



FALL 2018

**VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN
JORDAN:
LOCAL GOVERNANCE, TRIBAL
DYNAMICS AND FORCED
MIGRATION**



A PROJECT OF THE INTERNATIONAL REPUBLICAN INSTITUTE

Violent Extremism in Jordan: Local Governance, Tribal Dynamics and
Forced Migration

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Approach

- The International Republican Institute (IRI) contracted NAMA Strategic Intelligence Solutions to conduct a series of focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs) in December 2017 to better understand the factors that influence radicalization of susceptible individuals and determine potential sources of resilience within the communities of Mafraq and Zarqa.
- This report is based on five FGDs, two IDIs with returned foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and 11 IDIs with community leaders and those proximate to at-risk populations. The FGDs were comprised of politically and socially marginalized youth in Zarqa. In Mafraq, the FGDs targeted Syrian refugees and Jordanian residents of Mafraq.
- NAMA selected FGD participants and interviewees who had shown signs of pro-violence attitudes and vulnerability to violent extremism (VE) in their national surveys. NAMA also conducted a pre-screening process which took into account individuals' monthly salary, employment status and perceived marginalization. As is common in qualitative research, findings from these FGDs and IDIs do not necessarily represent the opinions of all politically and socially marginalized youth in Zarqa or of all Syrian refugees and Jordanian residents in Mafraq.
- In June 2018, NAMA conducted a nationwide poll consisting of 1,525 face-to-face interviews. Data points relevant to VE are referenced throughout the report.
- IRI's approach to preventing violent extremism (PVE) is anchored in three phases: **understand, inform, and equip**. This report represents the first phase.

Findings

Potential Sources of Vulnerability to Violent Extremism

- **Finding #1:** An absence of community identity and belonging and a dearth of spaces for open and productive dialogue may leave individuals vulnerable to radicalization.
- **Finding #2:** Tribal loyalties may compete with and undermine the democratic channels that should be used to redress grievances.
- **Finding #3:** Economic and political exclusion breeds dissatisfaction among citizens, which may increase the appeal of VE as a means of changing their situation. In Mafraq, Jordanians' frustrations may be further exacerbated by the influx of Syrian refugees.
- **Finding #4:** Individuals may be susceptible to the manipulation of narratives about geopolitical flashpoints by violent extremist organizations (VEOs).
- **Finding #5:** Heavy-handed treatment of returnees and their families or friends may increase susceptibility to VE.

Potential Sources of Resilience to Violent Extremism

- **Finding #1:** Awareness of the brutality of VEOs can diminish vulnerability to VE.
- **Finding #2:** Most FGD and IDI discussants were content with levels of safety and security in their communities.
- **Finding #3:** Strong family ties can be leveraged to build resilience to VE.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Local government leaders should engage community and tribal leaders on the drivers of VE.

Recommendation 2: Nongovernmental organizations should facilitate community journalism projects to report on acts of brutality committed by VEOs.

Recommendation 3: Community actors should cultivate space for inclusive dialogue and tolerance that is resilient to VE.

Recommendation 4: Nongovernmental organizations and community actors should promote community pride campaigns, cultural activities and other efforts to strengthen social cohesion.

Recommendation 5: Nongovernmental organizations should equip families with dialogue and conflict management skills.

Recommendation 6: The national government should strengthen policies and programs that address returning FTFs.

Recommendation 7: The national and local government should recognize the need to address the root causes of conflict and VE to achieve sustainable peace and security.

KEY TERMS AND ACRONYMS

Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs): An individual who leaves his or her country of origin or habitual residence to join a non-State armed group in an armed conflict abroad and who is primarily motivated by ideology, religion, and/or kinship.¹

Forced migration: A migratory movement in which an element of coercion exists, including threats to life and livelihood, whether arising from natural or man-made causes (e.g. movements of refugees and internally displaced persons as well as people displaced by natural or environmental disasters, chemical or nuclear disasters, famine, or development projects).²

Returnees: Individuals who return home after joining a non-state armed group in an armed conflict abroad.

Refugees: Individuals who are unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.³

Violent Extremism (VE): Active or passive support for or participation in violence perpetrated with the intention of changing the existing political, social, and/or economic order.

Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs): Groups that advocate for and/or use violence in an attempt to change the existing political, social, and/or economic order.

¹ *Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Manual for Judicial Training Institutes South-Eastern Europe*, United Nations, September 2017, https://www.unodc.org/documents/frontpage/2017/Foreign_Terrorist_Fighters.pdf.

² "Key Migration Terms," *UN International Organization for Migration*, <https://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms>.

³ "What is a Refugee?," *UNHCR*, <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee/>.

INTRODUCTION

The International Republican Institute (IRI) conducted this research in two cities in northern Jordan to better understand the dynamics of violent extremism in the region. Jordan's domestic radical movement dates back three decades, when returning fighters from Afghanistan began spreading extremist messages in a country ripe for recruitment, with high unemployment and imperfect political representation. Jordan remains particularly vulnerable to homegrown radicalization and myriad destabilizing factors, including the return of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs)⁴ and the arrival of refugees from neighboring Syria. Despite its highly volatile and vulnerable location, Jordan has persisted as a committed and effective partner on counterterrorism efforts in the region, and is an island of enduring, albeit shaky, stability.

IRI takes a three-phased approach to preventing violent extremism: **understand, inform, and equip**. Each phase is critical to forging a comprehensive, responsive, governance-focused strategy capable of preventing the conditions that allow violent extremism to take root. IRI's approach is politically-informed, locally-driven and customized to the unique needs of specific communities.

Drivers of violent extremism stem from several interconnected factors as detailed in Figure 1. Much of the existing research on violent extremism focuses exclusively on factors at the macro (global), meso (national and subnational), or micro (individual) levels. However, focusing on just one of these levels risks obscuring the ways in which the levels interact with and reinforce each other. In recognition of this fact, the research approach taken by IRI in our "understand" phase uses qualitative methods of information gathering, including focus groups to gather data across multiple levels of analysis. Our regional and thematic knowledge and political expertise allows us to glean unique insights from the research to develop a comprehensive yet nuanced understanding of local drivers of violent extremism.

IRI's "understand" phase framework includes several levels of analysis to assess "vulnerability," as well as sources of "resilience." "Vulnerability" encompasses the full spectrum of drivers, including social, political and/or economic grievances that convince an individual to support violent extremism. "Resilience" connotes the ability of individuals to withstand recruitment efforts despite these grievances. Our unique framework—see *Figure 2*—allows us to identify not only differences between violent extremists and resilient individuals, but also between "cognitive radicals"—those who agree with violence but do not perpetrate attacks—and "behavioral radicals"—those who act on their radical ideology by committing violent acts.

Building on decades of survey research experience by IRI's Center for Insights in Survey Research and Office of Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning, our "understand" phase is customizable and scalable to fit the myriad contexts susceptible to the threat of violent extremism.

⁴Between 2,000 and 4,000 Jordanians have fought with the so-called Islamic State as FTFs, rendering Jordan one of the world's highest per capita contributors of FTFs. Yom, Sean and Katrina Sammour, "Counterterrorism and Youth Radicalization in Jordan: Social and Political Dimensions," *CTC Sentinel* vol 10, no. 4, April 2017, *West Point Combating Terrorism Center*, <https://ctc.usma.edu/counterterrorism-and-youth-radicalization-in-jordan-social-and-political-dimensions/>

METHODOLOGY

IRI designed and commissioned a nationwide poll and a series of focus groups in order to understand the behaviors, perspectives and attitudes of individuals in Jordan.

IRI contracted NAMA Strategic Intelligence Solutions to facilitate FGDs and IDIs with individuals from the municipalities of Mafraq and Zarqa in December 2017 to better understand the vulnerabilities to VE at the community level. NAMA conducted a total of five FGDs which reached 60 Jordanian and Syrian individuals; two IDIs with returned FTFs; and 11 IDIs with community leaders and individuals proximate to at-risk populations, including civil society activists and representatives of the military and security sector.

NAMA selected FGD participants and interviewees who had shown signs of pro-violence attitudes and vulnerability to VE in their national surveys. NAMA also conducted a pre-screening process which took into account individuals' monthly salary, employment status and perceived marginalization.

In Zarqa, the two FGDs comprised politically and socially marginalized youth, respectively including 14 Jordanian women and 13 Jordanian men aged 16 to 26. IDIs were conducted with two Jordanian men who had joined VEOs in Syria and were, at the time, partaking in rehabilitation programs.

Home of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi—the deceased head of al Qaeda in Iraq sometimes hailed as the “father” of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)⁵—the impoverished city of Zarqa has seen hundreds of youths joining radical groups in Iraq and Syria.⁶ IRI selected the city due to its reputation as a traditional hotbed of radicalization and fundamentalism. Zarqa may also be a source of homegrown radicalization; most recently, in January 2018, security forces foiled an ISIS plot formulated by individuals from the city.⁷

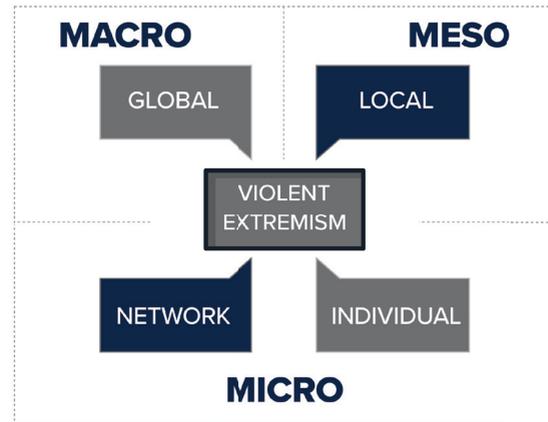


Figure 1: IRI analyzes grievances at multiple levels

Mafraq faces unique, potentially disruptive challenges, partially due to its proximity to the Syrian border. The mass influx of Syrian refugees has strained Mafraq's limited resources and economic opportunities, resulting in frustration among the local Jordanian population. Recognizing that Mafraq has received more than 85,000 forcibly displaced people from Syria,⁸ the three FGDs conducted in this governorate targeted a mix of Syrian refugees and a non-representative sample of the Jordanian local population. One FGD included nine Syrian women; the second included 12 Syrian men aged 18 and above; and the third FGD was facilitated with 12 Jordanian males, aged 16 to 26.

From June 20-29, 2018, NAMA conducted a nationwide poll on behalf of the IRI's Center for Insights in Survey Research.⁹ The sample consists of 1,525 face-to-face interviews with Jordanians aged 18 and above. The margin of error is plus or minus 2.5 percent at the midrange of the 95 percent confidence level. Some of this poll data is highlighted throughout this report to supplement the qualitative insights gained from the FGDs and IDIs.

⁵ Patterson, Thom, “The unlikely godfather of the Islamic State,” *CNN*, 3 July 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/06/29/middleeast/declassified-zarqawi-father-of-isis/index.html>

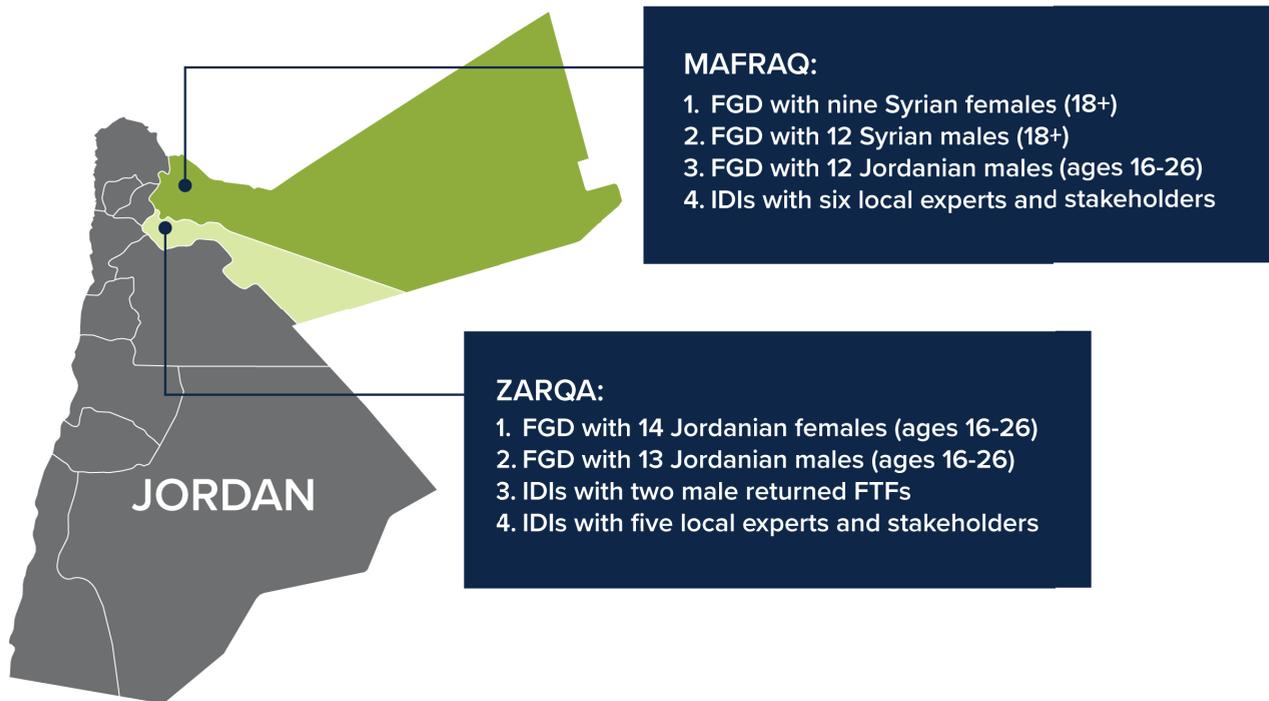
⁶ It is estimated that a third of FTFs hail from Zarqa. Hubbard, Ben, “In Jordan Town, Syria War Inspires Jihadist Dreams,” *New York Times*, 12 April 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/13/world/middleeast/in-jordan-town-syria-war-inspires-jihadist-dreams.html>

⁷ Khalidi, Suleiman, “Jordan says arrests 17 in foiled Islamic State attack plot: state media,” *Reuters*, 8 Jan. 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-jordan-security-militants/jordan-says-arrests-17-in-foiled-islamic-state-attack-plot-state-media-idUSKBN1EX11I>

⁸ “Mafraq,” Syrian Regional Refugee Response, *UNHCR*, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/52>. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/52>.

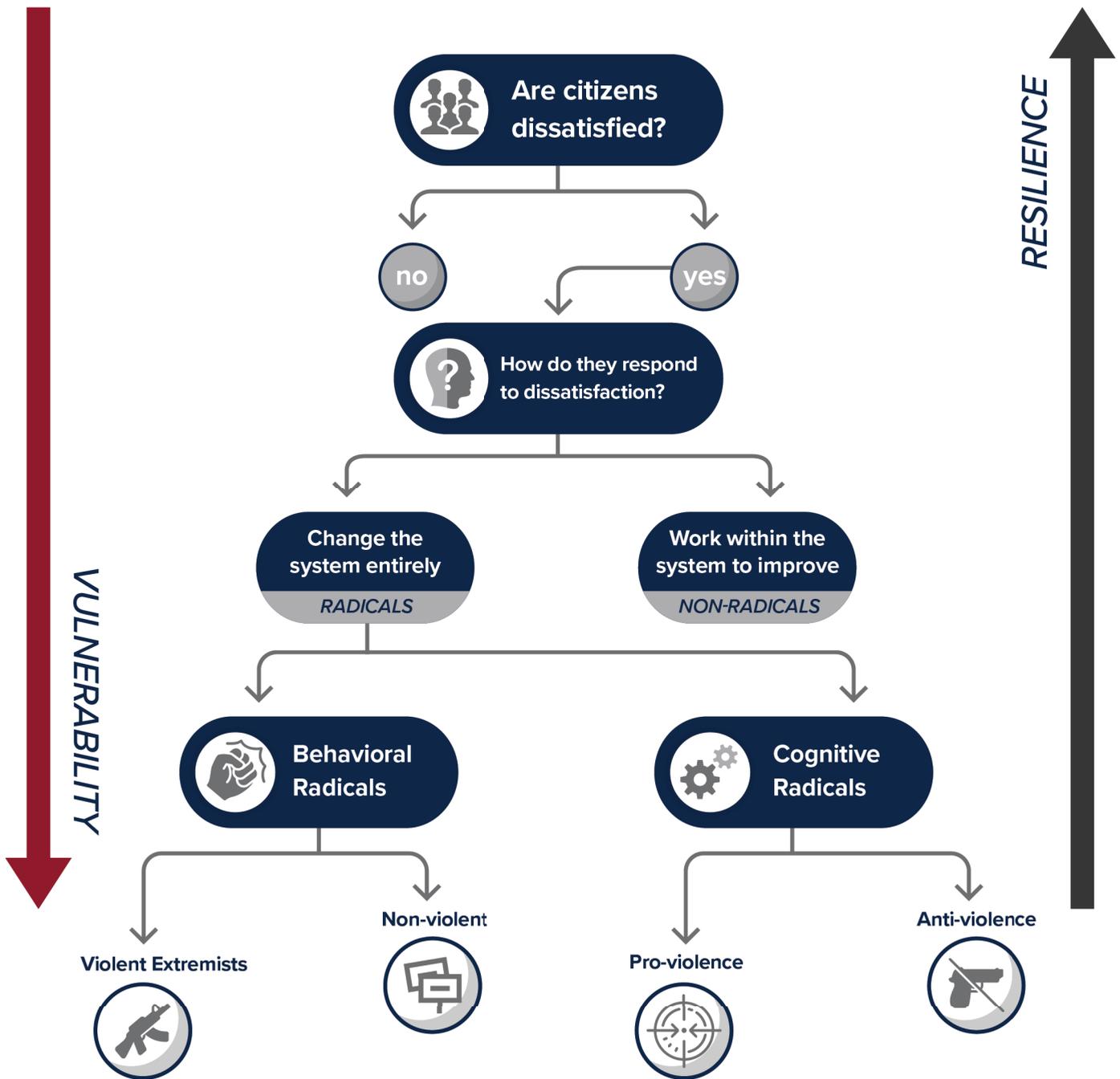
⁹ IRI, “Jordan Poll Reveals Low Trust in Government; Increasing Economic Hardship,” 6 Nov 2018, <https://www.iri.org/resource/jordan-poll-reveals-low-trust-government-increasing-economic-hardship>.

OVERVIEW OF FOCUS GROUP AND IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS:



These groups were selected in an attempt to capture a nuanced understanding of VE in Jordan by including a diversity of perspectives, with representation from Zarqa, a traditional hub for recruitment; returned FTFs, who provided unique perspectives into the recruitment, disengagement and deradicalization process; and Jordanian and Syrian individuals in Mafraq, whose challenges often intersect and compete with one another. Due to the distinct challenges both governorates present, IRI tailored its questions during the FGDs and IDIs based on the context of each municipality to elicit key points of vulnerability and of resilience. As is common in qualitative research, findings from these FGDs and IDIs do not necessarily represent the opinions of all politically and socially marginalized youths in Zarqa or of all Syrian refugees and Jordanian residents in Mafraq.

Figure 2: IRI's Pathways to Violent Extremism



FINDINGS

Potential Vulnerabilities to Violent Extremism

The following five findings represent potential vulnerabilities to VE in northern Jordan. The qualitative research reflects key factors which drive citizen dissatisfaction and disillusionment, including political and economic exclusion; the influx of Syrian refugees; a vacuum of religious dialogue and cultural identity; and potential vulnerabilities associated with tribalism and Jordan's geopolitical status. Jordan also faces grave challenges with the return of FTFs. Approximately 250 of the estimated 3,000 Jordanian FTFs have already returned, while 900 remained in Iraq or Syria as of May 2017.¹⁰

Although the path to VE is non-linear and highly individualized, factors that may increase an individual's propensity to become a behavioral or cognitive radical include: myriad forms of citizen dissatisfaction; a willingness to change the system; and pro-violence attitudes (see Figure 2, "IRI's Action Pathways to Violent Extremism"). While none of these dynamics taken alone represents a necessary, sufficient or exclusive condition for VE, IRI's research indicates that they may act as push factors that leave individuals increasingly vulnerable to radicalization and VEO recruitment.

Finding #1:

An absence of community identity and belonging and a dearth of spaces for open and productive dialogue may leave individuals vulnerable to radicalization.

Cultural desertification—the absence of social, public spaces and projects that build an intellectual or recreational identity—is widespread in both Zarqa and Mafraq, and the issue arose multiple times in the course of our research. One in-depth interviewee mentioned that

Mafraq had suffered from a mass migration from Mafraq to Amman, driving “a lack of cultural maintenance and development.”¹¹ Another IDI from Mafraq noted that cultural desertification was one of the biggest problems facing the municipality: “An issue [facing Mafraq] is the lack of social and cultural awareness. Thus, there have to be serious efforts directed towards raising awareness, to achieve social stability...The absence of recreational activities [is a major problem], resulting in cultural desertification and so on.” One IDI directly connected the decreasing level of culture to driving VE in Zarqa. Without social, intellectual and cultural activities to provide a galvanizing identity and social outlets, individuals may feel detached from their communities and deprived of a sense of purpose.

Across focus groups, discussants also indicated VEO recruitment methods may find increased receptiveness among individuals who do not understand VE and its use of Islam as a justification for violence. Young men from Zarqa pointed to the lack of education and ignorance as key drivers of VE. One FGD participant said, “There is not enough awareness regarding radicalization. Some people are adopting religion in a wrong way.” Syrian refugees taking part in a FGD in Mafraq described extremist groups' recruiting tactics in a similar way: “They capitalize on people's ignorance with religion.”

Together, a lack of community engagement opportunities and low levels of awareness about radicalization and violent extremism may generate an environment in which radical views can proliferate.

Finding #2:

Tribal loyalties may compete with or undermine the democratic channels that should be used to redress grievances.¹²

Tribal systems are part of the foundation of Jordanian

¹⁰ Barrett, Richard, *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*, The Soufan Center, October 2017, <http://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017-v3.pdf>.

¹¹ Quotes in this report may have been minimally treated to increase clarity. The original voices have been preserved to the maximum extent possible, and may retain errors in syntax, grammar, or word choice.

¹² It should be noted that this finding is only reflected in the Zarqa FGDs and IDIs, as different questions were asked in the Mafraq research that did not elicit the same sentiments. However, considering country dynamics and knowledge of the municipality of Mafraq, this finding could be extrapolated as a vulnerability in the Mafraq municipality as well.

society. The FGDs and IDIs bolstered IRI's understanding of the central role played by family and larger tribal structures in Zarqa. The traditional legitimacy of tribes presents both challenges and opportunities to addressing VE vulnerabilities in northern Jordan. Although the majority of discussants from Zarqa spoke positively about tribes and family, a few individuals recognized that tribalism may have negative aspects. For example, one female participant said that, despite "lov[ing] this place, it is comfortable...The worst part is tribalism." Another young female noted, "My community is bad compared to Amman; there is tribalism, partisanship..."

Beyond some comments indicating discontent with tribal dynamics, our data also found that family structures may in fact aggravate tensions among individuals instead of successfully channeling frustrations. A solid majority of both male and female FGD participants suggested that vulnerability to VE may be driven by "family break-up," such as a death in the family, marital disintegration or other incidents that could cause familial breakdown and dysfunction.

Although most of the male FGD participants from Zarqa said they would turn to family or friends to discuss their grievances, the majority said that no person or groups they knew could help them with these issues. In a tribal society, individuals or groups may feel increasingly isolated if they do not connect with their fellow tribe members. In some instances, individuals may search for their sense of belonging and for alternative social structures to feel a sense of belonging.

Tribalism can undermine the relationship between the government and citizens, with citizens turning to tribes for service delivery and leadership if government performance is deficient. Tribalism can also fuel or perpetuate corruption in the country, as government officials favor their kinsmen when providing services or benefits.¹³ Corruption, *wasta*¹⁴ and favoritism were among the most frequently cited problems at the national and municipal level.¹⁵ Furthermore,

56 percent and 22 percent of Jordanian adults said that personal contacts and/or relationships were either "very important" or "somewhat important," respectively, to "get things done in their dealings with the government."¹⁶ In such a system, a sense of injustice—real or perceived—may prompt a desire to effect change outside of the existing, legal structures.

Finding #3:

Economic and political exclusion breeds dissatisfaction among citizens, which may increase the appeal of VE as a means of changing their situation. In Mafraq, Jordanians' frustrations may be further exacerbated by the influx of Syrian refugees.

While weak governance and economic vulnerability are rarely exclusive drivers of VE, their *effects*—marginalization, idleness and a sense of hopelessness, among other sentiments—may create conditions in which individuals are susceptible to VE. In particular, when frustrations with the current political and economic order intensify, discussants who are unwilling to work within the system to create change and who have pro-violence tendencies may be disproportionately susceptible to VE.

Political and economic exclusion appears to underpin feelings of dissatisfaction at the national and local level. At the national level, nearly half of Jordanian adults think the country is "somewhat" or "mostly" going in the wrong direction. Poor governance was a key source of frustration and dissatisfaction: 18 percent of those who said the country was mostly or somewhat going in the wrong direction thought it was because of bad governance and lack of planning and proper policy, and 16 percent attributed this to corruption, *wasta* and favoritism.¹⁷ Additionally, 51 percent of adults said that government officials were somewhat or very untrustworthy as sources of information.¹⁸ These attitudes imply a breakdown in legitimacy and trust between the government and citizens.

¹³ Kao, Kristen, "Do Jordan's tribes challenge or strengthen the state?," *Washington Post*, 28 May 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/05/28/do-jordans-tribes-challenge-or-strengthen-the-state/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.b2daa9e0ec74

¹⁴ *Wasta* refers to any attempt to use the influence of family or friends—especially in the government or in other positions of power—to achieve certain objectives.

¹⁵ IRI, "Jordan Poll Reveals Low Trust in Government; Increasing Economic Hardship," 6 Nov 2018, <https://www.iri.org/resource/jordan-poll-reveals-low-trust-government-increasing-economic-hardship>.

¹⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁸ *Ibid*

The economic order presents serious challenges to Jordanian citizens, and underlies unfavorable sentiments toward the government. Seventy three percent of Jordanian adults said the current economic situation was “bad” or “very bad.”¹⁹ Political and economic dissatisfaction appeared to be inextricably linked, as nearly 90 percent of those who deem the economic situation to be “very bad” or “bad” believed that the government holds the most responsibility for the economic situation.²⁰

A. Political and Economic Exclusion in Zarqa

This national-level data was corroborated at the local level in both Mafraq and Zarqa. In Zarqa, female participants indicated that their interactions with local government institutions and officials was marred by frustration with nepotism or inefficient processes. One in-depth interviewee noted that the provision of services such as water, electricity and infrastructure was unsatisfactory. A FGD participant said, “There is no work, we always have to go very far to get an opportunity, even when it comes to training courses and workshops. Public buses are terrible, they are dirty and they do not treat us well. The streets are dirty too.” One female discussant complained that “parliamentarians and municipality officials disappear after they get voted in office,” while a male discussant claimed, “We do not see government officials.”

Significantly, these negative opinions were connected to pro-violence attitudes among FGD participants from Zarqa. About three quarters of Zarqa male FGD participants agreed that violence was justified to change the government’s policies. Moreover, in this same group, about a third of males said that their grievances cannot be properly addressed without using violence.

FGD participants from Zarqa also expressed the view that poverty and economic vulnerability may be a key reason underlying VE drivers. According to one IDI, “Certain socioeconomic and political factors lead to grievances, which makes alternative options more appealing.”

B. Political and Economic Exclusion in Mafraq

In Mafraq, similar levels of cynicism about both the political and economic order are exhibited. Regarding the government, Jordanian young male FGD participants in Mafraq said that the former national government²¹ had unclear policies and “did not do anything of value.” In parallel with the findings on economic exclusion in Zarqa, IDIs likewise associated poverty and economic hardship as softening the ground for radicalization. One IDI from Mafraq said that “[VEOs] exploit the feelings of poverty and hunger.” Another contended that vulnerability to VEO recruitment may arise from “the economic status of people, causing them to consider running away to chase materialistic benefits.”

However, these existing grievances are exacerbated by the economic and political destabilization that often accompanies an influx of refugees and migrants. Jordanian participants and interviewees partially blamed the worsening economic and political conditions in Jordan on the influx of Syrian refugees. Several focus group discussants attributed the negative community impact of Syrian refugees to employers’ preference to hire Syrians as they can be paid less and are more skilled, which has resulted in wage reductions. Another FGD discussant said that Syrian refugees had a negative impact on the community because they were driving up the cost of rent. One IDI said, “They compete with Jordanians in Mafraq over scarce job opportunities.” Another said, “[Syrians] have constituted a major impact, most of which was quite negative. They pose pressure on the already limited services in Jordan. They have had a direct and indirect impact on resources, such as water, pollution, underage marriage and crimes.” According to IRI’s June 2018 poll, a majority of Jordanians attributed the deterioration of the quality of services to the influx of Syrian refugees.²²

Frustration with political and economic exclusion were evident throughout the focus group interviews. Poverty, high prices, and a lack of job opportunities appear to be among the most pressing and palpable issues

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ The FGDs were conducted prior to the former Prime Minister Hani Mulki’s resignation due to countrywide demonstrations. See more here: Holmes, Oliver, “Jordan’s prime minister steps down after large anti-austerity protests,” *The Guardian*, 4 June 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/04/jordan-prime-minister-hani-mulki-resigns-protests-reports>

²² IRI, “Jordan Poll Reveals Low Trust in Government; Increasing Economic Hardship,” 6 Nov 2018, <https://www.iri.org/resource/jordan-poll-reveals-low-trust-government-increasing-economic-hardship>.

individuals face on a day-to-day basis. When combined with the perceived deprivation of personal agency, these grievances could push some individuals to consider VE.

Finding #4:

Individuals may be susceptible to the manipulation of narratives about geopolitical flashpoints by VEOs.²³

Our data found high levels of pro-violence attitudes in situations where community may be threatened—whether at a micro level (i.e., their families) or at the macro level (i.e., the broader pan-Arab or pan-Muslim identity). Perhaps due to Jordan’s regional proximity to major geopolitical flashpoints, all young female and male FGD participants from Zarqa said that violence was justified to fight occupation in one’s own country or in another Arab or Muslim country. Moreover, about two thirds of young males believed that “conflict zones,” or locations where violence is being perpetrated against Arabs or Muslims, were drivers of VE. One local stakeholder from Zarqa also mentioned that the “surrounding geopolitical turmoil” may be an issue that underlies VE drivers.

These findings complement our research surrounding the justification of violence related to family in Jordan. All men and about a quarter of women in Zarqa said that violence was justified to defend their family. When explored through other questions in the FGDs and IDIs, it became clear that “family” may have multiple interpretations—1) the immediate family; 2) the tribe; or 3) the broader pan-Arab or pan-Muslim identity.

Across a range of contexts, the manipulation of geopolitical flashpoints has successfully fueled terrorist propaganda. One returnee validated this notion, noting that the narrative of Arab or Muslim identity inspired VEO recruitment messages: “I was following the news media outlets...which employed a mobilizing narrative such as ‘Where are you Arabs? Where are you Muslims?’”

Collectively, these justifications of violence, combined with VEOs’ use of geopolitical flashpoints to serve their agenda, may create a major vulnerability among individuals in Jordan.

Finding #5:

Heavy-handed treatment of returnees and their families or friends may increase susceptibility to VE.

Our research found a range of complex dynamics surrounding the issue of returned FTFs—including fears among discussants from Zarqa that their safety and security may be threatened by returnees, and serious challenges faced by returnees upon their reentry into the country.

Interviews with returnees shed light on the factors motivating their disengagement from VEOs, and their experiences with imprisonment, rehabilitation and reintegration. After their return, the two interviewees reported disproportionately punitive treatment toward their uninvolved family members by the justice system as well as exposure to radical ideology in prison when they voluntarily returned to Jordan. Both of these experiences could present significant vulnerabilities to VE.

One returnee stated, “I think that [security forces] can worsen [the problem] for the following reason. My wife and my own daughter are locked in prison [...which] is a big enough reason for anyone to develop grievances against the country.” As the returnee suggests, the perception by VE-vulnerable individuals that FTFs’ family members—regardless of culpability—are being treated unjustly could increase their vulnerability to VE and in the case of returnees, VE recidivism. In similar contexts, family members or friends of FTFs can face an increase in stigma or excessive punishment due to their relationships with such individuals. Perceived mistreatment and overly harsh legal repercussions of family members could also create

²³ It should be noted that this finding is only reflected in the Zarqa FGDs and IDIs, as different questions were asked in the Mafraq research that did not elicit the same sentiments. However, considering country dynamics and knowledge of the municipality of Mafraq, this finding could be extrapolated as a vulnerability in that municipality as well.

ripple effects throughout society; research has shown that witnessing state violence can serve as a traumatic event which triggers the decision to join a VEO.²⁴ To that end, individuals who observe or are affected by the treatment of these family members or friends of FTFs may also develop grievances against the state.

The prison environment can also act as a breeding ground for radicalization, further complicating the rehabilitation and deradicalization of returnees. The second returnee interviewed faced tremendous challenges in prison: “I was put under a huge radicalization pressure by the people in the cells, and they tried mobilizing me against the security forces.”

The reintegration of returnees arose as a critical issue facing communities. IDIs expressed serious fear and anxiety that some returnees may not fully dissociate from radical views, thereby posing “an incredible security threat” to their communities. One IDI noted, “[Returnees] might attempt to rekindle their grievances against the state. They might attempt to connect with likeminded people to establish their own group.” These sentiments indicate that some individuals may ostracize returnees who attempt to reintegrate into their communities.

While these interviews are not representative of all returnees’ experiences, they offer a glimpse of the challenges faced by returnees and the communities that receive them. Questions remain at the international, national and local levels about addressing returnees—especially efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate such individuals—all of which have serious policy and societal implications. These issues will only continue to grow as more FTFs come home.



“My wife and my own daughter are locked in prison [...which] is a big enough reason for anyone to develop grievances against the country.”

- Returned FTF Interviewee, Zarqa

Reflections on Potential Sources of Vulnerability to Violent Extremism

The above findings represent potential sources of vulnerability to VE that can help explain the sustained presence of VE in the country. They reveal grievances and attitudes that correspond with a search for alternative systems and a renewed sense of belonging—sentiments that often increase susceptibility to radicalization in other contexts. Together, these findings do not constitute definitive drivers of VE in Mafraq and Zarqa, but rather reveal key conditions, grievances and attitudes that could contribute to the problem. Further, though these findings may represent vulnerabilities to VE in particular, all may have broader destabilizing impacts, ultimately undermining peace and security in the country.

²⁴ Journey to Extremism in Africa, UNDP, 2017, <http://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/content/downloads/UNDP-JourneyToExtremism-report-2017-english.pdf>.

THE INTERSECTION OF FORCED MIGRATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN MAFRAQ: DUAL DESTABILIZING FORCES

Our research encountered conflicting and often incongruous interpretations of social dynamics in Mafraq. In addition to economic anxiety, the data revealed frustrations with the social upheaval caused by the influx of Syrian refugees. One Jordanian male FGD participant said, “The Syrian people are very conceited and they are the reason behind the conflict.” Another Jordanian interviewee from Mafraq insisted throughout the interview that the arrival of Syrian refugees would only enhance diversity and strengthen the social fiber of the city. Yet he also remained wary of them: “There might be danger since they [Syrian refugees] are generally vulnerable to becoming violent extremists.”²⁵

These sentiments are reflected at the national level. Fifty-one percent of adults in IRI’s June 2018 poll believe that attitudes toward Syrian refugees are getting worse.²⁶ Forty-one percent think that Syrian refugees should be sent back and 35 percent believed that Jordan should stop receiving them.²⁷

Despite the apparent resentment of their host community, Syrian female and male FGD participants in the city expressed contentment with the living and security conditions. The vast majority of Syrian female participants mentioned their desire to stay in Jordan even if the conflict in Syria were resolved. In the Syrian male focus group, only a quarter of participants expressed a desire to stay in Jordan in general, but all said they would stay if the conflict ends and Assad remains in power. The research indicates a disparity between the Jordanian and Syrian populations, in which Jordanians feel neglected by their government (see Vulnerability #3), but Syrians feel grateful for the Jordanian government’s hospitality. The Jordanian participants’ frustrations and the likelihood that the Syrian population may stay on a long-term, if not permanent, basis, underscores the need to address community cohesion issues before existing grievances are aggravated and escalated.

²⁵ It should be noted that our research did not find Syrian refugee FGD participants to be particularly vulnerable to VE.

²⁶ IRI, “Jordan Poll Reveals Low Trust in Government; Increasing Economic Hardship,” 6 Nov 2018, <https://www.iri.org/resource/jordan-poll-reveals-low-trust-government-increasing-economic-hardship>.

²⁷ Ibid

Potential Sources of Resilience to Violent Extremism

The five findings cited above represent the grievances, conditions and attitudes that are likely contributing to VE vulnerability. However, FGD and IDI participants also pointed to constructive attitudes, societal structures and key actors that could be drawn upon to counter these drivers.

The data show that most participants were appalled by the brutality of VEOs and by the association of VEOs with Islam. Participants also appeared to be happy with the relative security and stability in the country, validating the perception that Jordan is a stabilizing force in the region. Paradoxically, although tribalism and family structures can be a source of vulnerability, the research indicated that such ties can be leveraged to fortify individuals' resilience to VE.

While none of these factors by themselves represent a necessary or sufficient condition for resilience, these sentiments could constitute important sources of cohesion and peace, and a foundation upon which the government, civil society and other key actors can build.

Finding #1:

Awareness of the brutality of VEOs can diminish vulnerability to VE.

The data suggest a link between the perception of VEOs as brutal killers hijacking Islam and a disinclination to associate with these groups. Across all focus groups, both Jordanian and Syrian discussants consistently associated VEOs with brutality and fear and expressed horror and anger at the way they claim Islam to justify their behavior. Syrian women in Mafraq associated ISIS with "butchering children," "unbelievable violence," and said "they are terrifying, crazy" and "scary." Syrian men in Mafraq associated ISIS with "killing, destruction and killing of children" and "terror and destruction." Jordanian young men associated ISIS with "kill[ing] for fun." They also coupled them with "ruining the image of Islam" by "hijack[ing] Islam," "kill[ing] people in the name of Islam" and lacking "Islam's or humanity's morals."



"I started seeing a lot of inhumane things; I saw them beheading people right after they had prayed. That was the moment for me when I decided that I had to go back."

- Returned FTF Interviewee, Zarqa

One returnee stated that he no longer wanted to participate in VE after witnessing atrocities: "I started seeing a lot of inhumane things; I saw them beheading people right after they had prayed. That was the moment for me when I decided that I had to go back." This indicates that witnessing a VEO's brutal acts may prompt disengagement from that group. The other returnee further expressed his disgust with VEOs' cooptation of Islam: "They [violent extremists] do not practice real Islam, nor are they righteous, and they are abusing the Quran. They do use Quranic verses, but they interpret them in a terrible way." As first-hand witnesses to this violence and the distortion of Islam, returnees may be uniquely positioned to dispel the fantasies of heroism associated with joining a VEO.

Finding #2:

Most FGD and IDI discussants were content with the level of safety and security in their communities.

Essential to community resilience against extremist movements is the population's satisfaction with the state and its services. Perceived security is a prerequisite to other community cohesion efforts that bolster community resilience to VE. At the national level, a plurality of 37 percent identified safety, security and stability as the reason they believed Jordan was heading mostly or somewhat in the right direction.²⁸ When asked about safety and security in both Zarqa and Mafraq, most Jordanian and Syrian participants responded positively, saying that it was "amazing," and that "there are no threats at all. It is completely under control and constantly monitored." This indicates that individuals may not actively fear violence nor

²⁸ Ibid

the threat of terrorism in their own communities. Indeed, the Jordanian security services successfully disrupted a number of terrorist plots over the past few years.²⁹

Notwithstanding their problematic experience in the justice system, the two returnees noted that they felt comfortable turning to security forces or the General Intelligence Directorate to discuss grievances. More than a quarter of women from Zarqa said they would turn to security forces to discuss grievances (with the rest relying on their families).

Despite the widespread feeling of safety, interviewees also expressed fears that this status quo would not endure. One IDI from Mafraq said, “certain points of danger exist moderately, which is mainly due to its geopolitical status;” while another noted, “there are some security threats such as the surrounding geopolitical turmoil...” When asked to describe life generally in Zarqa, one male FGD participant said, “It is good, security overshadows everything else and makes it look better, and educational facilities are ignored.” This indicates that security may be overemphasized in their communities in lieu of much needed services and cultural activities (see Vulnerabilities #1 and #3). One IDI from Zarqa said, “[Countering VE] should not stop with the security aspect.” Indeed, such efforts must go beyond simply disrupting terrorist plots and instead address the root causes of radicalism and vulnerabilities to VE.

Stability and security in Jordan represent a strong point of resilience; its regional proximity to conflict renders this peace particularly elusive to obtain, and therefore all the more striking. Yet strides should be made toward sustainable peace, especially regarding the issue of VE. Perceived community security is an important foundation upon which to build other community resilience efforts to more holistically address the complex network of VE vulnerabilities. Inclusive, democratic institutions, community cohesion and opportunities to peacefully address grievances can be fostered in a community that feels safe.

Finding #3:

Strong family ties can be leveraged to build resilience to VE.

Family can provide an important outlet for grievances that might otherwise manifest in violence. A solid majority of female participants and virtually all male participants in Zarqa indicated that they would discuss their grievances with family or friends. At the national level, 90 percent of adults stated that they consider friends and family to be trustworthy sources of information—yielding the highest credibility rating of any of the actors examined in the survey.³⁰

It is important to build upon the level of legitimacy held by friends and families in efforts to prevent VE; however, families are often insufficiently equipped with the knowledge or tools to do so.³¹ Positive social networks have been recognized as integral to shaping attitudes toward violence and non-violence, and strong family bonds often serve as a bulwark against radical influences by both influencing individual family members to play a productive role in society, and by engaging in broader societal efforts to prevent VE.³²

Reflections on Potential Sources of Resilience to Violent Extremism

The above findings constitute potential sources of resilience to VE in Mafraq and Zarqa, indicating the presence of social cohesion and nonviolent attitudes that could be utilized to counter radicalism. Participants’ critical attitudes toward VEOs show a high level of awareness of the issue of radicalization and the activities of VEOs. The positive perceptions of safety and security help demonstrate Jordan’s relative stability in the region, providing a solid foundation for community cohesion. Yet security efforts alone are not sufficient to address VE. When addressing VE, key stakeholders should build on the high levels of legitimacy held by families when designing and implementing programs. All resilience points further instruct how to maneuver and build on existing societal elements which are critical to PVE programming success.

²⁹ “Country Reports on Terrorism 2017: Jordan,” U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2017/282844.htm>.

³⁰ IRI, “Jordan Poll Reveals Low Trust in Government; Increasing Economic Hardship,” 6 Nov 2018, <https://www.iri.org/resource/jordan-poll-reveals-low-trust-government-increasing-economic-hardship>.

³¹ UN Global Counterterrorism Forum, Initiative to Address the Life Cycle of Radicalization to Violence, The Role of Families in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism: Strategic Recommendations and Programming Options, <https://www.thegctf.org/Portals/1/Documents/Toolkit-documents/English-The-Role-of-Families-in-PCVE.pdf>

³² Ibid

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations listed below are designed to address the vulnerabilities to VE and to leverage the resilience points identified in the FGDs and IDIs. These recommendations are intended for national and local government officials, as well as domestic and international non-governmental organizations.

- 1** *Recommendation 1:*
Local government leaders should engage community and tribal leaders on the drivers of VE.
-

NGOs and other community actors should facilitate roundtables between the two stakeholders to brief them on local drivers of VE and establish a coordinated action plan to address the key structural factors which contribute to the problem.

- 2** *Recommendation 2:*
Nongovernmental organizations should facilitate community journalism projects to report on acts of brutality committed by VEOs.
-

NGOs and community leaders should lead community journalism projects to highlight the brutality of VEOs through as investigative journalism. Projects should target at-risk communities. Programs may benefit from including the perspectives of former recruits or returnees who have since rejected VE.

- 3** *Recommendation 3:*
Community actors should cultivate space for inclusive dialogue and tolerance that is resilient to VE.
-

Community actors such as NGOs or schools should sponsor dialogue days and organize small, informal discussions to raise awareness of issues such as peace, VE, tolerance and returnees. In Tunisia, IRI has found that dialogue circles provide a much-needed space in which individuals can talk openly about issues that may be considered taboo or sensitive. These opportunities may also shed light on and mitigate key concerns, grievances and misunderstandings associated with VE.

- 4** **Recommendation 4:**
Nongovernmental organizations and community actors should promote community pride campaigns, cultural activities and other efforts to strengthen social cohesion.
-

The dearth of cultural events and weak social cohesion demand an increase in activities which would build ties among disparate groups. Emphasis should be placed on connecting Syrian refugees and Jordanian individuals in Mafraq. Communities should establish clubs or other voluntary organizations that offer affordable or free activities and create a sense of belonging. NGOs should also organize beautification and other cultural projects, led by young people in the community.

- 5** **Recommendation 5:**
Nongovernmental organizations should equip families with dialogue and conflict management skills.
-

NGOs should facilitate trainings of family members on dialogue, conflict management and drivers of VE in their communities to encourage open conversations about VE vulnerability and resilience factors.

- 6** **Recommendation 6:**
The national government should strengthen policies and programs that address returning FTFs.
-

a. The government should diminish any overly punitive policies and programs that address returnees and their families and should seek to strike an effective balance between accountability and reconciliation. Lessons could be drawn from successful demobilization, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) projects.

b. Rehabilitation and reintegration programs should involve community actors and families of FTFs and returnees to help ease returnees' reentry into society. For example, programs could include a community liaison network which fosters mentorship, support and trust among returnees and other key stakeholders.

c. Returnee reintegration projects could include artistic or entrepreneurial

skill-building workshops. These initiatives could provide an effective outlet for returnees to process their experiences and contribute productively to their community.

d. Community actors should implement awareness campaigns about returnees to mitigate any anxiety in communities receiving them. Campaigns could include roundtables featuring reintegrated returnees who could speak about their experience.

7 ***Recommendation 7:***
Both the national government and local municipal government should recognize the need to address the root causes of conflict and VE to achieve sustainable peace and security in Jordan.

Government officials should, when possible, commission and incorporate research and analysis into policymaking to prevent VE. Intermittent, national and subnational assessments to understand the evolving root causes of VE and broader instability would greatly strengthen the effectiveness of policies developed to promote peace.

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