

DEMOCRACY OF TERROR  
An Investigation of Jihadist Trends in Tunisia

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## The Puzzle

Following Tunisia's "Jasmine Revolution" in early 2011, it seemed like the country's future held endless possibilities for positive change. While other revolutionary movements throughout the region were viciously oppressed or devolved into bloody civil conflicts, Tunisia appeared to be the one bright spot in a region that otherwise seemed to be destroying itself from the inside. One of the longest-standing authoritarian regimes in history had been overthrown by a largely peaceful protest movement in less than a month, with relatively few casualties.<sup>1</sup> As opposed to many revolutionary movements throughout history, Tunisia's protest movement, and the political movements which took center stage after the fall of the Ben ' Ali regime, never were taken over by extremist groups. The Islamist "al-Nahda Party", though gaining a plurality of the seats in parliament following the first free elections after the revolution, did not have the required seats to have complete control of the government. They were forced to form a coalition with two secular, center-left parties, and then to work together to make a new constitution that espoused several Western and progressive values. Perhaps most importantly, after losing the next round of elections, the ruling party peacefully transferred power.<sup>2</sup> All these things indicated that Tunisia had rid itself of its oppressive government while somehow escaping the grasp of radical extremism that had begun to spread chaos throughout the rest of the region. However, six years after the revolution, it has become clear that the country's seemingly bright future now faces serious challenges posed by jihadist Salafism, which are endangering the young democracy—and it is the theory presented in this study that Tunisia's transformation into a democratic state is one of the very causes of its battle with extremism.

When the Islamic State burst onto the international scene following its invasion of Iraq in 2014, few could have imagined the impact that the so-called "caliphate" would have on the

world in the coming years. As the terrorist group made the unprecedented move of claiming and governing large swathes of territory, it drew thousands of fighters from across the globe to join its ranks and wage violent jihad. While these fighters came from over 80 different countries – from both the traditional Islamic world and the West – Tunisia, with its small, liberal population, has produced more than 7,000 foreign fighters that have travelled to fight on behalf of extremist groups according to recent estimates.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the Tunisian government claims to have detained another 12,000 extremists who have attempted to go fight abroad.<sup>4</sup> Not only are foreign fighters from Tunisia overrepresented in extremist groups based on the country's small population, but they are greater in number than foreign fighters from any other country – in fact they more than double the number of fighters from the country with the next highest amount, which is Saudi Arabia at only 2,500.<sup>5</sup>

While these numbers deal with the number of foreign fighters in combat zones like Iraq, Syria and Libya, it is also important to recognize the impact that they have had elsewhere. Tunisians carried out two high-profile attacks in Europe last year, in Nice, France<sup>6</sup> and Berlin, Germany,<sup>7</sup> while other suspected Tunisian-born terrorists have been arrested in raids by law enforcement agencies.<sup>8</sup> Tunisia has also been struggling with terrorist attacks within its own borders as well. Several major attacks have taken place in Tunisia over the last two years that have specifically targeted its tourism sector,<sup>9</sup> as well as government officials and security forces.<sup>10</sup> As the Islamic State continues to lose ground in Syria, Iraq and Libya, the Tunisian government faces the prospect of thousands of combat tested extremists attempting to reenter the country—a prospect which will almost certainly put the Tunisian government's commitment to individual liberties and freedom of expression to the test as it tries to maintain security.

The question remains: How did the one “success story” of the Arab Spring turn into the number one exporter of violent extremists in the world? What factors would lead a large part of the population to be in favor of democracy and aligned with Western thinking and interests, while causing a significant minority to be so deeply affected by jihadist Salafism and extremist ideology? How have extremist groups and networks established such a strong hold on the country when they appeared all but absent from the revolutionary movement of 2011? The political, religious, and societal factors that contribute to the spread of extremist ideology and influence the decisions of individuals to participate in violent jihad are complex and varied. While there is no one answer to these questions, I argue that the sudden breakdown of state security and religious institutions, and the institution of newfound freedoms of expression and assembly, created a window of opportunity that allowed extremists to consolidate their control in the country. This new democratic political reality combined with limited economic prospects and geographic characteristics unique to Tunisia and turned the country’s once repressed Salafist networks into deeply entrenched and effective recruiting tools for jihadists. These networks would indoctrinate and recruit thousands of young Tunisians, leading to the country’s unusually high number of violent jihadists—both inside and outside of the country.

I will begin by providing a general background of the history of Islamist movements under the Burqiba and Ben ‘ Ali regimes to give context to the massive changes that resulted from the revolution. I will also review some key events of the revolution to explain the ways in which the Salafists were able to establish a foothold following the collapse of the regime. Then I will review some of the most prominent arguments that attempt to explain this phenomenon while providing analysis of their strengths and weaknesses, after which I will present the causal logic that I believe combines these theories in a more compelling explanation of Tunisia’s

jihadist trends. Then this study will present evidence to support my claim. First it will review the case studies of three Tunisian jihadists who have traveled to the combat zone or attempted attacks in Tunisia to identify common causes for extremist activity on the individual level. Following which it will provide analysis of three different cities and regions in Tunisia that have produced high numbers of foreign fighters to identify common trends at the city or regional level. Finally, it will compare Tunisia with two other countries in the region to better isolate variables that would lead to Tunisia's high number of extremists. I will then offer some analysis regarding what implications these findings have for Tunisia's future, what they mean for the region as a whole, and the broader implications they could have for US policy concerning Tunisia and democracy in the Middle East generally.

### **Islamism in Tunisia**

Tunisia's relationship with Islamism has been a complex one. Like many countries in the region, Islamic thinkers and movements formed an important part of the fabric of Tunisian society for centuries. However, when Tunisia gained its independence from France in 1956 and the Burqiba regime ascended to power, Islam's role in society experienced significant changes. President Burqiba started by taking religious land endowments under state control, thereby weakening the power of the Tunisian 'ulama', as well as moderating the content of the nation's religious education.<sup>11</sup> In the political arena, the regime was initially somewhat permissive of the beginnings of Tunisia's Islamist movement because of the public stance they had taken against the anti-government communist bloc.<sup>12</sup> However, as the movement began to solidify and expand in influence and activity, the regime started to see it as a legitimate threat. The Burqiba regime started to oppress the country's leading Islamist movement, which was then known as the Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI), by limiting its participation in politics, arresting large

numbers of its leaders, and ultimately ordering the assassination of its leader, Rashid al-Ghannushi.<sup>13</sup> The assassination order was not followed, after which President Ben ‘ Ali carried out his well-known “medical coup” and took power.

The change in regime initially gave the Islamists hope for wider participation in government, and in the beginning of Ben ‘ Ali’s reign those hopes seemed to come to fruition. The MTI, who during this time changed their name to al-Nahḍa, were allowed to participate in several important political councils between 1987 and 1989, including the parliamentary elections of 1989. However, as it became clear that al-Nahḍa would probably do well in the elections, the group was subsequently outlawed and forced into exile.<sup>14</sup> The 1989 elections marked a major shift in Ben ‘ Ali’s position towards Islamism for the rest of his presidency. State secularism would remain a powerful molding force in Tunisian society, and as a result, the state-controlled religious establishment would remain weak and uninfluential.<sup>15</sup> Formal Islamist opposition groups would remain entirely absent from Tunisia’s political scene for the next two decades, and many Muslims would consequently feel marginalized by the system. This long history of tight control of the religious establishment and repression of Islamist groups would create a void in Tunisia’s Islamic society that Salafists would quickly fill following the revolution.

Muhammad al-Bau‘ azizi’s self-immolation, born of frustration with government corruption and the dismal economic prospects he faced, inspired local protests. These protests soon spread throughout the governorate, and as the government tried to repress them, they spread to Tunis and throughout the country.<sup>16</sup> Ben ‘ Ali backed away from his initial strategy of subduing the revolts by force and attempted to offer some concessions to the resistance, but this only made matters worse. Protests continued to intensify, and when Ben ‘ Ali ordered the

military to fire on protestors, they refused. The embattled dictator soon fled the country, and the state structure that had governed Tunisia for over 50 years was suddenly thrown into question.<sup>17</sup> The country's Salafist groups, which had been dormant or in exile for decades, were poised to take advantage of the ensuing power vacuum.

### **Why the Rise of the Jihadists?**

Understanding the history of Islamism in Tunisia helps set the stage for some of the leading theories trying to explain Tunisia's struggle with violent extremists. It is important to recognize that theories are not contradictory or exclusive, rather, they each focus on different pieces of a complex web of variables that collectively explain the phenomenon of Tunisia's jihadist issue. These theories focus primarily on the exploitation of the post-revolution power vacuum by Salafist groups, the increase in access to extremist ideology generally among Tunisians, economic factors that push the potential recruits to embrace jihad, and other religious and societal factors that pull them to join the fight. Together, these theories allow us to begin to understand how Tunisia became the world's leading exporter of foreign fighters.

One of the most prominent themes among theories explaining the rise of jihadi Salafism in Tunisia, upon which the hypothesis of this study also relies heavily, is the expansion of both peaceful and violent Salafist groups into the space left in the wake of the overthrow of the Ben 'Ali regime. The internal security forces had been in large part a personal tool of Ben 'Ali, and his exit quickly brought on their collapse. Leaders and officers abandoned their posts, while angry Tunisians burned police stations and attacked individual officers in retaliation for their violence towards protestors during the revolution. With the protective umbrella of the regime gone, what remained of the security services were afraid of carrying out their duties because of the threat of further retribution.<sup>18</sup> Experts argue that as the state security apparatus collapsed after

the revolution, Salafist groups, that had previously been closely monitored or repressed, began to integrate themselves into communities throughout the country. They began providing security and other important services in areas where government influence was minimal, while simultaneously gaining control of mosques and establishing da‘ wa (preaching) networks.

Abu ‘ Ayyad al-Tunisi is the leader of what is considered the most prominent Jihadi Salafist organization in Tunisia, Anṣār al-Sharī‘ a. In an interview with a Tunisian newspaper he described his group’s activities saying, “[Tunisia] is a land of preaching. We went out to the people and distributed thousands of pamphlets which called for prayer and chastity and for wearing the hijab and morals. We went into the mosques and we were convinced, after what was known as the revolution, that what we call for is far from violence—rather it is mercy. It’s true that we don’t deny jihad, but jihad has its reasons.”<sup>19</sup> Especially in the initial stages, the majority of Salafist groups avoided engaging in any type of violence; rather, they opted to consolidate their control in the regions where they found the most support, so as to not provoke a strong government response.<sup>20</sup> It is important to note, however, that shortly after the publication of this interview, Al-Tunisi went into hiding after a warrant was issued for his arrest in connection with a terrorist attack that occurred the following month on the US embassy in Tunis. Anṣār al-Sharī‘ a was also designated as a terrorist organization by the Tunisian government a year later because of its connections with multiple attacks that took place in Tunisia.<sup>21</sup>

This aspect of the theory is nearly universally accepted by scholars—it seems logical that such a major increase in jihadist recruitment success would at least in part be caused by growth in extremist group recruitment networks.<sup>22</sup> However, while this theory thoroughly explains how this Salafist space was created, it fails to explain why it was so effectively maintained. Several of the countries that were affected by revolutionary movements in 2011 saw rapid state collapse,



but they were all replaced by either authoritarian states or their own civil conflicts. Tunisia is the only example whose authoritarian government was replaced by a democratic system, which simultaneously limited the government's ability to act unilaterally to disrupt jihadist groups, gave the groups greater freedom to spread their ideology, and gave the people more freedom to openly associate with them. The challenges that accompanied this new system left the way open for jihadists to survive—and thrive—in the new order of Tunisian society.

Another explanation given to explain the sudden rise in jihadist Salafist activity in Tunisia is the newfound access to radical conservative media and freedom of expression which followed the fall of the regime. Some analysts believe that access to radical satellite channels from the Gulf, or radical preaching in Tunisian mosques themselves, has been the main driver of Tunisia's spike in radical extremist recruitment in the country.<sup>23</sup> There are reports that groups like Anṣār al-Sharī' a have been allowed to stage preaching events at schools which attract hundreds of young Tunisians, and intelligence indicates that at least one of the attackers in the Bardo Museum attack was initially exposed to radical ideology at such an event.<sup>24</sup> The government's leniency towards these groups' activities created a huge market for Salafist ideology, which would eventually inspire many young Tunisians to take up the cause of violent jihad. While being closely related to the first theory, it puts the emphasis less on Salafist networks themselves as actors in the radicalization process and more on the Tunisian populace, which was suddenly exposed to large amounts of radical ideology and began to take a more active role in participating in jihadist groups—the type of association that was more effectively limited prior to Tunisia's democratic transition.

The dramatic shift in permissibility of jihadi Salafist preaching in Tunisia over the last six years has greatly augmented the reach of radical groups in the country. Salafist groups had long

been repressed by the police states of Burqiba and Ben ‘ Ali, and they quickly seized the opportunity to establish a foothold over the religious establishment once government control vanished. Without an opportunity for such ideas to spread in an open environment, the amount of youth that they radicalize is likely to remain relatively small—we see that in countries in which this type of Salafist preaching is repressed or not widely present, such as the United States or Jordan, where the number of foreign fighters coming out of the country is considerably lower.<sup>25</sup> If that is the case, why do other countries in which Salafist ideology is widespread or preached openly, like Saudi Arabia, not have numbers of foreign fighters that are comparable to Tunisia? The majority of Salafist material comes from Saudi Arabia itself, and access to it is widespread.<sup>26</sup> However, as was previously mentioned, the number of foreign fighters it has produced is not even half of the number from Tunisia.<sup>27</sup> Clearly, while an increase in accessibility to Salafist material certainly has had an effect on Tunisian jihadist recruitment, it only explains part of the phenomenon. As I mentioned previously, Tunisia’s young, democratic government was less effective in disrupting the recruiting efforts of these organizations, and it allowed people to more freely associate with them.<sup>28</sup> Also of great importance to Tunisia in particular is that this accessibility of Salafist ideology and freedom of movement for jihadist organizations is coupled with a high rate of youth unemployment and slow economic growth, both of which form the basis of another major argument explaining this trend.

Many experts believe that Tunisia’s struggle with slow economic growth and high youth unemployment has greatly contributed to their country’s struggle with radical extremism.<sup>29</sup> Prior to the revolution, the unemployment rate among Tunisian university graduates reached up to 45%, and their economic growth averaged around 2 or 3 percent each year.<sup>30</sup> Since the revolution, youth unemployment has remained high (over 30%) and the GDP has stayed low.<sup>31</sup>

Other research about motivations of foreign fighters outside of the scope of Tunisia suggests that one of the main variables that push young people to leave their homes and wage jihad is that they feel that they do not have any future in life, usually due to limited future financial prospects.<sup>32</sup>

Tunisian youth would certainly fit this narrative.

However, youth unemployment and slow economic growth is not limited to Tunisia, with similar unemployment rates existing throughout the region.<sup>33</sup> If that were the main cause of jihadist success, then other countries in the region would produce similar numbers of extremists. Additionally, when looking at the individual profiles of Tunisians who have gone to fight for groups in the Levant or have carried out attacks in Tunisia, one finds a set of individuals who do not fit a single economic profile. While unemployment is a common theme among many fighters, it is hardly a universal factor, nor is it always cited as a reason they chose to engage in violence.<sup>34</sup> Of course, exceptions to patterns are expected in this type of analysis, but the level of contribution of economic hardship to the spread of radical jihadism in Tunisia does not seem to warrant the level of importance that some theorists give to this theory. While negative economic factors certainly contribute to this problem, in Tunisia their interaction with other variables unique to that country is what causes such a high number of Tunisian foreign fighters.

“Pull factors” also form an important part of the narrative of a jihadist’s motivation to fight. As events on the ground have developed in Syria, Iraq and Libya, such as the Assad regime’s deliberate targeting of civilians, or Shi‘i militias’ abuses of Sunni Iraqi civilians in ISIS controlled areas, more fighters have been drawn to joining extremist groups in those countries. The narratives of individuals seem to indicate that perhaps the biggest “pull factor” for them to go to the combat zone is religious belief. They often cite the influence of a specific Imam or recruiter who convinced them of their religious duty to go and wage jihad.<sup>35</sup> There have

also been other pull factors uniquely directed at Tunisia, namely in the form of ISIS propaganda ads that have featured Tunisian fighters, specifically calling for Tunisians to join their struggle in Iraq and Syria.

This phenomenon is not treated extensively in literature because of measurement problems that accompany attempts to analyze the psychological motivations of a person to commit an act. For example, foreign fighters may tend to report that they left for “religious reasons” because that would sound more noble than saying they chose to fight because they were angry that they could not find a job, or they were longing for a sense of belonging to a group. It’s also important to remember that by the time a fighter is being interviewed about their motivations for leaving to fight, they will likely have spent a considerable amount of time being indoctrinated by extremist ideology. If they once had any other motivation for joining the struggle earlier on, it may have been long forgotten after months or years of extremist education. Despite the difficulty in measuring these pull factors, they still play an important role in the decision of an individual to engage in jihadist activity, and they are important to analyze in the context of explaining Tunisia’s broader problem with radicalization.

The current theories on Tunisian extremism, while useful, fall short of combining all of the pieces of the puzzle to form an accurate picture of the root cause of Tunisia’s problem. I argue that the sudden collapse of the state security and religious establishment, and the shift to a democratic system without adequate controls on the activities of extremist groups, combined with unfavorable economic conditions and regional factors unique to Tunisia have caused its current problems with jihadists. The logic behind this theory is as follows:

Once a state’s security apparatus collapses, its ability to respond to any internal threat is severely limited. Groups that would normally have been disrupted or repressed by the

government, like Salafist organizations, are not targeted—in part because of the state’s sheer inability to do so effectively.<sup>36</sup> Equally as important as the state collapse itself is the form that state takes once it begins rebuilding. A democratic government was established in Tunisia, which for various reasons proved incapable of uniting itself around a coherent counter-extremism strategy.<sup>37</sup> Ultimately, all these reasons were rooted in issues that are commonly associated with democracies. First, they tend to respect rights of free speech and assembly more, giving more room for extremists to operate as long as they do not cross certain boundaries, like carrying out acts of violence. Second, they move slower in general and their strategies are sometimes less decisive because decisions usually must be made through compromise. Finally, they are warier of alienating segments of society because they can remove the government from office more easily than in authoritarian systems. Conversely in other countries like Egypt, which also experienced rapid state collapse that was ultimately replaced by an authoritarian government (after a brief stint with a democratically elected Islamist government of its own), we find that in general the government clamped down harder and more effectively on extremist groups and has limited their influence.<sup>38</sup>

Additionally, jihadist Salafist groups are especially tricky for governments to handle because of their multifaceted nature. They do not only target state actors with violence, rather they establish themselves in communities and put down roots in society, allowing them to make a profound impact in activities like recruiting without attracting much negative attention from state security or intelligence agencies.<sup>39</sup> In tandem with the government’s ineffective counter-extremism strategy in general, this has allowed jihadist networks in Tunisia to become incredibly robust and effective.

While these factors are all very important on their own, a certain catalyst must also be present for them to really result in high levels of jihadist recruitment—and that catalyst is youth unemployment. Throughout the region, high levels of unemployment among a massive youth population has often been cited as a contributing factor in the success of extremist movements.<sup>40</sup> As youth have ever fewer reasons to hope for a better future, they turn more often to extremist groups. Their reasons for doing so are usually personal and varied, however, a common theme among them is usually a desire to strike back at a system that they feel has marginalized them.<sup>41</sup> Many argue that this has been the most important factor driving the success of extremist groups in the region, and that countries with high youth unemployment (like Jordan) have relatively high numbers of foreign fighters or jihadists in general. However, while high youth unemployment is present in virtually the entire region, Tunisia still has more than double the foreign fighters of any other country. Tunisia's economic situation following the revolution was ripe for extremist recruitment, and when combined with a young democracy with a weakened security apparatus, jihadist networks thrived, as evidenced by the thousands of Tunisians who have flocked to their cause.

Finally, a number of variables that are unique to Tunisia have also facilitated the movement of jihadists in and out of Tunisia. First, the destabilization of neighboring Libya has provided a haven for extremist networks to operate and train, as well as establish passageways for fighters to Syria and Iraq, or even to fight in Libya itself. Tunisia also has very weak border security on both the Libyan and Algerian sides, which further facilitates the movement of foreign fighters to the combat zone. Finally, several remote regions, often near these porous borders or in the mountains, have given jihadists greater freedom to operate without the knowledge of the government.

## The Evidence

I will begin with a brief overview of the specific actions taken by the Tunisian government following the revolution which allowed Salafist groups to become so entrenched in Tunisian society. This will highlight the issues that arose in Tunisia specifically because of its transition to democracy, thereby strengthening my claim that the creation of a democratic government immediately following the collapse of the state security apparatus left a dangerous window of opportunity for jihadist groups.

The interim government that took control after the fall of the Ben ‘ Ali regime found itself in a precarious political situation. While many welcomed Tunisia’s transition to democracy, the fate of the al-Nahḍa led government was hardly guaranteed. Many Tunisians were angry about the number of members of the old regime who had managed to retain their posts or the continual decline of the economy, and they were continuing to stage street protests.<sup>42</sup> In an attempt to maintain its tenuous hold on power, the interim government made several decisions that would ultimately end up benefiting the country’s Salafists greatly.

First, it passed an amnesty bill that released thousands of prisoners who had been imprisoned by the Ben ‘ Ali regime, among whom were many convicted terrorists and others who had been radicalized in prison. These released prisoners gave a major boost to jihadist Salafist movements in both leadership and potential recruits.<sup>43</sup> This was done mostly to try to solidify the government’s legitimacy in comparison to the old regime. It could be argued that such an action could logically be taken by any regime type, but it seems more likely to occur in a

democratic system, which is theoretically driven by values of political transparency and tolerance rather than political or strategic expediency. Additionally, problems between the al-Nahḍa-led government and holdovers from the old guard, who still occupied key positions in the security services, also compromised that institution's ability to effectively maintain security and prevent the expansion of radical groups.<sup>44</sup> This would leave a huge opening for the Salafists on a tactical level, as the government was simply unable to disrupt those networks effectively. This type of infighting could be present in any type of regime; however, authoritarian systems tend to avoid such issues by purging themselves of opposition. Finally, the al-Nahḍa-led government did not take a hard line against Salafist groups in the first years after the revolution—in part because of their relatively non-violent activity, and in part to avoid alienating the Salafist wing of their own movement.<sup>45</sup> This was a move born entirely of the need of the new democratic government to curry favor with a relatively divided coalition of political forces and maintain political control, rather than acting only according in its own interests. This allowed groups like Anṣār al-Sharīf a to operate in virtually complete freedom and further establish their control over certain parts of the country.

### *Three Individual Case Studies*

Next this study will examine the case studies of three Tunisian foreign fighters who have gone to fight in combat zones or to carry out attacks in Tunisia or abroad. I will compare these fighters to look for commonalities in economic/employment status, process of radicalization (where available), self-reported reasons for engaging in jihad, and how they traveled to the combat zone. I selected these variables to put these individuals and their experiences into the context of my overall hypothesis. While this sample size is small and inherently lacks external validity to the wider population of Tunisian foreign fighters, given the challenges of gathering



accurate information from that group, it will still provide a valuable basis for making inferences about the reasons behind Tunisia's overrepresentation among foreign fighters.

First, we will look at Walid ' Abdoui, a Tunisian who attempted to travel to Syria to fight as part of the Islamic State. He was one of eight children in a middle-class family from Sidi Bouzid. His father was a health care professional and their family put great value on education in general. Walid had also just gotten a job to work in the local hospital in the burns and trauma unit. His path to radicalization began through his brother, who first joined the Nuṣra Front and went to Syria before Walid. At first, Walid tried convincing his brother to come back home, but it appears that over the course of their communication he too was convinced to join the fight. He intended to make his way to Syria through Libya to join up with his brother, but he was killed during clashes in Benghazi before completing his journey.<sup>46</sup>

Here we see an example of a young man who was most likely not affected by the high unemployment of his age group in the area as evidenced by his new job. This illustrates that, especially when dealing with radicalization, each individual story is different and often general trends are difficult to identify. The information we have implies that his brother was the primary means of his radicalization which illustrates the importance of close relationships between recruits and recruiters to effectively persuade them to join the cause. As it relates to my theory generally, these close recruiting relationships would be much more effectively cultivated and maintained by extremist groups as they were better able to establish themselves following Tunisia's democratic transition. Unfortunately, we are not able to assess his self-reported reasons for engaging in jihad, but we see that he passed into Libya to fight. As suggested in my theory, sharing a border with a country with little to no rule of law, a large extremist presence, and active

combat zones has played an important role in the number of Tunisian jihadists found on the battlefield.

The next case we will look at is that of Aymen Assadi. He was a seventeen-year-old student when he started down the path to radicalization. He came from a comfortably middle class, mostly secular family. His parents described him as being a well-adjusted young man who did well in school and liked things like sports and western culture and style. This quickly changed when he started spending a lot of time at the local mosque with an older man who he described as a mentor, and suddenly traded in his western clothes for a robe and stopped talking to girls. The first time he tried to go fight in Libya, he was stopped by the security services at the border and sent home. His parents tried to convince him to stay, but soon after he left again, and this time succeeded in reaching Libya. He later reentered Tunisia and attempted to carry out a suicide bomb attack at a popular tourist destination, but he was tackled by security before he could detonate his vest.<sup>47</sup>

It is difficult to determine if economic factors had any bearing on this case. Aymen was a successful student, but that does not guarantee job security. He also was still in secondary school at the time, so it is hard to say how much his personal economic prospects were on his mind; however, his middle-class upbringing might suggest that he would be less likely to be concerned with that than someone whose family was from a lower economic class. The close relationship he had with his “mentor” at the mosque again illustrates the importance of close, personal relationships for successful recruiting. While details are scarce on how exactly Aymen became radicalized, the evidence that radical groups and recruiters were better able to operate following the revolution would suggest that recruiting relationships like his became more common in a more free and open Tunisia. Again, unfortunately we do not have access to any self-reported

reasons for going to fight. However, while he was stopped on his first attempt, he eventually succeeded in getting into Libya, where he was presumably recruited to carry out an attack in his homeland. A scarcity of reliable data makes it difficult to determine exactly how many extremists have crossed into Libya to fight, either in Libya itself or in route to another destination, but its frequency in the individual stories of Tunisian extremists suggests that Libya's proximity has played a major role in facilitating jihadist movement. This supports the element of my theory that geographic factors unique to Tunisia also played a role in its output of foreign fighters.

This study's third subject is a Tunisian man who took the pseudonym "Abu Hamza" to protect his identity. He gave the details of his radicalization in a TV interview on a UAE-based program. He was unemployed at the time he was approached by a recruiter and was in desperate need of money. He said the recruiter started giving him cigarettes, and then food, and eventually money. The recruiter would tell the Abu Hamza not to worry and to take more, and eventually the man started to entertain the idea of going to Syria. The recruiter told him "it would be better for you than sitting here with no work," and that he could take all the money he wanted, and that everything would be provided for him there. He was hesitant to go, but the recruiter persisted for more than a month, "tempting" him and introducing him to other young recruits who were excited to go. Eventually, Abu Hamza decided to make the journey to Syria. The details of how he made it to the combat zone were not given, and neither were the details of his return to Tunisia.<sup>48</sup>

This case gives us a clear example of the effect that unemployment and a desperate economic situation can have on the recruiting process. This fighter said nothing of ideological motivations to wage jihad, rather everything centered around his recruiter offering to provide for

his basic needs. Little information is offered concerning his support system, but we again get a clear picture of the importance of the recruiter in the process. This case also provides new insight into the role of the broader extremist network as he was introduced to other members of the group and other recruits. It is reasonable to conclude that the consistent effort made by his recruiter and his integration into a group of men who were also going to fight made a very significant impact on his eventual decision to wage jihad. The political climate in Tunisia during its democratic transition allowed for these type of recruiting efforts to be carried out consistently without disruption from the government, and for potential recruits to associate with these groups more openly. Additionally, the desperate economic prospects faced by this subject, and thousands more like him, provided the necessary leverage for his recruiter to push him into the fight. We are unable to draw any conclusions about geographic factors that may have facilitated his travel due to a lack of information.

Overall these cases illustrate some important points. While the sample size is too small to make meaningful inferences at the group level, they do serve to complicate the discussion on the motivations of jihadists on an individual level. At the group level, a variable like the economic prospects of a segment of the population takes on a central role in the theories that explain participation in violent extremism, but on the individual level, these variables may or may not be at play, as appeared to be the case in the first two studies. Without a larger number of case studies it will continue to be very difficult to draw group level conclusions, but this small case study still manages to highlight an important variable that supports my overall theory—the importance of the recruiting network in the process. While it might seem self-explanatory that the recruiting network would play an important role in recruitment, this supports my claim that Tunisia’s robust jihadist recruiting networks have contributed to its incredibly high number of

foreign fighters and domestic jihadists, and that these networks could not have been formed without the country's transition to democracy following the revolution. They also support the idea that geographic factors unique to Tunisia have played a major role in the success of extremist groups and their ability to move fighters to the battlefield. In two out of the three studies the subjects crossed into Libya (although without details of how they did so), and the exceptionally insecure border Tunisia shares with Libya sets it apart from many other countries in the region,<sup>49</sup> making it easier for large numbers of fighters to make it to the combat zone.

### *Three Regional Case Studies*

This study will now expand the evidence backing up my claim by investigating three of the cities and governorates that have been indicated as producing the greatest number of recruits, namely Ben Gardane, Bizerte, and Kairouan. I will be examining these cities for commonalities in geographic location, unemployment levels, and the presence of Salafist or other criminal networks. Part of my theory is that, along with Tunisia's democratic transition, regional factors unique to Tunisia played a significant role in the number of violent extremists it has produced; these include its proximity to Libya and areas in Tunisia that provide good operating ground for extremist groups away from the control of the government. Identifying common themes between these locations will allow me to draw meaningful inferences that will be more applicable to the foreign fighter population as a whole than the narrower conclusions drawn from the individual case studies.

The Tunisian town that is reported to have produced the greatest number of foreign fighters is Ben Gardane in the governorate of Medenine. The fact that this town has produced the most foreign fighters in the entire country is particularly noteworthy because its population is less than 80,000.<sup>50</sup> The unemployment level in the governorate as a whole was 15.09% in 2014,

which is actually slightly lower than the national average of 15.3%. However, the unemployment rate reported for Ben Gardane itself was 18.58%, which could contribute to its high output of foreign fighters.<sup>51</sup> Ben Gardane is also located near the Libyan border and has historically been a hub for smuggling and other illicit activity.<sup>52</sup> Reports also say that the Islamic State has positioned dozens of sleeper cells inside of the town, and last year a full-on assault on the town from the Libyan Islamic State affiliate was repelled by government forces. The combination of its high unemployment, proximity to the Libyan border, and proven extremist group presence all could contribute to Ben Gardane's unmatched output of foreign fighters. This supports my theory that factors that are present in many countries (relatively high unemployment) combined with those that are unique to Tunisia (proximity to Libya and weak government control following the revolution) and contributed to Tunisia's remarkably high production of foreign fighters.

Bizerte is another Tunisian town with a reputation for producing an unusually high number of foreign fighters, second only to Ben Gardane. It's located on the northern coast of the country in the Bizerte governorate, near the capital of Tunis. The unemployment rate in that governorate actually falls below the national average, at 13.11 %.<sup>53</sup> It is also situated on the coast, making it an easy exit point for foreign fighters who intend to use maritime routes to enter Turkey and then continue to Syria. While not as prominent as stories of crossing into Libya, accounts of Tunisians transiting through Turkey and then into Syria make up a sizeable part of the available narratives we have from Tunisians who have joined the fight.<sup>54</sup> However, unlike Ben Gardane, it is not in an outlying area with limited government control. It also does not have the same noteworthy history with criminal or jihadist networks that Ben Gardane has, but has still managed to produce the second highest number of foreign fighters in the country according

to recent reports.<sup>55</sup> Again, this information supports my theory that unique geographic characteristics combined with wider regional trends lead to a higher foreign fighter output.

Kairouan is another governorate with a notably high foreign fighter output. It is located near the middle of the country and is a short distance south of the capital. Its unemployment rate is above the national average, reaching 16.96% according to the 2014 census.<sup>56</sup> While not being in an especially strategic position, extremist groups have also evidently established a major foothold there, as evidenced by the rise of one of Tunisia's most prominent Islamic State affiliates, Mujāhidīn of Kairouan.<sup>57</sup> The efforts of this well-established and active jihadist network have led to the recruitment of many Tunisians from this part of the country. Kairouan is noticeably different from Ben Gardane and Bizerte because its geography does not seem to play a significant role in its production of foreign fighters, which departs slightly from my theory. However, it is clear that rates of unemployment, along with well established extremist networks have led to high recruitment levels. This supports my theory that Tunisia's democratic transition created a space in which extremist networks could operate effectively.

The evidence provided by the investigation of the cities and provinces of Tunisia provides the following insights. First, the fact that their unemployment levels in two of the three cases were higher than the national average could link higher unemployment to increased success in jihadi recruiting efforts, especially at the provincial or town level. Second, it shows us that the locations in which jihadi Salafist networks experience the most success are also usually areas with some kind of strategic or logistical advantage which would facilitate training or trafficking fighters or maintaining operational security. Third, it shows us that areas with previously existing criminal or jihadist networks also have experienced greater success in the current wave of recruiting, further indicating that the establishment of effective jihadist networks

in Tunisia was a crucial factor in that country's problem with extremism. While they are far from definitive, they help to paint a picture of the situation in areas that are known to produce high numbers of foreign fighters and the attributes they share.

### *Three National Case Studies*

Lastly, I will present a comparison of some bigger picture political and economic factors that are tied to the spread of extremism between Tunisia and two other Arab countries: Saudi Arabia and Egypt. I chose Saudi Arabia because its relatively large contingent of foreign fighters allows for some useful comparisons to Tunisia, and I chose Egypt because its revolutionary experience followed by an authoritarian takeover offers a unique contrast to Tunisia. While these countries have a relatively high number of foreign fighters, they still have less than half as many as Tunisia, and by comparing these cases I will be able to support my claim that Tunisia's shift to democracy set it apart from other countries in terms of foreign fighter recruitment and jihadist activity.

Saudi Arabia's experience in the Arab Spring was vastly different than that of Tunisia. The monarchy, which has remained in power for decades, faced limited protests from its small Shi' i minority but remained totally intact.<sup>58</sup> The minor policy concessions it made did not affect its internal security forces or their ability to combat extremist groups as was the case in Tunisia. However, Saudi Arabia presents an interesting case because jihadist Salafist ideology and networks have a relatively strong presence in the country. Many extremist voices originate from within the country, and many more millions of dollars in funding go out to support jihadist groups elsewhere.<sup>59</sup> The Islamic State also has active affiliates in the country who have carried out notable attacks on Saudi soil in recent years, proving the presence of jihadist networks there.<sup>60</sup> Most importantly, calls to go to Syria and join the fight against the Assad government,



and especially Iranian backed Hizbullah, went out from notable members of the Saudi religious community.<sup>61</sup> Here we see that recruiting efforts on behalf of militant groups were not only dependent on covert, local networks with a relatively limited reach, but that their voice was heard throughout Saudi society. It is also important to note that the unemployment rate in Saudi Arabia has ranged between 5-6% for the last four years, indicating that high unemployment has not been a major factor in spurring the Kingdom's jihadists to action.<sup>62</sup>

Egypt's path through the Arab Spring mirrors that of Tunisia in many ways. Historically, Islamist groups were severely oppressed, and after the revolution, a longstanding authoritarian regime was overthrown in favor of a democratically elected Islamist government. Under the democratically elected government, Islamist groups—including jihadist Salafists—had greater freedom to operate, as they did in Tunisia. Nevertheless, after only a year, the Egyptian Military took power in a coup in 2013 and ousted the Mursi government. After the coup, the newly installed president, ' Abd al-Fatah al-Sisi, led a major crackdown on Islamists and other dissidents in the country, killing and arresting thousands.<sup>63</sup> It is reasonable to believe that these policies would have been difficult or impossible to pursue in a democratic system. It also appears that Egypt's security services were left mostly intact following the collapse of the regime. Egypt's swing back towards authoritarianism and al-Sisi's war against Islamism appear to have severely disrupted the recruiting efforts of jihadist networks in the country, with Egypt's contingent of foreign fighters to Iraq, Syria, and Libya being estimated as only somewhere between 600 and 1000.<sup>64</sup> It is important to note, however, that an Islamic State affiliate known as Wilāyat Sīnā' (Sinai Province) has been established within Egypt's Sinai Peninsula and is waging an insurgency against the government. This would certainly redirect Egyptian fighters from going to abroad to fight, however, most experts estimate the number of fighters in Wilāyat

Sīnā' as only between 1,000 and 1,500.<sup>65</sup> This number, even when combined with the highest estimates of Egyptian foreign fighter numbers, only reaches around 2,500, paling in comparison to Tunisia's roughly 7,000 fighters. This becomes an even less impressive number considering Egypt's total population outnumbers that of Tunisia by nearly 8 times. Economically, Egypt is arguably in a worse situation than Tunisia. Unemployment is relatively high, ranging between 12 and 13 percent since 2011, and they currently face massive inflation rates on the cost of food and other essential goods.<sup>66</sup> According to traditional thinking, many would expect Egypt to have a significantly larger extremist presence than Tunisia's, but that is clearly not the case.

These comparisons further strengthen the link between the presence and reach of jihadist networks and levels of recruitment, while weakening the idea of economic hardship playing a dominant role. In Saudi Arabia, we see that regardless of a generally prosperous economic situation, a relatively large contingent of foreign fighters has made their way to the combat zone, mostly because of the major influence that jihadist voices and networks have there. Conversely, in Egypt we see that the harsh stance of the regime against Islamist groups—especially jihadists—has limited their ability to recruit foreign fighters. Additionally, despite the presence of an Islamic State affiliate in country, the number of Egyptians estimated to be actively engaging in violent jihad is significantly less than the number of Tunisians, despite Egypt's much larger population. While many variables play into these differences in jihadist activity, the effects of the different policies of Tunisia's democratically elected government versus Egypt's authoritarian regime cannot be ignored. Additionally, the robustness of the claim that economic conditions are the main driver of participation in extremist groups is weakened by these two examples. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia's participation is quite high regardless of economic

prosperity among its citizens, and Egypt's is relatively low (compared to its overall population) despite the limited economic prospects of its citizens.

### *Analysis*

The evidence on the individual, regional and national level all indicate that the strength and presence of extremist networks is the biggest cause of jihadist activity coming from Tunisia, and as I demonstrated earlier, the strength of these networks is primarily the result of Tunisia's democratic transition. Of course, many variables play a role in this phenomenon and should also be considered. Both Tunisia's high unemployment and geographic proximity to Libya certainly were major drivers of recruitment, and so were pull factors like Jihadist leaders specifically encouraging Tunisians to come to the combat zone. Rather than pitting the importance of jihadist networks and other factors like unemployment against each other, my claim is that in Tunisia, these factors all combined in a way that made Tunisia's output of foreign fighters remarkably high when compared to other countries.

Because unemployment and geographic proximity to the combat zone are present in other places with far lower numbers of foreign fighters, Tunisia's transition to democracy is really what sets it apart. Unfortunately, Tunisia presents the only case of a country following the Arab Spring where the old regime collapsed and was not subsequently taken over by an authoritarian regime or thrown into civil war, so it is impossible to help verify this claim with other similar examples. Despite this, the fact that the main variable that sets Tunisia apart from other post-Arab Spring states with fewer foreign fighters is its democratic government, coupled with the evidence that indicates that Tunisia's democratic transition allowed jihadists groups to take root

in the country, provide a compelling case that this transition to democracy in fact caused Tunisia's current struggles with extremism.

The intensifying fight against extremism in Tunisia raises many important questions about Tunisia's own future and that of the entire region. In 2015, the Tunisian government passed a new counterterrorism law that expanded the government's definition of terrorist groups and acts, and it also increased their power to conduct surveillance on their citizens among other changes.<sup>67</sup> Many fear that this law is a dangerous step toward eroding the democratic progress that Tunisia has made since the revolution, since the government could use these expanded powers to attack any of its opponents in the name of "counterterrorism." Current trends indicate that the number of attacks carried out in Tunisia is increasing, and the impending collapse of the Islamic State means that thousands more Tunisians will soon return home from the combat zone.<sup>68</sup> The need for an effective counterterrorism strategy in Tunisia is now greater than ever, which will make finding the right balance between security and rights only more difficult.

One major facet of this strategy will be the stance Tunisia takes towards the thousands of foreign fighters that will return home as the Islamic State and other armed groups within the combat zone are forced underground. These returning fighters pose a major security concern because of their combat experience, combined with their clear disposition to engage in violent jihad. Some countries, like Jordan, have taken a relatively hard line toward returning combatants, putting many of them in high security prisons. Others, like Saudi Arabia, have instituted de-radicalization programs aimed at helping former jihadists be reintegrated into society. Such programs will be an important tool for the Tunisian government as they seek to fight the root causes of extremism in the country. If they only rely on keeping returning Tunisian foreign fighters in prison, then they will risk radicalizing more of the prison population and having to

deal with more radical individuals should they ever get out. Conversely, adopting a strategy of deradicalization will create more voices in the community against extremist ideology, and their knowledge of jihadist networks could prove to be valuable in the government's efforts to disrupt those networks.

Overall, decisions that the Tunisian government makes regarding this balance will have important implications regarding democracy throughout the region. As the one real democracy in the Arab world, Tunisia functions as a sort of test for the viability of democratic governments in the region. If the Tunisian government takes steps towards authoritarianism in the name of security, it weakens the argument that successful and secure democratic governments can be maintained in a region that faces such a significant challenge from extremism. Conversely, if Tunisia is able to gain significant ground against the extremists while maintaining its democratic system, then it will go a long way toward showing that in spite of the many challenges the region faces, democratic ideals can still be maintained in the Middle East. There is evidence that democratic governments are actually more effective at combatting extremism in the long run. A 2013 study indicated that longstanding democratic governments were just as (if not more) effective as authoritarian regimes in combatting terrorism. However, that same study also showed that new democracies are particularly vulnerable to terrorism.<sup>69</sup> The real test for Tunisia will be whether or not it can hold onto its democratic progress long enough to effectively curb the extremist threat within its society, which will in turn influence the likelihood of other Arab populations making moves toward their own democracies.

The debate between security and rights in Tunisia has major implications beyond the Middle East as well. Western governments have an interest in combatting extremism in Tunisia because of its effect on their efforts to combat foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria, as well as

prevent attacks on their own soil like those in Nice, France or Berlin, Germany in 2016. Western governments will likely continue to partner closely with their Tunisian counterparts in counterterrorism operations in the country.

This also has important political policy implications concerning Western, and specifically American, support for democratic regimes in the region. In recent years, the US has pursued a strategy based on political and economic expediency – in some cases supporting authoritarian regimes like those in the Gulf countries or Egypt – or striking against those we deem as threats – such as Saddam Hussein’s Iraq or Gaddafi’s Libya. This has sent mixed signals about America’s stance towards democracy in the region, and by extension their support for popular protest movements against authoritarian regimes. If the US attitude toward democratization in the region is perceived as indifferent, it could significantly impact on the likelihood of protest movements to take place in other Arab countries in the future. If the US continues to send a message that it will support authoritarian regimes when it falls within its interests, I assess that protest movements will be less likely to form, or will take significantly longer to do so. It seems likely that the US will continue to support the Tunisian government, especially in its counterterrorism efforts, however, it would do this only so long as it remains the best choice for their own security. If the security situation inside Tunisia were to deteriorate significantly, it seems unlikely that the US would continue to support the democratic government there, given its recent hesitation to become involved in prolonged conflict in the region. However, as long as the effect of Tunisia’s extremism remains mostly limited to Syria, Iraq and Europe, there is little reason to suspect any change in US policy in toward the government there.

As Tunisia moves toward an uncertain future, the question must be asked, what is *best* for Tunisians? Despite the decrease in security and increase of economic hardship that has followed

the fall of the Ben ‘ Ali regime, Tunisian satisfaction with democracy is actually higher now than it was immediately after the revolution.<sup>70</sup> Some Arab populations, like that of Jordan, often say that they are happy under authoritarian rule because of the stability and security it offers them, and it is not hard to follow their logic when one looks to the failed states in the region that resulted from the revolts of Arab Spring. Would Tunisians be better off under a possibly more secure yet more oppressive authoritarian regime? Of course, that is a decision for Tunisians themselves to make, and they have made their decision clear so far. As Tunisians continue to engage in the political process, support the institutions of democracy in their country, and express concern when the government begins to infringe on their rights, they send a clear message that they prefer democracy—even with all its potential risks—to the oppression of authoritarianism. Even as the country continues to struggle to maintain security, it seems unlikely that the population would tolerate any major infringement on their rights unless a major change was to take place, like the outbreak of a widespread insurgency. Despite the major struggles with extremism that Tunisia faces because of its democratic transition, its embrace of democracy continues to be a source of hope for Tunisians – and their neighbors throughout the region – as they look to create a more peaceful and stable future.

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