extremism. Secondary school teachers, together with psychologists' and medical assistance, can rely on the following recommendations:

- Encouraging pressure-management.
- Enhancing self-confidence and positive attitudes.
- Increasing creativity.
- Improving communicative skills.
- Inserting more empathy skills by guiding students in how to respect and get respect from others.
- Helping students to identify and recognize their strengths and weaknesses through active listening.
- Helping students to find out the appropriate career trends and helping them to visualize their own career prospects.

At universities (19-23 years of age)

- Taking classes/ going through training that further enhance Emotional Intelligence as an asset in the future job market step.
- Inserting a one-year business management as an option to foster academic and social competencies.
- Creating compulsory course on management, professional/ organizational behavior and leadership skills.
- Suggesting visual arts as a way of refining taste and empathy in all in the majors in higher education programs in Tunisia as they deem vital in preventing youth from being extremists or violent.

This would support the prevention of extremist orientation because the main focus of the curricula would be on building inter- and-intra-personal skills. In this way, the probability of attracting youth to join extremist organizations and groups would inevitably diminish. Self-awareness and intra-personal skills are critically vital competencies in human endeavors as they provide individuals with a pre-requisite preparedness to respond to emerging threats. Accordingly, any job recruitment or training should not only value these competencies and new innovative approaches based on life and soft skills should be developed to strengthen them.

Emotional Intelligence is a vital component in educational reforms in Tunisia as a scientific approach to prevent extremist thought and behavior. The Tunisian youth are living a crisis of identity with the sole aim of being recognized. Only with the assistance of a tool such as Emotional Intelligence, being able to construct the youth abilities to be aware of their feelings, actions, and reactions in a fragile vulnerable context full of contrasting norms, this youth can be rescued from violent extremism. Emotional Intelligence should be fully developed and utilized in most schools and universities, and why not expanded over all collective Tunisian firms and organizations. The government, now more than ever before, should take these recommendations into serious consideration.

6. CONCLUSION

The emphasis in Tunisian schools and universities should be on the notion of Emotional Intelligence building the capacity of individuals to recognize their own, and other people's emotions, and to use emotional information to guide thinking and behavior in a way that protects them from extremist thinking that may lead to terrorism. It is the accurate reasoning of emotions and their usage to enhance thought and, practically, social behavior. In this sense, when teaching a subject related to Emotional Intelligence, emotions would be skilled and would automatically represent a potential ally and a real asset. Then, Emotional Intelligence entails the effective employment of emotions and emotional knowledge to further nurture the thinking process and the ability to act and react properly within a given community.

Skills and capacities of Emotional Intelligence have become increasingly significant and inevitable almost in every public sector of life ranging from effective leadership, building teams, to the

globe-spanning network of communication, development of human potential and performance. They are to build a successful economic and political life. In this sense, Tunisian students, who are the country's future leaders, have to develop their own leadership skills and potential with the help of Emotional Intelligence.

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