

WINTER 2016

**UNDERSTANDING  
LOCAL DRIVERS  
OF VIOLENT  
EXTREMISM  
IN TUNISIA**



A PROJECT FROM  
THE INTERNATIONAL REPUBLICAN INSTITUTE



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International Republican Institute

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Understanding Local Drivers of Violent Extremism in Tunisia

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## Approach

- In late 2016, the International Republican Institute (IRI) conducted research in Beja, Tunisia, to understand the local drivers behind increased vulnerability to violent extremism in the community. Beja was selected because it has been a source of a significant number of foreign fighters.
- This report is based on focus group research and extensive interviews with residents of Beja, including family and friends of foreign fighters. The groups have been classified according to their levels of vulnerability or resilience to violent extremism.
- IRI's approach to preventing violent extremism is anchored in three phases: understand, inform, and equip. This report represents the first phase.

## Findings

- Focus group findings indicate that marginalized portions of the Tunisian population are vulnerable to radical, often violent ideology in part because they do not believe that there are viable, nonviolent means of alleviating grievances.
- Participants revealed a nexus between high expectations that have been disappointed by the post-revolution Tunisian government and continued grievances over issues such as the dearth of economic opportunity, corruption and harassment by security services.
- Unemployment, the lack of responsiveness by local government and the perception of widespread corruption appear to rob vulnerable segments of Tunisia's population of their sense of agency and self-worth.
- Resilient focus group participants tended to note their dissatisfaction with many of the same issues as vulnerable participants, but did not experience the same degree of hopelessness. The feeling that things will never improve is preyed upon by violent extremist recruiters.
- Focus group respondents conveyed the sense that violent extremists offer vulnerable Tunisians with both negative (an outlet for grievances) and positive (sense of self-worth, financial reward) incentives.
- A large proportion of respondents reported negative encounters with police or security services, including assault and harassment. In vulnerable segments of the population, this appeared to feed into feelings of anger, frustration and the sense that there are no effective nonviolent ways to seek remedies for grievances.
- Several respondents noted the lack of moderate religious leaders as a factor contributing to the spread of extremism in Tunisia. Violent extremist organizations are exploiting religious illiteracy to facilitate recruitment efforts and provide justification for addressing grievances with violence.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Recommendation 1:**

Engage citizens through measures such as regular and accessible town hall meetings, door-to-door outreach and strengthened, ongoing communication with constituents.

### **Recommendation 2:**

Address corruption by introducing measures to make municipal processes more transparent, publicize information on these processes and job opportunities, and provide information on public grants and funding.

### **Recommendation 3:**

Security services must work with the public to improve security responses and perceptions. This could be achieved through measures such as forming citizen security committees to work directly with the police; enhancing outreach from the Ministry of Interior; improving community interaction with the local Ministry of Interior branches; training for local police to improve community relations; and joint community safety projects between youth and police.

### **Recommendation 4:**

Encourage constructive engagement by civil society through trainings on subjects including: advocating for community projects; understanding the legislative process in Tunisia; and organizing community meetings and outreach campaigns.

### **Recommendation 5:**

Inspire pride in Tunisia's history of a peaceful and tolerant approach to religion through measures such as: radio and television programs exploring Tunisia's religious history and tradition; documentary screenings, multimedia initiatives and other events highlighting the progress Tunisia has made since the revolution; and initiatives led by religious leaders with support of government and civil society leaders.

# INTRODUCTION

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The International Republican Institute (IRI) conducted this research in Beja, Tunisia, to understand the local drivers behind increased vulnerability to violent extremism in the community. Tunisia has been lauded for its uniquely positive democratic progress since the 2011 revolution overthrew the Ben Ali regime. However, in the years following the Arab Spring, Tunisia's post-revolution government has struggled to consolidate democracy and meet the increasingly high expectations of its citizens. This has contributed to some citizens becoming dissatisfied and more susceptible to recruitment by violent extremist organizations and transnational terrorist networks. Although Tunisia does not have significant levels of religiously conservative Muslims<sup>1</sup>, our research shows that radical ideologies are nonetheless finding a foothold among a frustrated and marginalized segment of the population.

These marginalized portions of the population are open to radical, often violent ideology in part because they do not believe that there are viable, nonviolent means of alleviating grievances. The same sentiments that led citizens to the streets in 2011 chanting *degage* ("get out") to a corrupt, autocratic dictator are still alive and well today. As expectations of what life in a newly democratic country should be like rose, the wellbeing and livelihood of many Tunisians declined. This dynamic has been further exacerbated by a government that has done little to manage citizens' expectations and has been accused of corruption, regionalism, and state harassment.

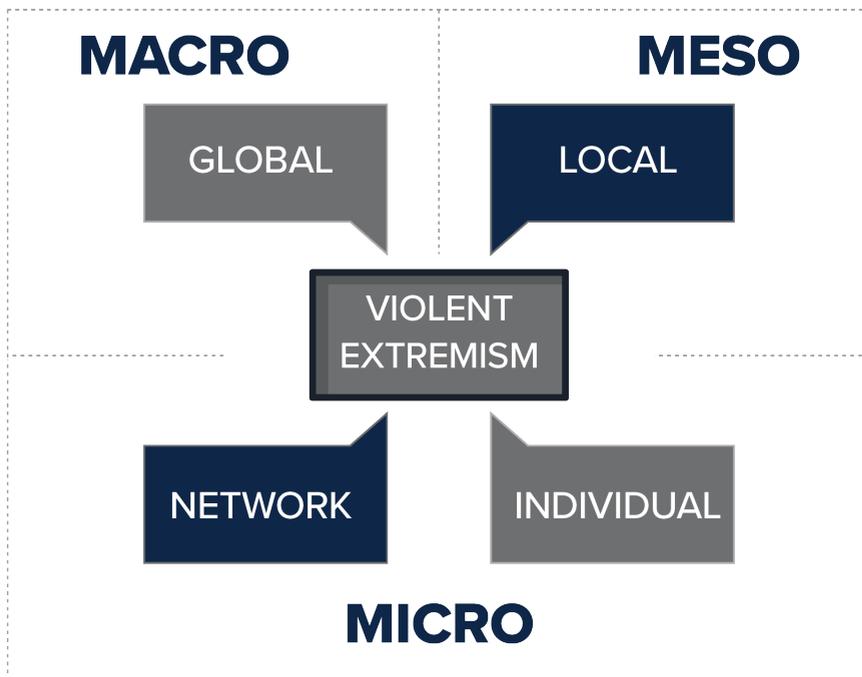
The nexus of high expectations and significant grievances create a volatile environment susceptible to radical ideology. Now, nearly seven years after the start of the Arab Spring, many Tunisians are considering alternative means of employment, and some are exploring radical, sometimes destructive paths to change. Violent extremist organizations have seized on this widespread anger and disappointment, and promised the finances, opportunities and the future prosperity Tunisians expected the post-Ben Ali, democratically-elected state to deliver.

Across the world, the drivers of violent extremism are often highly localized and fluid. Disrupting violent extremism's spread is a challenge for even the most experienced policymaker and community leader. In Tunisia, this task is particularly daunting as the country is still building its democratic system.

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

<sup>1</sup>According to IRI polling, only 17 percent of Tunisians believe that Islamic texts should form the foundation of all policy and lawmaking.

See [http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri\\_tunisia\\_dec\\_2016\\_poll\\_public\\_1.pdf](http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri_tunisia_dec_2016_poll_public_1.pdf)



*Figure 1:  
IRI analyzes grievances  
at multiple levels*

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 global, national, sub-national, and individual levels interact with and reinforce each other. In recognition of this fact, the research approach taken by IRI in our “understand” phase uses quantitative and qualitative methods of information gathering, including focus groups, in-depth interviews, and national-level surveys to gather data across multiple levels of analysis. Finally, our in-country 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 cause an individual to support violent extremism. Resilience connotes the ability of individuals to withstand recruitment efforts

despite these grievances. Our unique framework 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 with violence. Building off of decades-long 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.

This research, the first of the three phases, took place in Beja, a northwestern governorate in Tunisia’s interior. Many non-coastal communities in Tunisia experience governance challenges and political marginalization. We chose to examine this community because many foreign terrorist fighters have been recruited from Beja. This research is the first step in helping government and community partners in Beja to push back against these recruitment efforts. The findings below are the foundation for our future work to “inform” and “equip,” with the aim of ultimately reducing susceptibility to violent extremism in Beja.

# METHODOLOGY

*IRI conducted focus group discussions and in-depth interviews in Beja in the fall and winter of 2016. IRI worked with a Tunisian marketing and survey research firm to prescreen focus group and interview participants<sup>2</sup>, administer the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, translate the transcripts into English, and supply initial analysis. To inform the focus groups and in-depth interviews, we used the findings of public opinion research previously conducted by IRI in Tunisia, which is referenced throughout this report.*

We conducted six focus group discussions with both vulnerable and resilient individuals to better understand the local drivers of violent extremism. IRI conducted an additional focus group discussion with young male community members who exhibited traditionally conservative religious attitudes and priorities. In order to gain a better understanding of the micro-dynamics that drove fighters out of Tunisia, we supplemented the focus group research with 13 in-depth interviews. We conducted the interviews with select focus group discussion participants and family members of individuals who were fighting in Syria, Iraq, and Libya.

## Focus Group Participants

We used our unique pathways to violent extremism model (Figure 2) and 13 nationwide surveys conducted in Tunisia since the revolution to develop a typology from which to identify focus group participants. We ultimately decided to focus on three types of participants:

- Individuals susceptible to violent extremism;
- Individuals resilient to violent extremism; and
- Individuals exhibiting conservative religious behavior.

When prescreening participants, we controlled for demographic characteristics that, according to research<sup>3,4</sup> and reporting<sup>5,6,7</sup>, were common to many individuals who had left Tunisia to fight with the Islamic State and other violent extremist organizations in Syria, Iraq, and Libya: namely, economic status, education, gender, and age.

Focus group participants were identified through an IRI-designed prescreening questionnaire based on the action pathways to violent extremism.

### The six focus groups were:

- **Vulnerable Young\* Men:** economically vulnerable, religiously vulnerable, experienced social marginalization; unproductive/bad relationship with state
- **Vulnerable Men:** economically vulnerable, religiously vulnerable, experienced social marginalization; unproductive/bad relationship with police/security; experienced social injustice
- **Vulnerable Women:** economically vulnerable, religiously vulnerable, experienced social marginalization; unproductive/bad relationship with police/security; experienced social injustice
- **Resilient Young Men:** economically vulnerable
- **Resilient Young Women:** economically vulnerable
- **Religious Young Men:** high levels of religiosity; economically vulnerable

#### \*Young defined as ages 20-35

IRI classified individuals as “vulnerable” or “resilient” based on their stated support for foreign fighters in Syria, Iraq, and Libya, as determined in the prescreening questionnaire

<sup>2</sup> Unless specified as interview or focus group, throughout the report, we refer to “participants” as all Beja residents with whom we conducted research, regardless of methodology (in-depth interview or focus group).

<sup>3</sup> International Crisis Group, *Jihadist Violence in Tunisia: The Urgent Need for a National Strategy*. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/jihadist-violence-tunisia-urgent-need-national-strategy>

<sup>4</sup> International Alert, *Experiences and Perceptions of Young People in Tunisia*. [http://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Tunisia\\_YoungPeopleSurvey\\_EN\\_2015.pdf](http://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Tunisia_YoungPeopleSurvey_EN_2015.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Foreign Policy, *Why does Tunisia Produce So Many Terrorists*. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/15/why-does-tunisia-produce-so-many-terrorists-nice-france-truck-terrorist-attack/>

<sup>6</sup> Wall Street Journal, *How Tunisia Became a Top Source of ISIS Recruits*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-tunisia-became-a-top-source-of-isis-recruits-1456396203>

<sup>7</sup> Foreign Policy, *The Jihadi Factory*. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/03/20/the-jihadi-factory-tunisia-isis-islamic-state-terrorism/>

– with a control in place for other demographics. The question on support for foreign fighters served as a proxy: if respondents expressed support for foreign fighters, they were considered supportive of violence as a means of achieving political ends and therefore classified as “vulnerable.” If they rejected the notion of foreign fighters in spite of their similar situations, we classified them as “resilient.”

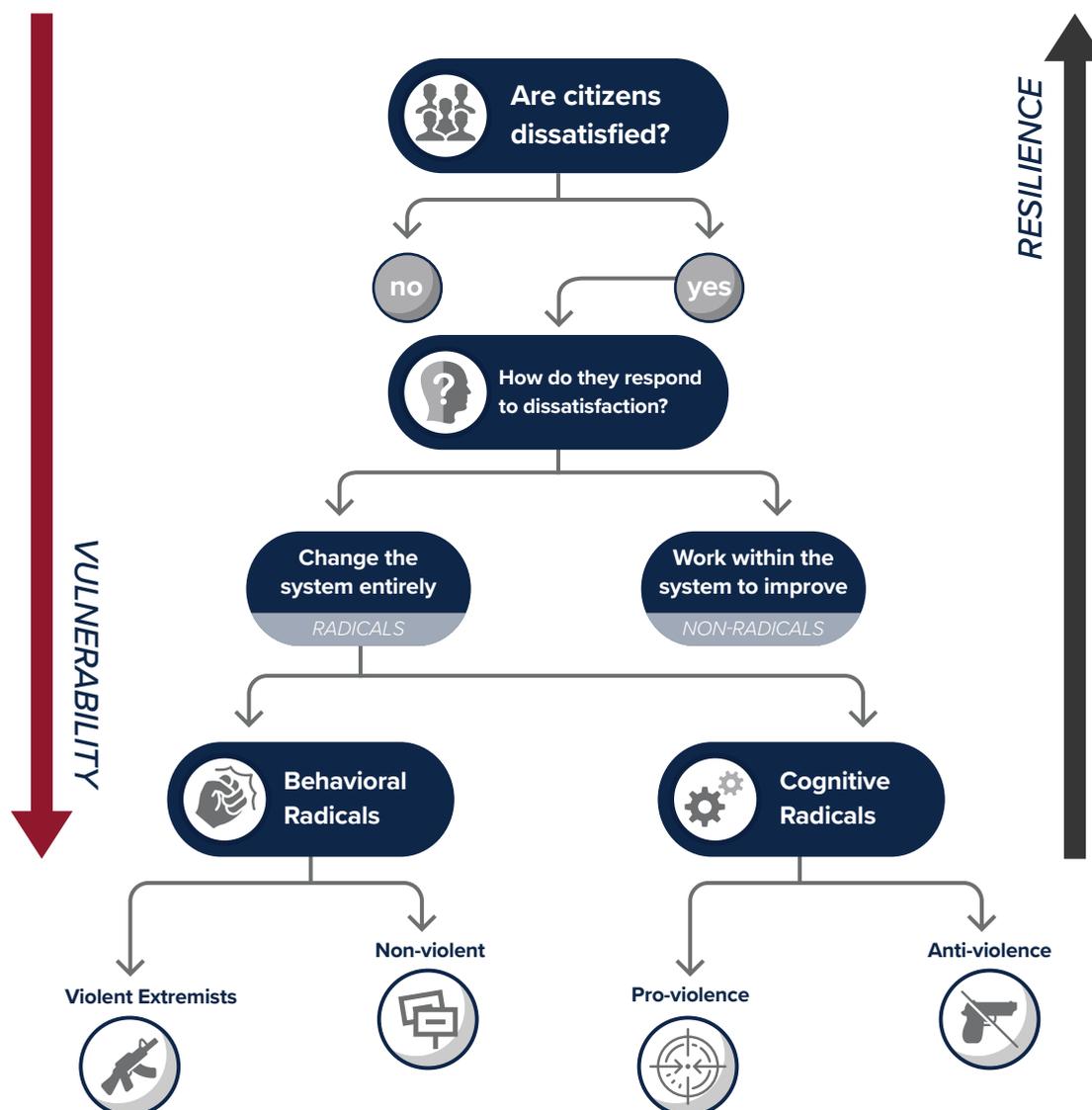
During the prescreening process, those exhibiting traditionally conservative religious tendencies were unwilling to continue the prescreening process when asked about foreign terrorist fighters. In order to capture

their perspective, we added a sixth focus group. To prescreen, we developed a unique questionnaire that did not ask about foreign fighters, but rather about religious preference, attitudes and behaviors. This group was not pre-identified as either vulnerable or resilient.

The in-depth interviews are divided into two groups:

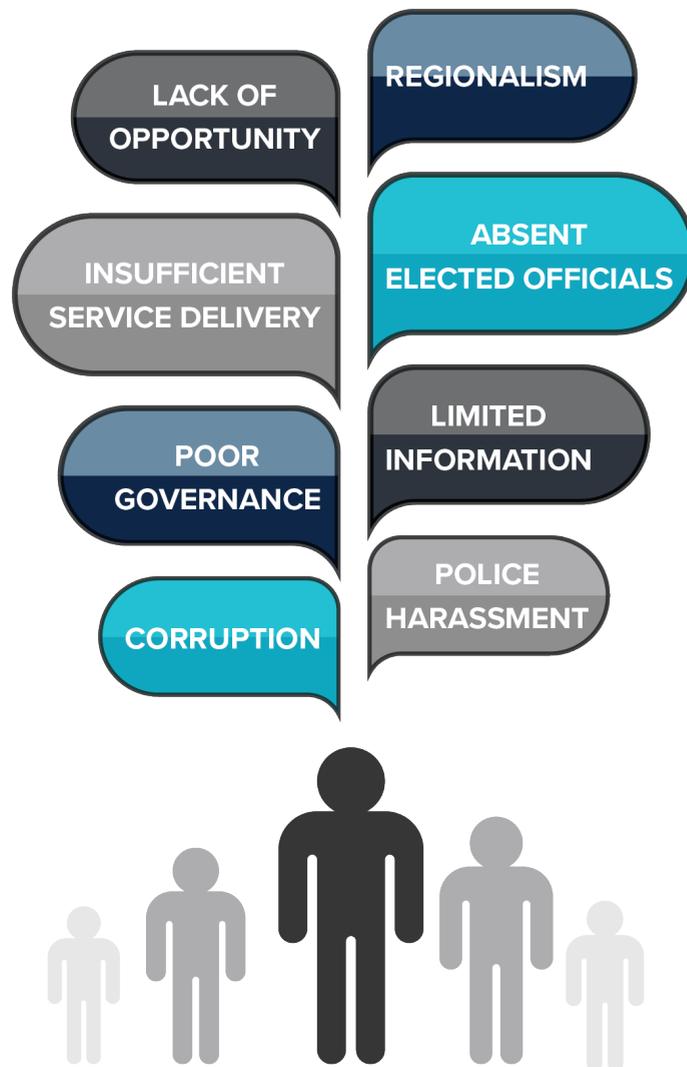
- Immediate family members, relatives, and friends of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) from Tunisia; and
- Five focus group participants who expressed views not in keeping with their original classification of “resilient” during the focus group discussion.

**Figure 2: IRI’s Pathways to Violent Extremism**



# FINDINGS

When considering what drives radicalization and ultimately leads to violent extremism, both focus group and interview participants reported various factors that contribute to individual and collective grievances, including discrimination, socio-economic marginalization, lack of opportunities, poverty, and unemployment. These grievances are directly related to perceptions of corruption in government and public institutions, as well as institutional injustice which promotes feelings of hopelessness that leads to stress and depression and results in increased violence. Small scale and individual episodes of violence turn into violent extremism when angry individuals who are easily influenced are exposed to a radicalized interpretation of Islam.



**Figure 3:**  
*Grievances identified during focus groups*



## Poor Governance, Lack of Job Opportunities and Corruption

The most frequent reasons cited by vulnerable and resilient focus group participants for turning to violent extremism were poor economic conditions and institutional corruption. This corresponds with a January 2017 nationwide IRI poll, which revealed that 78 percent of Tunisians believe that corruption has worsened since the revolution. Nepotism and cronyism were mentioned as problems in most of the focus groups – particularly in hiring – furthering the perception that local government officials are not concerned with improving economic inequality and social marginalization. All groups believe that local officials do not care about Beja’s residents, and do not do anything to improve the situation of ordinary citizens.

Focus group participants expressed frustration with the lack of employment opportunities and their inability to get accurate information about opportunities that may exist. Most of the interviewees said that their acquaintances who joined extremist groups were unemployed and living in a state of idleness that caused low self-esteem and feelings of uselessness. The majority were between the ages of 24 and 37, and unable to find work due to the absence of job opportunities and felt greater economic vulnerability due to increased cost of living in the region.

There was a general consensus in the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews that the government is not prioritizing job creation and as a result is stoking anger and distress among residents. Unskilled people almost always suffer disproportionately from poor economic conditions. However, while college graduates have more success in finding work, it is typically unrelated to their specialization and yields low wages that barely cover the cost of living. The unemployment rate is very high, topping 15 percent<sup>8</sup>, and most participants feel completely disillusioned, consistently reiterating, “there is nothing here.” Extremist recruiters take advantage of this by offering financial incentives and a sense of value.

Our research shows that institutional corruption is a contributing grievance that motivates violence. Heads of households in particular experience disappointment and low self-esteem when they cannot provide for the basic needs of their families. When coupled with feelings of hopelessness and a lack of outlets for their grievances, this stress can lead directly to violence. Some participants stated that though they did not support foreign terrorist fighters, they “can understand those who chose to go, because they know they are living in poverty and have to sell themselves to certain organizations.” Respondents felt that only people with money and connections can get jobs, and those who lack financial or social standing may seek for any opportunity to escape the country for income, even if that means joining violent extremist organizations. All groups complained about the state of public services in Beja, and interviewees described a gap between the

***Widespread disappointment with local political representation results from the contradiction between promises made during elections and the inattentiveness of officials after the elections.***

average citizen and public officials. Participants from both the vulnerable and resilient focus groups and interviewees reported that issues requiring government assistance remain unresolved for long periods of time, or officials simply do nothing about them. Focus group participants blamed individual characteristics of the local government officials—such as the belief that local officials are not from the region and do not care about the people there—for unresolved administrative issues. Participants further noted that officials only act in response to bribes and nepotism. There is also widespread perception that officials lack the incentive to do their jobs effectively since they will be paid regardless of whether they deliver.

The focus groups also agree that there is a lack of effective policy implementation. Even though the government allocates projects, the initiatives are usually suspended or postponed. The main things that people expect to see from the government in Beja are job opportunities and cultural clubs. When residents do not see these developing, they believe that officials are not providing them with the necessary information to access new opportunities. There is clear disappointment with elected and appointed government officials, both at the national and local levels, particularly because the current reality contradicts promises made during elections. They feel that no one listens to the grievances of citizens.

<sup>8</sup>The World Bank, *Tunisia's Economic Outlook – Spring 2016* <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/tunisia/publication/economic-outlook-spring-2016>




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## Collective Social Grievances

In general, all focus groups articulated dissatisfaction with living conditions in the region or with the performance of local government officials. However, there was a stark difference between the vulnerable and resilient groups in the extent to which they expressed hope for the future. Whether expressed as a lack of economic and employment opportunities, or the absence of representation by political parties or access to elected officials, the vulnerable focus groups expressed a much stronger sense of hopelessness than resilient respondents. This sentiment was linked to grievances related to negative interactions with government officials or law enforcement and poor economic conditions.

A majority of both vulnerable and resilient focus group participants spoke of a lack of social opportunities, especially in the form of social clubs and organizations. They claimed the lack of these opportunities stunted their personal and professional growth and see the opportunities as a positive outlet for people to build social networks and achieve social change and individual growth. Vulnerable focus group participants complained about a lack of outlets for cultivating hobbies or other means of entertainment, expressing the view that this adds to their stress, erodes motivation among youth and affects their lives negatively.

Some in-depth interviewees attributed susceptibility to religious extremism to a collapse in societal values—leaving individuals open to recruitment by extremist organizations who offer the opportunity to do something “good” as a means of gaining self-worth. Some interviewees said that some of the foreign terrorist fighters were attracted to extremist groups because of the “positive” characteristics of those groups, including: the ideological appeal of the organization; the sense of self-

respect derived from fighting for a cause; and the promise of financial gain. However, some interviewees felt that susceptibility to religious extremism was fundamentally caused by a lack of understanding of religious tolerance.

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## Religion

Several focus group participants reported that there is a lack of moderate religious leaders in Tunisia, which facilitates extremism. Religious focus group participants – those who regularly go to mosques and use the Quran and Hadith<sup>9</sup> as reference in their daily lives – reported the spread of extremist beliefs after the revolution. They believe that the increase in violence from violent extremist organizations stems from the oppression experienced before the revolution and the way that the post-revolution government has dealt with more religiously conservative Tunisians.

The Ben Ali regime’s tendency to crack down on conservative religious communities bred intense skepticism and fear of the government, which some say caused resentment and even violence among Tunisia’s religious hardliners. Because of this response, the religious focus group participants believe that many Tunisians do not understand that Islam is actually a moderate and peaceful religion, and that this lack of knowledge enables the spread of radical ideology. Participants in several groups echoed this, commenting that when Tunisians seek to learn about Islam, the only

resources available are radical books and imams that encourage violent religious extremism.

Interviews with the focus group participants who gave responses deviating from their “resilient” classification revealed that the places where extremist groups most frequently recruit are mosques. They stated that recruiters usually target people with a religious background and invite them to participate in a seemingly benign activity such as a charity event. Subsequent invitations escalate to religious settings where recruits are exposed to radical interpretations of Islam.

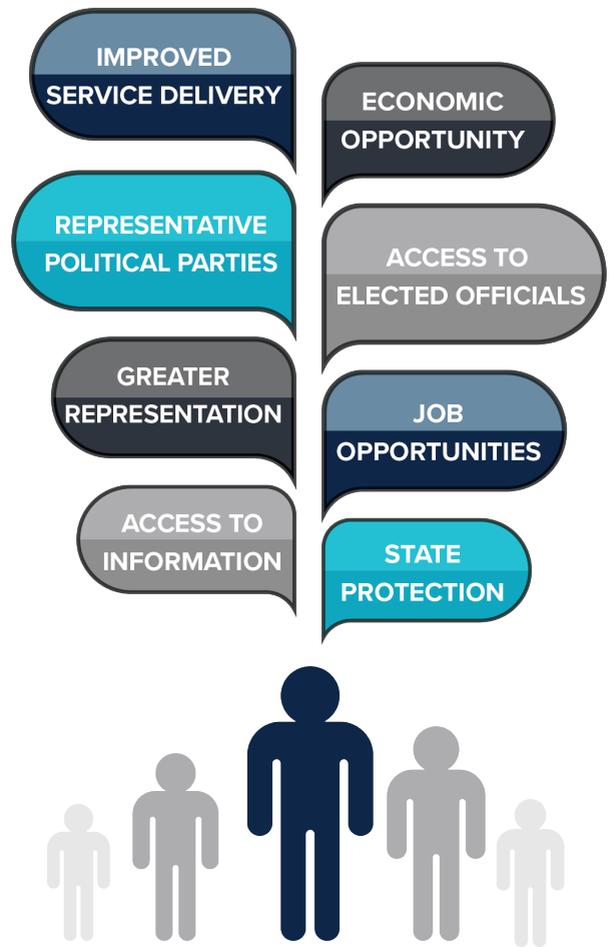


**Within limits; Islam forbids and allows violence.”**

- Young male vulnerable focus group participant

These non-resilient interviewees differed on how they defined their own personal religiosity, with answers varying from “not religious” to “not religious enough.” Some felt that following the five pillars of Islam qualified them as religious. Others measured religiosity on the basis of how much of the Quran one has memorized and how well versed one is in their interpretations of the Quran and Sunna<sup>10</sup>.

Approximately two-thirds of the people we interviewed believed those who left to fight abroad were initially moderately religious and underwent a process of radicalization after the revolution. The degree to which their radicalization was reflected in behavior and physical appearance varied. Some women began wearing the



**Figure 4:**  
*Expectations expressed by focus group participants*

*hijab*<sup>11</sup> or *niqab*<sup>12</sup>, and men would wear *qamis*<sup>13</sup> and grow their beards. Many men would stop shaking hands, especially with women, or in some cases men wouldn't even look at women. These radicals began accusing people of being infidels, reading extremist religious literature, and publishing very conservative or extremist content on their social media accounts.

<sup>9</sup> *Hadith* refers to the literature detailing the words, actions and habits of the prophet Mohammed.

<sup>10</sup> *Sunna* is the term used to describe the Prophet Mohammad's way of life. It also serves as a guide to optional religious practice.

<sup>11</sup> The *hijab* is the veil worn by Muslim women in public or in the company of non-relative males, which covers the hair, neck and chest.

<sup>12</sup> The *niqab* covers the head, neck, and face of Muslim women and is worn in public or in the company of non-relative males.

<sup>13</sup> *Qamis* is the traditional long tunic worn by many Muslim males.



## Security Personnel and Safety

The focus groups and in-depth interviews revealed varying sentiments about law enforcement and security. Resilient focus group participants reported both positive and negative interactions with police. Some said that police services were improved by new recruitment after the revolution and that they are satisfied with the police. In contrast, others claimed that police do not respond to complaints, and several respondents even mentioned that they have experienced or seen police brutality. Though some interviewees say they feel safe, the majority do not feel safe in Beja. Regardless of perceptions of safety, opinion was unanimous that there is a lack of security.

Most interviewees had experiences in which they called the police about a specific incident and no one responded. “If they are called to break up a fight in a poor neighborhood, they do not show up,” said one interviewee. Others spoke about the regularity with which police accept bribes from people who violate the law, creating the perception that “some policemen are aligned

***One woman, a victim of sexual exploitation who was subject to violence at the hands of police when she tried to report the incident, completely lost hope for holding her assailants accountable for what they did to her. With only a sixth-grade education and no career, she joined a foreign terrorist fighter group and traveled to Libya to fight.***

“

**If you’re unemployed, cops humiliate you; [they] don’t respect you.”**

- Young male vulnerable respondent

with criminals.” As with public officials, security forces are perceived as corrupt and self-serving. The interviewees who felt safe did not attribute this to the police, but rather to a community situation in which people know and protect one another. Other participants hold very negative views of the police and national security forces, reporting that officers regularly insult and mistreat people, and that as a result residents “do not expect the government to provide security.”

Vulnerable focus group participants’ negative sentiments about police ranged from those who were frustrated with having to pay bribes, to having an often-violent relationship with the police. The latter group claimed that they have daily confrontations with police in which they are stopped and searched for no reason. According to one of the participants in the vulnerable group, “Citizens no longer fight with each other. They don’t have problems with each other. The only problems that they have are with the police officers.” This group also claimed that every interaction they had with public officials ended in verbal or physical violence with police.

Even though this type of frequent violence is not typical for all residents of Beja, these interactions usually affect young people who are disappointed by unsuccessful attempts to secure jobs with local government offices or are dissatisfied by the lack of job opportunities made available by the local government. As frustrations escalate, police are called and some degree of violence often follows. One explanation for this provided by participants was that interactions related to job-seeking usually results in sense of unmet expectations, creating anger and resentment. The young vulnerable group referenced its negative relationship with police as one of the primary explanations for the increase in verbal and physical violence in Beja.

Religious interviewees who have beards or wear veils feel that targeted by security forces on a regular basis because of their appearance. Some participants in this group expressed a desire to leave the country just to be able to freely practice religion. Others mentioned that they feel stressed every time they see a police officer or pass a checkpoint because they know they will be stopped and searched.

As far as national level security, some interviewees think that security forces “take full responsibility to respond to security challenges,” and that there are very good efforts to counter terrorism and fight crime despite their lack of equipment and protective gear. While these statements reflect a certain level of satisfaction with the responsiveness of security forces, other interviewees do not think enough is being done, and that more preparation and preventive work is needed. Some believe that the work of national security forces has improved only in areas like countering terrorism, but that the situation is worsening in other areas such as the spread of drugs. Other participants feel that the terrorist threats currently facing Tunisia are greater than security efforts to respond to them; they suggest that there is a need for more effective work, vigilance, and firm decision-making on the part of police and security forces.



## Violence and Victimization

Participants from the vulnerable and resilient focus groups referenced the amount of violence that young people are exposed to as a compounding factor in their willingness to use violence to express their grievances. The vulnerable group noted that the normalization of violent behavior makes it acceptable for youth to commit acts of violence, as it no longer appears morally wrong. Other participants cited safety concerns specifically as a limitation to job hunting. According to participants, economic woes contribute to increased violence, often in the form of domestic violence.

The term “violence” was repeatedly used by participants when referring to their personal experiences of corruption and classism. These instances of less overt violence were brought up by some participants in the vulnerable and resilient focus group discussion and included ill treatment by local officials, delay of development projects, and moral violence in the form of disrespect.

“

**We all know many victims [of violence]. Tunisia is a victim; we’ve all been beaten at least once in our lives.”**

- Young vulnerable male participant



## Varying Paths to Extremism

The friends and family members of people who joined extremist groups reported that before joining a violent extremism organization their loved one was an ordinary person living a typical life. While some would discuss government-related topics, others took little interest in politics. Those who were interested in national politics were generally opposed to the government and dissatisfied with the economic conditions in Tunisia. Though there was not consensus amongst interviewees on the role of religion and religiosity in Beja, a majority consider themselves and their families to be both moderately religious and moderately conservative.

Yet in most cases of foreign fighters, there appear to have been early behavioral signs of susceptibility to extremism. The participants reported these common indicators:

- Distancing themselves from their communities and usual social networks;
- Increased interaction and phone calls with new people; and
- Frequent travel.

Prior to leaving Tunisia, there were other commonalities in the behavior of foreign fighters. Whereas women would stay at home to watch TV, young men would go to coffee shops or spend a significant amount of time online. Although these signs of altered behavior, combined with the three common signs mentioned above, were sometimes concerning, most relatives were still shocked when they received the news that their family members traveled abroad to fight for an extremist group.

In some cases, individuals showed no warning signs of their transition to extremism. They engaged in activities that appeared normal to their peers and did not raise any suspicions. The primary common activity among foreign terrorist fighters prior to their departure overseas

*Some interviewees described acquaintances who espoused Salafist ideology, and one participant personally turned to Salafism for a brief period.*

*She began to isolate herself from family and friends, acted and dressed more conservatively, and intended to travel to Syria. She says she was brainwashed until her brother stepped in and stopped her.*

was spending a significant amount of time online, and family and friends believe that the radicalization process happened through the internet. To this point, arrangements to join terrorist organizations and travel arrangements usually happen using social media platforms such as Facebook.

Some foreign fighters were described by their friends and relatives as being either not religious at all or only moderately religious. In this group, participants often described the relative or friend who joined an extremist group as someone who previously smoked and drank alcohol, or as someone who did not pray.

# CONCLUSION: THE GRIEVANCE EXPECTATION NEXUS

Tunisia sparked the Arab Spring by successfully calling for a more representative and democratic government. Ironically, the country has emerged as one of the sole democracies in the region, yet has also supplied more foreign terrorist fighters to Syria, Iraq and Libya than any other nation in the world. The focus group discussions and in-depth interviews IRI conducted shed light on this seemingly paradoxical coexistence of greater democratization and greater radicalization. Following the revolution, the expectations of Tunisians regarding their economic prospects and access to new opportunities rose rapidly. This rise of expectations amongst Beja residents were echoed in a nationwide poll we conducted in April 2011 (just three months after the revolution). That research showed 35 percent of Tunisians thought their economic situation would get much better and 49 percent thought their economic situation would get somewhat better. As expectations grew, democratically-elected leaders failed to manage expectations or provide a more effective plan about the country's democratic transition.

Compounding the rise of expectations was the continuation—and sometimes worsening—of grievances among average Tunisians. Unmet expectations have created widespread disillusionment and mistrust in traditional government officials and mechanisms. This focus group finding was also seen nationally in a December 2016 IRI poll that revealed 64 percent of Tunisians do not believe the government is doing anything to address their needs. Constructive, democratic avenues for expressing these grievances have not sufficiently developed, leaving citizens more susceptible to nontraditional, sometimes violent, means of making their voices heard. Further exacerbated by the shift from revolutionary optimism to disillusioned apathy, many Tunisians have lost any sense of hope and potential for improved personal situations. With hope on the decline and frustration on the rise, Tunisians have become vulnerable to recruiters who prey on the marginalized and hopeless.



*Figure 5:  
The Grievance  
Expectation Nexus*

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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There are a number of challenges that need to be addressed in Tunisia to effectively prevent and counter the rise of violent extremism — particularly in the local, non-coastal communities of Tunisia’s interior and the traditionally marginalized pockets of Tunisia’s urban centers. To disrupt the Grievance-Expectation Nexus that creates a fertile environment for recruitment, a whole-of-society and whole-of-government approach must be employed. The state must manage citizen expectations through consistent, non-threatening interactions with constituents. Civil society and non-governmental actors in Tunisia’s vulnerable communities must help channel the grievances of at-risk populations by leading nonviolent advocacy efforts and government oversight initiatives. Government officials must respond positively to these nonviolent, community-led efforts by resisting corruption and taking the lead in improving relationships with marginalized segments of their constituencies.



## **Recommendation 1:** The government must effectively engage citizens

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In light of the widespread popular dissatisfaction and skepticism of governing officials and traditional governance mechanisms, IRI recommends Tunisian lawmakers increase their presence and accessibility within the communities they represent. Elected and appointed officials should be active and visible in their communities. The perception by vulnerable Tunisians that they have no advocate in the government can be countered with consistent, open interactions between officials and constituents. Examples of potential responses include:

- Encouraging regularly scheduled, accessible townhall meetings;
- Providing technical expertise and support on outreach efforts such as door-to-door information campaigns, with a specific focus on the youth population;
- Training on and encouraging public speeches that promote and guide civic engagement; and
- Supporting and strengthening outreach and communications efforts of government officials with citizens in their districts.

## **2** **Recommendation 2:** **The government must address corruption**

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Government officials should make public information more transparent and accessible to citizens. Too often, Tunisians in at-risk communities feel completely cut off, not only from their elected and appointed officials, but from the system as a whole. When the average citizen is unfamiliar with procedure and relevant information, government officials are emboldened to engage in corruption.

Marginalization can be lessened through a concerted effort by elected officials to make public information and services easy to access. By focusing on increasing transparency and access, opportunities and incentives for corruption will be dramatically undercut. Specific attention should be placed on:

- Making municipal processes transparent;
- Publically displaying information about requirements for citizens who are engaging in public processes;
- Publicizing information about how the government is developing and promoting job opportunities;
- Providing information about how to apply for government grants and other funding; and
- Working with youth to organize a committee to plan activities, such as sporting or cultural events, to increase positive interaction between youth and local officials.

## **3** **Recommendation 3:** **Police and citizens must work together to improve security response and perception**

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In the focus groups and in-depth interviews, a number of Beja residents discussed experiencing verbal and physical harassment by police and other security personnel. Charged with providing peace, safety and order, Tunisia's national and local security services must refrain from harassment and actively seek to restore positive relationships with citizens in their districts and precincts. Beyond merely reducing harassment, security personnel should see members of the community as allies in the struggle against threats to peace and order.

A natural, mutually beneficial relationship is possible between the police and Tunisian citizens, and would improve the safety and overall well-being of the entire community. Some suggested measures to achieve this are:

- Formal and informal citizen security committees who work directly with the police;
- Enhanced media and communication outreach from the Ministry of Interior;
- Support for local Ministry of Interior branches to improve community interaction;
- Trainings and technical expertise for local police on operating under and protecting the rule of law in a democratic system; and
- Joint community safety projects and events with youth and police.

## 4

### **Recommendation 4:** **Civil society must work constructively with government**

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As the government strives to improve its relationship with the citizenry and increase access to education, community-based organizations and civil society organizations should redouble their efforts to lead civic education initiatives. Even if public information is more available and government officials are more responsive, citizens need to be educated about their rights, responsibilities, and the peaceful means by which they can express and seek remedies to their grievances. Tunisia's vast civil society is well-positioned to lead these efforts with informal community leaders and government officials, particularly those concerned about addressing this need. Specific initiatives could focus on:

- How to advocate for a community project;
- Understanding the legislative process in Tunisia;
- Grant writing courses tailored to the Tunisian government's grant requirements; and
- How to organize community meetings and outreach campaigns.

## 5

**Recommendation 5:****Government, civil society and religious leaders must work together to promote a peaceful and tolerant Tunisia**

Civil society groups and government officials should work together to revitalize national pride in peaceful, democratic Tunisian identity. While this national identity initiative should focus on Tunisia's remarkable transition from autocratic rule to self-government, it should also include elements of religious literacy. Beja residents with whom we met often raised the concern that the misunderstanding and misinterpretation of Islam was a key vulnerability to recruitment by violent extremist organizations. Many participants called for more control of religious teachings and education by the government. Tunisia's legacy of moderate Islam should be built upon and incorporated in efforts to revive pride in Tunisian identity. Potential programs to this effect could include:

- Radio and television programs exploring Tunisia's religious history and tradition;
- Documentary screenings, multimedia initiatives and other events highlighting the progress Tunisia has made since the revolution; and
- Initiatives led by religious leaders with support of government and civil society leaders.

This research uncovered a wide range of issues and challenges that residents in Beja experience on a regular basis. Broadly speaking, insufficient governance, poor representation, and undemocratic practices and policies have led many in this governorate to consider unproductive, sometimes violent means of expressing their grievances. With a comprehensive, whole-of-society approach, many of the grievances identified can be addressed and thus mitigate the likelihood of violent extremism.

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