**Authors**

Andrew McDonnell  
Henry Burbridge  
James Patton  
Dr. Yara Zgheib Salloum

**Contributor:**  
Walid Haddouk

**Field Research Partner:**  
Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID)

---

**Acknowledgements**

This project was made possible through the critical support of the Lynn and Harry Bradley Foundation and the M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust. Special thanks to the team of local researchers who collected the data presented herein, in particular CSID, which coordinated this data collection process. The authors greatly appreciate the invaluable contributions of Walid Haddouk in shaping the research methods and data analysis.

Finally, thanks to the many staff members and interns of ICRD who supported this project in innumerable ways.


Back image, *Fideles a' la grande mosque'e*, produced by Gigi Sorrentino (CC BY-SA 4.0).
Preface

This report aims to advance the international field of countering violent extremism (CVE) through a close examination of Tunisia’s efforts to promote positive religious alternatives to extremism. In particular, ICRD hopes to provide a more nuanced and critical look at the role that religious actors can and should play in CVE policy and programs. This includes engaging with others beyond state-sanctioned religious authorities, such as non-violent Salafis and other non-traditional partners.

This research in Tunisia represents just one piece of a larger effort at ICRD to assess the role of religion in CVE, with a focus on determining appropriate strategies for working with conservative religious actors. Recognizing the inherent risks and challenges associated with engaging those who seek to advance an illiberal agenda, ICRD believes that a nuanced, data-driven discussion within the field of policy and practice is urgently needed to prevent further social polarization in spaces like Tunisia. To that end, this study draws on the perspectives of a range of religious and civil society actors from across Tunisia, including those who identify as Salafi.
# Contents

Preface ................................................................................................................................. 1  
Executive Summary ............................................................................................................. 3  
Background .......................................................................................................................... 4  
  Violent Extremism in Tunisia Pre-Revolution ................................................................. 4  
  Religion and the Tunisian State ....................................................................................... 4  
  Violent Extremism in Transitional Tunisia ................................................................. 6  
Problem Statement – Religion and Extremism ............................................................... 7  
Research Methodology ....................................................................................................... 8  
Key Challenges .................................................................................................................... 9  
  An Inflexible Religious System ...................................................................................... 9  
  Shifts in Religious Authority ......................................................................................... 11  
  Suspicion toward the Religious Sector .......................................................................... 13  
A Path Forward .................................................................................................................... 16  
  Strengthening the Role and Capacity of Official Religious Actors .............................. 17  
  Enhancing Religious Credibility .................................................................................... 19  
  Connecting with Non-Traditional Religious Actors .................................................... 20  
Conclusion and Recommendations .................................................................................. 22  
References ........................................................................................................................... 24
Executive Summary

Despite immense progress in democratization, Tunisia’s political transition has been rocked by internal security concerns and the spread of violent extremism. In the past few years, Tunisia has suffered several high-profile terrorist attacks, struggled with extremist activities on both borders, and witnessed the exodus of thousands of its citizens to join violent extremist organizations in Syria, Iraq, and Libya. At the heart of these phenomena is a violent, transnational ideology – Jihadi-Salafism – that cloaks criminal and militant activities in religious purpose. This ideology has been able to thrive in the chaotic, post-revolution environment, where so many youths are lacking direction and opportunity.

Recognizing the importance of this security threat, Tunisia has taken steps to strengthen its counterterrorism policies and empower law enforcement. Beyond these reforms, however, national policymakers lack a “common vision” of the problem and thereby struggle to identify a set of unified national priorities to respond holistically to the various factors driving Jihadi-Salafism. In the fragile post-revolution environment, there are many barriers to addressing deep-seated structural concerns.

One of the most sensitive challenges has been the need to reimagine the public role of religion. For generations, the religious sphere served as a battleground between the secular establishment and an Islamist opposition movement. As such, the state often sought to control the religious sphere and prevent religious actors or institutions from becoming too influential or independent. Over the years, the state asserted its authority to oversee religious actors and regulate religious speech, a dynamic that has not changed dramatically after the revolution. Following the fall of Ben Ali, however, this legacy of state control left a void in credible religious leadership and socially-engaged institutions that was filled, to a large degree, by Jihadi-Salafi activists and associations. These new actors became trusted religious authorities for many Tunisians and paved the way for violent extremist recruitment.

If properly trained and empowered, religious actors and institutions can greatly enhance the resistance of local communities to extremist narratives of intolerance and violence. However, the Tunisian religious sector, at present, is not equipped with the right tools to compete with extremist voices. For religious actors to function as a source of resilience, they must be considered credible and be capable of meaningful engagement with the community. To reach this point, Tunisia must be willing to develop a new vision for the religious sector and confront some of the underlying social conflicts around religion that have shaped policy and public discourse.

To inform and support this process, the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) – in partnership with the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID) – conducted a mixed-methods study that included interviews with civil society leaders and national experts, along with surveys of fundamentalist religious actors from six key communities to determine how they could be most effectively engaged in future programs and policies for countering violent extremism (CVE). The findings of this study suggest that there is a widely-recognized need to strengthen the capacity of the religious sector to provide positive alternatives to Jihadi-Salafism. At the same time, however, there is critical disagreement as to what practices or discourse should be considered permissible within the religious sphere.

Based on these findings, ICRD identifies three strategic priorities for strengthening the role of the Tunisian religious sphere in CVE:

1. Invest in building the knowledge and outreach capacity of official religious actors and empowering them to take a more active role in the community.
2. Create space for the religious sector to be independent of the state so that the credibility of religious actors is not tied to public trust in the government.

3. Build collaborative, non-combative relationships with unofficial and non-traditional religious communities that are willing to be allies in support of peace, including those Salafis who are willing to oppose violent extremism.

**Background**

*Violent Extremism in Tunisia Pre-Revolution*

Prior to Tunisia’s 2010 Jasmine Revolution, violent extremist activity in the country was minimal – a relatively small contingent of Tunisians had traveled to fight in Afghanistan in the 1990s or Iraq in the mid-2000s and only one major terrorist attack had occurred in over a decade. The most notable Jihadi-Salafi organization to emerge in this period was the Tunisian Combat Group (TCG), which was founded in 2000 by two Tunisians fighting in Afghanistan. For several years, TCG worked to facilitate travel and other logistics for the few Tunisians wishing to train or fight in Afghanistan and Pakistan, until the group was disbanded in 2004.

The crackdown on TCG came as part of a national response to a 2002 terrorist attack on a synagogue on the island of Djerba, which proved to be a major turning point in counterterrorism policy that would set the tone for the next decade. In 2003, parliament passed a new counterterrorism law that established a broad definition of terrorism and greatly expanded the powers of law enforcement. Over the following years, this law was periodically used as a legal basis for wide-ranging crackdowns on anyone perceived to be extremist. In 2006-2007, for example, the activities of an al-Qaeda-trained cohort called the Sulayman Group led to a wave of mass arrests of local Salafis that was criticized as discriminatory by human rights groups.

While the threat of these violent extremist groups presented a new security challenge, the official response grew out of a legacy of tense relations between the state and the religious sector.

*Religion and the Tunisian State*

Following independence in 1956, Tunisia’s first two heads of state – Habib Bourguiba and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali – had to contend with powerful opposition from the religious sector. Religious scholars and groups affiliated with the Zaytouna mosque, a pre-eminent institute of Islamic education and heritage, had been major critics of Bourguiba’s nationalist and French-influenced policies both before and after independence. To address this political threat, Bourguiba took steps to weaken the independence and influence of religious institutions and bring the religious sphere under state control. This included seizing the lands and endowments of religious institutions, dramatically altering family law, and closing Tunisia’s Islamic schools, including Zaytouna and its network of more than 200 academic institutions. He also brought all of Tunisia’s mosques and imams under state control through the Department of Religious Service, which later became the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

In the decades that followed, religious opposition to the establishment coalesced around the Islamist organization *Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique* (MTI), later known as *Harakat Ennahda*. Ennahda become one of the most viable points of political opposition to Bourguiba and Ben Ali, and was alternately
tolerated and repressed in the ensuing years. Though Ben Ali initially promised to relax his predecessor’s grip on the religious sector, he soon reversed this approach as popularity for the religious opposition unexpectedly grew.

Over the decades of Ben Ali’s regime, the Ministry of Religious Affairs was repositioned underneath the Interior Ministry, and religious speech and publications were carefully monitored, with imams often delivering state-prescribed Friday sermons. Another tactic that Ben Ali employed against the traditional Islamist opposition was to cultivate a religious movement that could outflank Ennahda on the far right and thereby divide Tunisia’s religious conservatives. In this vein, some Saudi-funded preachers and missionary projects were allowed into the country and the Salafi movement was permitted some freedom to grow, provided that they did not challenge the state.

All of these policies created a delicate system wherein the state exercised firm control over the religious sector while at the same time cultivating suspicion of religious conservatives and any use of religion in the public sphere. While these tensions did not factor prominently in the causes of the Jasmine revolution, they erupted after the collapse of the Ben Ali regime.

Shifting Context in the Revolution

The 2010 revolution caused seismic shifts in Tunisia’s social and political landscape. While some of these shifts paved the way for democratization, others opened space for violent extremism. Perhaps most notably, political instability put a strain on economic growth, leaving many of the youth who had taken to the streets with fewer opportunities than before. The frustration of high expectations left many disillusioned, impatient, and ready to look outside the government for answers to their problems.

At the same time, a wave of influencers, some new and some that were previously repressed, emerged suddenly in the public sphere. Among them were hundreds of religious associations, which were quickly organized and granted legal status in the chaos following Ben Ali’s fall from power. As the state’s grip on the prison system began to slip, a general amnesty was issued to political prisoners in 2011, granting freedom to a number of Salafi figures and political dissidents. Though the population of Salafis prior to the revolution was relatively small – with as few as ten to thirty thousand adherents – they were quick to capitalize on the open environment to organize and build a base of support.

In the midst of the many upheavals of the revolution, a number of imams and preachers – perceived by some to be agents of the old regime – were driven out of their mosques by locals and replaced by preachers chosen from the community. By October 2011, the state had lost control of 400 mosques, and at least an additional 100 unofficial mosques had been established. What had previously been a closely monitored marketplace of religious speech was suddenly loosened, allowing the loudest and most passionate voices to gain rapid popularity.

Very quickly, the Salafi movement became a potent social force that mobilized against the perceived immorality and anti-religiosity of Tunisia’s secular and liberal society. Major civil unrest followed perceived slights against Islam, as exemplified by the demonstrations against the film Persepolis. For many, Salafism became a focal point for backlash against both the secular liberals associated with Ben Ali
and the older generation of Islamists who were perceived as too willing to compromise their values in order to participate in the political process.

The most prominent such organization to emerge in this chaos was Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia (AST), which was founded by the former head of the TCG, Saifallah Ben Hassine. AST functioned as a loosely organized social movement, which tackled a wide range of activities from charity, to proselytizing, to policing “un-Islamic” behavior and glorifying foreign fighters in Syria. While the movement had some central leadership, the bulk of its supporters maintained a casual affiliation, sometimes just by following AST on social media. Consequently, AST appeared to have many faces – for some, it was solely a charity group, while for others it maintained a jihadist agenda. While AST did push for radical social change and lauded jihadist activities in Syria, it advocated for Tunisia to be spared from this violence as there was still hope that Islamic law could be implemented through the political process.

Through their social organization and radical discourse, AST and many other new influencers helped pave the way for a massive wave of Tunisian youth to travel abroad to participate in conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Libya. Most recent estimates suggest that as many as 6,000 Tunisians left to fight in Syria, while thousands more traveled to Libya or other conflict zones.

**Violent Extremism in Transitional Tunisia**

In 2011, Ennahda re-emerged from exile to win control of the Constituent Assembly, along with Ettakatol and the Congress Party for the Republic (CPR), forming the three-part “Troika” government. Immediately, this transitional government faced a major dilemma in security policy. The proliferation of radical religious voices could potentially allow violent extremist groups to recruit and mobilize Tunisian citizens, but the use of repressive tactics to silence their speech might be publicly perceived as a backslide into the policies of Ben Ali. Furthermore, Ennahda’s experience as the victim of government repression made the leadership cautious that imprisonment would push a new generation of Tunisians closer to violent radicalization.

Instead, the Troika government sought to integrate various hardline religious groups into the political process, with the hope that full participation would moderate their more extreme positions. Ennahda encouraged Salafi youth to engage in peaceful social activism, while absolutely condemning any sort of violence. Some, like the Salafi party Jabhat al-Islah, took up this path and embraced the opportunity to be part of the mainstream political sphere. Others, like AST and Hizb ut-Tahrir, continued to agitate the system from the outside. Ennahda’s strategy, however, only lasted a short time before experiencing yet another upheaval.

In 2013, the national security situation began to deteriorate following the assassinations of leftist political leaders Chokri Belaid and Mohammed Brahmi. Authorities laid the blame for these attacks on AST, which was summarily branded as a terrorist group and formally disbanded. This move disenfranchised supporters who had known AST for its work providing social services or engaging in religious outreach (da’wa), and left many youth without a source of social and religious guidance or community. In the years following, Tunisia subsequently suffered from a series of horrific terrorist attacks – including Sousse beach, Bardo museum, and the insurgency in Ben Gardane. All of these developments placed an immense strain on the nascent democracy, which was simultaneously contending with economic stagnation and continued political uncertainty.

In response to these new threats, the Tunisian government reversed course, sideling efforts to accommodate non-violent religious dissidents and ramping up the law-and-order approach. At the height
of the violence in 2015, parliament passed revised counterterrorism legislation, which established a new legal framework that would supposedly empower the government to arrest and prosecute terrorists more effectively. Like the previous legislation, the law was immediately criticized by human rights groups for its harsh punishments and loose definition of terrorism.

In the religious sphere, the state has steadily drifted back to some of the punitive tactics employed by past regimes. Following the ousting of many official (i.e. state-approved) imams, the Tunisian government made a very public effort to “reclaim” such mosques, frequently accusing unofficial imams of being a source of extremist discourse. In reaction to the attacks on Sousse beach, for example, the government closed down 80 mosques which Prime Minister Essid accused of “spreading venom.”19 Similar moves to shut down mosques or religious media sources were used elsewhere in response to a perceived rise in extremism.20

In this environment, the fear of extremist influence has put a strain on open political discourse. Those who do not express a full-throated endorsement of the current security policies are accused of being soft on terrorism, particularly those affiliated with Ennahda or other religious groups. As such, there is little room to confront the difficult challenges in the religious sphere that have facilitated the growth of extremism in the first place.

Problem Statement – Religion and Extremism

While the rise of violent extremism in Tunisia can be attributed to a number of intersecting social dynamics – such as limited economic opportunities and youth disillusionment – this report takes a closer look at the relevance of religious actors and institutions. Whether or not the violent extremist groups that operate in Tunisia and the wider region are “religious,” there is no doubt that they have often used religious language and references in an attempt to endow their actions or ideology with a greater transcendent purpose or legitimacy.

For some, adopting an extremist religious ideology is a way to make sense of a confusing and unfair world or provide a sense of community and purpose, even if one is not necessarily deeply pious. In fact, a number of experts and stakeholders interviewed in this research insisted that many Tunisian youth who become radical are not initially religious at all, but despondent youth who turn to religion as a source of salvation for their problems.21

Despite how it has been co-opted by some, religion can also function as a powerful source of resistance to violent extremism. Religious values can offer youth a positive, non-violent worldview and local religious actors can leverage their social credibility to steer vulnerable individuals away from radicalization. In fact, several studies that have examined the relationship between religious literacy and radicalization have suggested that a basic understanding of Islam correlates with lower levels of support for terrorist groups.22

For countries like Tunisia, the challenge is in determining how to minimize the influence of those religious voices that support violence and terrorism, and instead empower positive sources of religious guidance. For decades, the official religious sector has served to maintain the status quo, rather than adapt to changing circumstances. Consequently, official religious actors and institutions were not equipped to compete with the new religious voices that emerged after the revolution, some of whom played a significant role in radicalization and recruitment of youth to extremist groups.
Research Methodology

The analysis and findings presented in this report are based on a combination of extensive desk study and mixed-method field research, implemented in collaboration with a team of Tunisian researchers coordinated by CSID. This study is not intended as a generalizable representation of the attitudes of Tunisian citizens, or of Tunisian religious actors specifically. Instead, researchers sought to explore particularly challenging subjects through a qualitative analysis, supplemented by the opinions of conservative religious actors, whose perspective is essential to understanding issues of religion at the local level.

Data was collected periodically between May 2016 and April 2017 from the following sources:

- Structured surveys with 139 religious actors who were identified as fundamentalists (usuliyya).
  - **Region** – Respondents were selected from six cities or neighborhoods that were identified by the research team as highly affected by the presence of violent extremism: Ettadhamen and Djebel Lahmar in Tunis; Sousse; Bizerte; Kasserine; and Ben Gardane.
  - **Gender** – Approximately 23% of respondents were women. This low rate is due, in large part, to the underrepresentation of women in formal religious roles.*
  - **Age** – 18-29 (29%); 30-49 (57%); 50+ (14%).
  - **Role** – Respondents included a mix of formal religious actors, such as imams, preachers (khutaba) and Islamic educators, and informal religious actors, such as active members of religious associations.

- Three focus group discussions gathered a total of 20 participants, including discussions with religious actors in Bizerte and Sousse and one discussion with youth activists in Tunis.

- Semi-structured interviews with 26 scholars, national stakeholders, and civil society leaders with relevant expertise in analyzing or leading efforts to address violent extremism.

Worth noting within the context of this project’s research methodology is the fact that gathering data from a large number of these survey respondents on highly sensitive issues posed a significant practical challenge for researchers. To gather the data used in this report, every effort was made to dispel suspicions that this study was conducted by the Tunisian security apparatus.

* This lack of representation poses a serious challenge for any attempt to disaggregate the data by gender. Women respondents were almost entirely students or individuals who hold informal positions in the religious sphere, while the male respondents included some actors who held formal roles (imams, preachers, scholars) and others who did not. Any breakdown by gender would be skewed by this confounding variable. Researchers did compare the responses of men and women to identify any significant patterns, but the results were not sufficiently distinctive to impact the major analysis and conclusions in the report. A more focused study on the insights of women fundamentalist religious actors would be necessary to explore key nuances in greater detail.
**Key Challenges**

ICRD’s field research raised three key challenges to strengthening the positive role of religion in CVE:

1. Over the years, the state has defined a narrow vision for the role of the religious sector, which has left official religious actors under-prepared to expand their local influence.

2. New, unofficial religious actors have capitalized on the freedom afforded by the revolution to organize and spread dissident religious messages. These unofficial actors have gained significant traction and credibility because of their grassroots activism and ability to speak freely.

3. Animosity between the state and the religious sector has been a barrier to effective empowerment of religious actors.

**An Inflexible Religious System**

As outlined above, decades of tension between the secular establishment and Islamist opposition left the religious sphere largely under the supervision of a government that had little interest in cultivating a strong religious identity among the populace. In the eyes of many conservative religious communities, religion was neglected and allowed to wither. As expressed by Ennahda leader Rachid Ghannouchi, “throughout the Middle East, for decades, dictators suppressed Islam. In Tunisia, any kind of Islamic education was forbidden.”

This feeling was reflected in ICRD’s survey of fundamentalist religious actors, who almost unanimously cited poor religious education as a significant driver of violence and terrorism in Tunisia (see fig. 1).

![Figure 1](image-url)
While Tunisia’s public education system does, in fact, provide 1-2 hours of Islamic education per week at every level, the material is considered by some to be dry and rote. As noted by one young Islamist activist, the curriculum emphasizes subjects that are safely noncontroversial – such as ritual or narrow legal questions – which does not encourage youth to critically engage with broader religious tenets. As an alternative to this system, some Tunisians have sought to provide their children with supplemental religious education through a more traditional practice: private Qur’anic schools. These schools, however, operate under careful state supervision, and have been subject to intense scrutiny out of fear that they may be spreading extremist ideologies.

Under the secular regimes of Bourguiba and Ben Ali, Tunisia placed a low priority on developing opportunities for higher religious education. While there are institutes for higher religious study – including Zaytouna University – they have been subject to frequent restructuring and tepid support from the state. For those interested in a religious job, the incentives to pursue higher learning are minimal, as the only formal requirements for Tunisian imams are to possess a high school diploma and pass a basic entrance exam. In fact, only about a third of imams hold a university degree – and not always one in religion – and only a small fraction (perhaps 5%) have graduated from Zaytouna University.

This system exists because, prior to the revolution, imams and preachers were not necessarily expected to play much of a role beyond leading prayer and reciting state-prescribed sermons. As in other Muslim-majority countries, working as an imam or preacher is only a part-time job that is compensated by a limited stipend. There has been little political appetite to empower preachers to play a more active role in community affairs or engage with the populace on sensitive theological subjects.

With these limitations, imams can do little to actively shape the religious lives of those who are coming under the influence of violent extremism. As noted in one dialogue among youth activists, even if young people are searching for guidance on the legitimacy of jihad in Syria, they are not likely to go out of their way to seek out the advice of a local imam. While some imams have personally undertaken a larger role through outreach or involvement in religious associations, there are limited opportunities or mechanisms to provide imams with resources or training on how to effectively expand their responsibilities.

ICRD’s survey of fundamentalist religious actors, many of whom were imams themselves, revealed a general sense of disappointment with the ability of imams and preachers to fulfill jobs outside of preaching or prayer (see fig. 3). For nearly every stated role, a majority of respondents believe that imams and

---

**Even if young people are searching for guidance on the legitimacy of jihad in Syria, they are not likely to go out of their way to seek out the advice of a local imam.**

---

**Figure 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In your community, how important is it for an imam or preacher to engage in the following activities?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Defend the fundamentals of faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don't know</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**Figure 2**

---

10
Preachers perform poorly, including on such critical areas as preventing violent extremism and counseling youth. These findings stand in contrast to respondents’ feelings on which roles are most important for imams and preachers to play (see fig. 2). Respondents consider most of the stated roles to be “very important”, though they ascribe comparatively less significance to roles that expanded beyond religious guidance, such as conflict resolution and serving as a nexus between the state and civil society. The exact reason for respondents’ disappointment is not inherently clear from the data. Whatever the cause may be, however, there seems to be a distinct need for religious actors to develop new skill-sets to expand beyond the roles envisioned under secular rule.

Similarly, as expressed by the head of one national imam association, Ben Ali-era policies toward mosques have limited their ability to play an animating role in public life. Historically, both within Tunisia and the wider Islamic world, mosques have functioned as social hubs and gathering places for various community activities. However, since Tunisian mosques are all technically state property, official permission is necessary for any activities. Cautious that mosques could be used as a hub for extremist outreach, officials often prefer to keep them closed except for Friday prayers. This approach not only limits the capacity of mosques to effect positive change, but also undercuts community ownership of the religious sphere. As expressed by one young Islamist activist: “the mosque is not our property… we have no right to it” [translated from Arabic].

This feeling that the religious sphere is completely owned by the government, rather than the citizenry, can undermine the credibility of all official religious actors in the eyes of those who distrust the government. In the words of one imam from Bizerte, “whomever the state appoints is distrusted by the people.” Until government-appointed imams are empowered and encouraged to engage communities on a meaningful level, as independent religious leaders, a vacuum in religious legitimacy will remain for non-state religious actors to fill.

**Shifts in Religious Authority**

As noted previously, the advent of violent extremism in Tunisia came coupled with the emergence of new religious voices that capitalized on the post-revolution freedoms. Unlike the preachers and religious educators whose positions were supported by the state, these new voices garnered support organically. The unofficial preachers who “took over” hundreds of mosques, for example, were often locals who were...
considered by their neighbors or peers to be credible religious authorities. While these new voices were a minority, they derived their legitimacy from grassroots support.

Despite the negative depictions of Salafis and other new conservative religious actors in the national media or political discourse, many communities where these actors were present did not perceive them as foreigners or terrorists. One study of youth attitudes in marginalized Tunis neighborhoods found that 69.3% of youth in Douar Hicher and 56.8% of youth in Ettadhamen consider Salafis to be simply “kids from the suburbs [ouled houma] who conform to religion,” and 32.5% and 46.3% respectively disagree with the definition of Salafism as an extremist group that wants to impose its views by force.31

In part, the new religious associations and activists cultivated the respect and support of the populace by providing assistance to socially or economically marginalized communities that had been neglected by the state. With the significant political disruptions caused by the revolution, the needs of these communities only grew more severe, allowing unofficial Salafi religious groups, including Ansar al-Sharia and others, to step in to provide for basic needs. As summarized by the International Crisis Group in 2013:

[Salafis] have stepped in to fill the vacuum created by atrophying public services in marginalized areas; in some places, they have become key economic actors. They are known to help with schooling and serve as mediators in local conflicts, administrative issues, and even marital problems.32

In some neighborhoods, following the fall of Ben Ali, Salafi communities organized patrols to keep the peace when the National Guard withdrew.33 In the course of this study, researchers noted that in some peri-urban communities in Tunis, a surprising number of official imams reported that unofficial religious actors had been stepping in to resolve local conflicts and protect vulnerable populations, such as young children, from violence.34 Often, these actors were responding to the lack of a formal security presence, and seeking to fill a void left by the state. In fact, nearly a third of respondents identified religious actors as the primary people responsible for preventing violence in their community, even in contrast to local police (see fig. 4).

---

Of the options listed below, who is primarily responsible for preventing violence in your community?

- Family/elders and local notables: 3%
- Local politicians: 7%
- Imams, preachers, and religious actors: 28%
- Military/police: 61%

*Figure 4*
While these sorts of measures did cause some friction with local residents who were not keen to see Salafis and conservative religious groups expand their presence, they generally served to foster trust and support for such groups from the community. This was voiced by a strong majority of survey respondents who, when asked about the relationship between their fundamentalist coreligionists and their neighbors reported overwhelmingly positive answers (see fig. 5).

When asked to elaborate, a small percentage reported that some members of the community have expressed suspicion, fear, or distaste. However, the vast majority described a positive and constructive relationship, noting that their coreligionists embodied positive moral values, and helped their neighbors deal with problems. In the words of one respondent: “They are regular people who help their neighbors in times of hardship, and the people trust them.”

To be clear, not all of these new religious associations or activists have been involved in promoting violent extremism; they represent a diversity of views along the ideological and political spectrum. However, in this new, more open environment, extremists are able to gain more traction and public support than they could previously, and official religious actors are not always prepared to compete with them on equal terms. Problematically, while these actors could be best described as violent extremists, they also benefit from the ability to offer a religious discourse that speaks directly to individuals’ frustration with the status quo and can thereby build their credibility by mobilizing community members to actually address some of those concerns.

**Suspicion toward the Religious Sector**

The legacy of conflict between the state and religious dissidents has heightened the suspicion of religious actors among some secular Tunisians who fear that religious actors will leverage their social influence to advance a theocratic political agenda. While Islamist actors, like Ennahda, have been very cautious to avoid the appearance of undermining Tunisian secularism, this fear continues to strain the relationship between the state and religion, even after the fall of Ben Ali.

One of the ways in which this tension manifests is in the informal taboo against religious actors engaging in political speech. Whether or not one considers this taboo to be justified, its enforcement has created problems for the religious sector. As expressed by several leaders of national imam associations, imams need to be able to tailor their discourse to speak to local needs and demonstrate the relevance of their religious guidance, or they will have a difficult time offering religious alternatives to extremism. While unofficial religious activists have the freedom to speak directly to the sensitive topics and current events that are most

---

*Imams need to be able to tailor their discourse to speak to local needs and demonstrate the relevance of their religious guidance or they will have a difficult time offering religious alternatives to extremism.*
relevant to their communities, official preachers must self-censor to avoid any issue that could be considered political.

Though official rules were relaxed somewhat following the revolution, the state still exercises the ability to dismiss imams based on the content of their sermons. Several young imams interviewed in this research noted that there continues to be clear pressure to conform their activities and speech to what is most acceptable to the government. Though official rules were relaxed somewhat following the revolution, the state still exercises the ability to dismiss imams based on the content of their sermons. Several young imams interviewed in this research noted that there continues to be clear pressure to conform their activities and speech to what is most acceptable to the government.37 This phenomenon is similarly reflected in responses to ICRD’s survey, where less than a third of respondents reported that local preachers discuss current affairs (see fig. 6).

The concern about state suppression has certainly been reinforced throughout the state’s efforts to “reclaim” hundreds of mosques throughout the country. Though some of these mosques have undoubtedly been used to promote violence, others have been labeled problematic solely because their speech was too political. This was a concern, for example, raised by some supporters of Ridha Jaouadi, a popular Islamist preacher who spoke out on sensitive subjects and was arrested for unauthorized management of a mosque.38 Such efforts to protect against the politicization of Islam have, unfortunately, muddied the line between non-violent Islamist speech and violent extremism. These policies and practices have also served to strain the relationship between religious and government actors.

Respondents expressed mixed sentiments regarding the state of this relationship in their community (see fig. 7). Some respondents noted that there has been constructive cooperation between state and religious actors in the area of counterterrorism. This collaboration has been a double-edged sword. While it demonstrates that government officials are not always hostile toward religious actors, the religious actors who are willing to work with officials are perceived in some religious circles as complicit supporters of the abuses perpetrated by security forces.

Those respondents who perceived the relationship to be more negative or mixed highlighted various sources of tension, including:

- The absence of a clear framework to explain the position of religious actors and institutions relative to the state.
- The absence of trust and clear channels of communication between the two actors. In the words of one respondent: “they are new to the era of freedom and democracy and the two sides are still getting to know each other.”

![Figure 6](image1.png)

![Figure 7](image2.png)
State animosity toward religion, whether in the form of harassment from law enforcement or the historical distrust between government officials and religious actors. Respondents particularly noted animosity toward those religious actors who voice political opinions or maintain a conservative appearance.

Throughout the course of the research, concerns were raised in particular about mistreatment by security forces of Salafis and others that maintained the appearance of Salafis. Asked about the relationship between their conservative coreligionists and the government or security sector, nearly half of all respondents reported that there has been unfair treatment (see fig. 8). These respondents claimed that police tend to discriminate against individuals based on their religious dress and appearance. In the words of one respondent, “anyone who grows out his beard is brought in for questioning by security forces” [translated from Arabic].

Notably, respondents expressed mixed feelings about the legal protections for religious practice. Several noted that there are no legal mechanisms for protecting religious actors from investigation or penalization. However, those respondents who did not believe there was unfair treatment of certain religious communities tended to claim that persecution could not be happening because people were protected by the law. On the whole, the legal system seems to be less of a point of concern. A strong majority of respondents agreed that their coreligionists could practice their religion freely, often justifying their response by pointing to the rights guaranteed by the Tunisian constitution (see fig. 9).

These responses point to a possible incongruity between the letter of the law and its implementation. From a legal standpoint, Article 6 of Tunisia’s 2014 Constitution guarantees the freedom of religious belief and practice, though that freedom is explicitly curtailed for those who practice takfīr or incite hatred or violence. Though the state has not formally banned particular religious practices, some officials seem to target individuals based on their religious appearance or beliefs under the guise of counter-terrorism. Individuals who suffer from such harassment do not have a clear legal recourse to address their grievances, which has made it difficult to change the culture of the system.

Conservative religious individuals are not alone in feeling subject to unfair harassment by security forces, and the data outlined above do not clarify whether their experiences are better or worse than their neighbors.
However, regardless of the comparative severity of the problem, the perception that officials are targeting individuals as security threats based on their religious practice undermines the religious legitimacy of the state – and any religious actor who is associated with the state – and fuels extremist narratives of persecution.

**A Path Forward**

A comprehensive strategy for addressing violent extremism must strengthen the independence and social role of the official religious sector and respond to the spread of new, informal religious voices without further exacerbating tensions with religious communities.

In recent years, there have been positive signs that national stakeholders recognize the importance of empowering the religious sector. Perhaps most notably, the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA) outlined a 26-point plan in March 2016 entitled *Ghodwa Khir* (Tomorrow is Better), that included a range of outreach, education, and artistic programs, including:

- Training and education programs for imams to enhance their knowledge of controversial theological issues. Such efforts were conducted primarily through the Institute of Sharia and the nascent Institute of Preaching and Religious Guidance (Institut Supérieur de Prédication et d’Orientation Religieuse).
- Conducting outreach to youth through media campaigns, roundtable discussions, and disseminating flyers and publications.
- Encouraging public activities by Sufi communities.
- Promoting Qur’anic education and memorization.

However, with only limited available funding and a lack of consistent administrative support, *Ghodwa Khir* was regarded by some as too ambitious to be practical, and it was later scaled back to a few core elements. A number of challenges also emerged in the course of its implementation, often stemming from the fundamental challenge of trying to breathe life into a sector that had received very little investment for decades. After generations of neglect, there were not enough local experts and institutions to scale up training programs and not enough buy-in from either grassroots religious actors or national leaders to ensure that these reforms would be sustainable.

In light of these opportunities and challenges, ICRD’s research has identified three key priority areas that should shape future strategies and programming:

1. Invest in building the capacities of official religious actors and empowering them to take a more active role in the community.
2. Create space for the religious sector to be independent of the state so that the credibility of religious actors is not tied to public trust in the government.
3. Build collaborative, non-combative relationships with unofficial and non-traditional religious communities that are willing to be allies in support of peace, including those Salafis who oppose violent extremism.
When asked to reflect on the areas in which religious actors should be involved, survey respondents generally agreed that religious actors should lead efforts to prevent violence and terrorism, even more so than quintessential religious roles, such as regulating social behavior or educating children (see fig. 10). Leading or even supporting local CVE efforts, however, requires specialized skills that are not inherently part of the qualifications to serve as an imam or preacher (or any other type of religious actor). Thus, for religious actors to be able to properly assume that role, they will need some measure of formal training.

Survey respondents widely agreed that some form of training program for religious actors was needed (see fig. 11). At present, however, there is no place for such a program to emerge organically, given that a formal center for professional training of imams does not exist. Though some small-scale training programs have been developed by the MoRA or civil society groups, only a minority of respondents claimed to be familiar with any sort of imam training program in Tunisia (see fig. 12). Of those who had heard of a program, the majority made a general reference to the MoRA or specifically cited the Institute of Preaching and Religious Guidance, which is still small in scale. A smaller number pointed to efforts led by CSOs, including the National Association of the Holy Qur’an, the Dawah and Reform Association, and the Association of Mosque Imams.
Given the fact that imams are accredited, supported, and supervised by the state, it is logical to assume that the state would be responsible for any major training or education effort, particularly as it relates to sensitive questions about violent extremism. In theory, the MoRA should be able to mobilize much greater funding support and top-level buy-in than any civil society organization. However, their efforts thus far have frequently stagnated, partially due to the lack of available resources, and partially because of the negative connotation of the state’s involvement in religious affairs.

For such a program to be successful, it is essential that it be perceived as credible and worthwhile by imams, and that it be responsive to local needs. As expressed by one former senior MoRA official, these issues can be difficult to overcome through a top-down approach to reform. Survey respondents expressed similarly mixed feelings about the role of the MoRA in imam training (see fig. 13) – while a plurality of respondents felt that the MoRA should be in charge, a sizable number preferred non-state or even foreign entities.

As for the substance of any training effort, respondents gave greater priority to theological education and religious tolerance over practical skills like conflict resolution or social media use (see fig. 14). Given the current status of the Tunisian religious sphere, this finding may suggest that some religious actors see less value in technical skills, or that they believe religious actors still lack sufficient education on religious matters. Training on theology would certainly address concerns regarding the low level of basic religious literacy required of imams. However, it would do little to prepare imams to engage in more effective outreach, youth counseling, conflict resolution, or other activities that might enhance their role in the community.

Ideally, resources could be dedicated to training religious actors on the skills most needed for them to become a more effective point of resistance to extremism: trust-building, use of new communication technologies, youth engagement, facilitation, networking, etc. However, any overarching strategy must also take steps to overcome the deficit in official support and professionalization that has existed to date.
Enhancing Religious Credibility

Beyond building the technical capacity of official religious actors, it is critical to enhance their credibility and relevance vis-à-vis the population. In part, this is a matter of individual capacity to build trust and engage with the community. However, it is also essential to disentangle the public perception of religious actors from the public perception of the state. As long as the religious sector is seen as intimately tied to the state, it will be difficult for religious actors to gain credibility among those people who are frustrated by government policies. This is a particularly challenging problem given the current low level of public support for political institutions and leaders in Tunisia.46

As long as the religious sector is seen as intimately tied to the state, it will be difficult for religious actors to gain credibility among those people who are frustrated by government policies.

If religious actors cannot tailor their discourse to speak to the concerns or interests of their community, then they can be easily outflanked by those unofficial religious voices, including extremists, who do not feel bound by such restrictions. This is not to say that religious actors need to condemn the government to gain popular support, but that they need to feel less scrutiny from above so that they can develop their own authentic voice. As noted by one preacher from Bizerte, there is a gap between official religious practice and the reality of popular practice.47 Religious actors need to have enough independence from the state to be able to overcome this gap so that they can be relevant to the religious life of the community.

To address this challenge, Tunisia must reassess the extent to which the religious sphere is a part of the government, and to what extent it is independent. Respondents offered some guidance on what this relationship should look like, as summarized in fig. 15. Their responses suggest that while the state should continue to play a central role in some areas – such as religious education and paying imam salaries – it should scale back its involvement in regulating religious speech and the appointment of imams. The data suggests that religious actors are not opposed to receiving support from the government in meeting religious needs, but that they are comparatively less interested in the government controlling religious discourse.

Obviously, this kind of independence comes with an inherent risk, from the perspective of the state. Recent history has demonstrated that in the absence of tight government control, some religious actors will promote extremist ideals. Of course, with the rise of the internet and the relative personal freedom afforded by the revolution, the government has already lost the ability to completely control the messages that its citizens receive. It is therefore far more essential to cultivate credible, and positive sources of religious authority.
who can serve as a counterpoint to extremist messages. This will not be possible without allowing some measure of independence within the religious sphere.

Regulation of the religious sector does not have to be conducted solely through the state. Religious institutions and organizations can play a vital role in coordinating religious actors and protecting against spoilers. The freedom afforded by the revolution created room not only for Jihadi-Salafi organizations, but for other religious civil society groups that can help promote positive reforms. There are a number of such entities — Zaytouna University, imam associations, etc. — that could be given greater support to expand their influence and act in a semi-independent fashion, allowing for some measure of regulation while creating some much-needed distance. As articulated by one former MoRA official, the state should take care of religion but not control it.

Many of the experts and stakeholders interviewed in this research particularly highlighted the importance of Zaytouna University, the symbolic and historic center of religious learning in Tunisia. Some believe that Zaytouna could formalize and articulate a national religious identity that would resonate among all Tunisians as an alternative to Jihadi-Salafism. However, these hopes are challenged by the small size of the institution and the fact that some critics still view Zaytouna in a negative light, either because it is outdated or has become tainted by association with various ideologues.

Tunisia should not look to Zaytouna alone to spearhead the reshaping and management of the religious field. Zaytouna may function as a national spiritual leader, but there must also be strong local groups and institutions that can actually effect change from the grassroots level.

Connecting with Non-Traditional Religious Actors

Even if steps are taken to strengthen the official religious sector, it is likely that Tunisia will still be host to an array of religious viewpoints that diverge from the mainstream Maliki Islam that many consider to be “Tunisian Islam.” While some of the new religious movements have directly fueled violence or recruitment to violent extremist groups, others may not necessarily pose a direct threat to public safety. It is important, therefore, to avoid painting all alternative religious communities with the same brush. As articulated by a number of political and religious leaders interviewed in this study, the doors of dialogue should remain open for all strands of thought that do not advocate violence.

There is, however, an important distinction to be made with respect to advocating violence, given that most people across the religious and political landscape support the use of violence in some circumstances. There is no doubt that some Salafi leaders and groups promote extralegal violence and social conflict in Tunisia, which represents a clear danger to public safety. However, these individuals should be differentiated from those who voice certain kinds of support for conflict without necessarily advocating for specific violent acts. In particular, there has been serious controversy over those religious actors — whether Salafi or not — who provide theological justification for ongoing foreign conflicts in Syria, Libya, or elsewhere. While this phenomenon is a pressing concern, it is essential to keep the doors of dialogue open to those religious actors who are not an immediate threat to public safety if there is to be any hope of positively transforming their discourse.

In this sense, it is important to engage with, rather than marginalize, Salafi communities that are not directly inciting violence in Tunisia. This is a difficult step for many Tunisians to consider, as Salafism is often portrayed in the popular imagination as a source of intolerance and social unrest or a gateway to violent extremism. Skeptics might argue that the Troika government’s policy of accommodation toward Salafi
communities allowed violent extremism to take hold in the first place and therefore Salafis should be treated as “enemies” or spoilers, rather than potential allies.

However, it is important to recognize that the Salafi community is also internally diverse. Salafism in Tunisia ranges from political to apolitical, democratic to anti-democratic, and violent to non-violent. When explicitly pushed, a number of non-Salafi respondents — including national political leaders — were willing to acknowledge this diversity and even offer up examples of Salafi leaders who have spoken out against violent extremism, such as Bashir Ben Hassan and Khatib Idrisi. A few civil society activists even discussed quiet efforts to connect certain Salafi leaders with the government.

Other civil society respondents, however, were quick to dismiss the idea on the basis that it is not possible to fight one form of Salafism with another. In other words, empowering non-violent Salafi voices will not diminish Jihadi-Salafis, as they share similar core ideological assumptions and followers of non-violent Salafi leaders have occasionally gone on to join extremist groups. Furthermore, opening more operational space for Salafi groups, or giving official legitimacy to Salafi leaders could allow the movement to spread more widely and, even if such Salafis are not committing acts of violence, this could still foster social conflict with Tunisia’s liberal communities.

While these concerns are certainly valid, they are rooted in the assumption that the state will be able to largely control the spread of religious practices without relying on authoritarian tactics. As Tunisia continues to democratize, Salafi groups will benefit from the associated freedom and will continue to proselytize and gain followers. Efforts to curtail this freedom will inevitably require expanding the power of the state to regulate public speech and undermine the democratization process. Even in the absence of legal restrictions, stigmatizing all Salafi communities and turning a blind eye to their harassment by officials or law enforcement only serves to foster hostility among Salafis toward outsiders and reinforce existing social barriers. This, in itself, could further radicalize otherwise non-violent Salafis toward more extremist actions.

Already, Tunisia’s Salafi communities are largely insular and wary of outside influences. As such, if there are youth within Salafi communities that are at risk of radicalization, their attitude toward violent extremism is far more likely to be impacted by their Salafi peers and neighbors, rather than outsiders. Building bridges into these communities should be an essential component of any CVE strategy. Tunisia’s mainstream religious establishment may diverge in significant ways theologically from the Salafi movement, but that does not mean it is impossible to find common ground in steering youth away from violence.

Doing so, however, requires overcoming a major deficit of trust, and addressing the harassment or perceived harassment of individuals on the basis of their Salafi beliefs or appearance. Major reforms to the security sector are urgently needed, particularly given the fact that current counterterrorism legislation provides wide latitude for any discrimination that can be justified as a security concern. However, it is unlikely that deep security sector reform will be achieved in the short term. To move this process forward, civil society groups, particularly local human rights activists, must play an active role by stepping in to defend those who have been subject to unjust harassment or scrutiny.

Addressing the ongoing tensions between religious actors and the state will similarly diminish the perception that the Tunisian government is anti-religious, which is a central talking point in extremist theological narratives.
**Conclusion and Recommendations**

Based on the data and insights summarized above, ICRD offers the following guidance to inform the development of future CVE policies and programs in Tunisia. These recommendations are not intended to fit Tunisia into a foreign model, but are reflective of the perspectives of local community leaders and national stakeholders. Any reform to the religious sector must be made with great sensitivity to the political fault lines that have been carefully negotiated since the change from an authoritarian regime in 2011, and deep structural changes will not be achieved overnight. Nonetheless, ICRD believes that the following priority areas should shape the development of short and long term CVE policies with regard to the religious sphere:

I. **Develop effective mechanisms for training and empowering official religious actors.**

   a. The Tunisian government should support long-term investment of resources in building up institutions that can serve as a conduit for training, coordinating, and professionalizing official religious actors across the country. In particular, the state should play a key role in providing long-term support for institutions that offer strong theological education.

   b. Local CSOs should partner with central and local governments to provide more targeted training for religious actors on relevant technical skills, such as new media usage, youth engagement, recognizing the signs of radicalization, and best practices for CVE. Working through local CSOs can increase the geographic impact of this effort and help cultivate buy-in from the ground up, instead of instituting programs from the top-down.

   c. INGOs can be engaged to provide additional technical expertise or guidance to local trainers or CSOs, thereby integrating international best practices into localized training methods.

II. **Enhance the independence of the religious sector.**

   a. The Tunisian government should encourage the formation of independent religious CSOs or other entities that can take a more active role in the community through the provision of services or the creation and dissemination of positive religious messages. Rather than expand the role of central authorities like the MoRA, the state should take steps to strengthen local actors and organizations that are rooted in underdeveloped communities.

      i. One natural way to decentralize the religious system would be to encourage local mosques to lead structured activities for the community. Leading formalized activities under the careful supervision of local religious actors would expand the relevance of the mosque while limiting its ability to serve as a quiet gathering point for extremist recruiters.

      ii. The MoRA should focus more on building capable institutions for the recruitment and training of imams than on recruiting imams itself and managing their public discourse.
b. Tunisian policymakers and media should critically reassess the limits of acceptable religious speech, focusing more on cracking down on clear incitements to violence than other forms of dissident speech.

c. Religious associations should work to empower local religious actors to expand their presence in the community and become involved in social spaces outside of the mosque.

III. Increase constructive collaboration with non-traditional religious actors and communities, including Salafis who oppose violent extremism.

a. Both the Tunisian government and local CSOs should take steps to identify and engage mediators who can serve as a bridge to Salafi communities or other influential non-traditional religious actors. These mediators should be empowered to connect trusted religious influencers with existing community-level CVE programs.

i. Community leaders should develop safe spaces to host dialogues with fundamentalist religious actors. Such dialogues should be facilitated by credible mediators from within the community and be independent of the political or security apparatus.

b. The Tunisian government should take steps to address the security policies or practices that have unjustly targeted certain religious populations or are otherwise contributing to tensions between the state and the religious sphere.

i. Local human rights organizations and other advocates should reach out to communities that may have been impacted by discriminatory practices, listen to their experiences, and continue to advocate for reform. These organizations or activists can serve as natural mediators, as described in part (a) above.

ii. The international community should push the Tunisian government to adopt CVE policies that are respectful to human rights and religious freedoms.

iii. A council of conservative faith leaders could be convened to interface with and inform policy makers with respect to protecting constitutional rights, which would also increase support for stability and the legitimacy of the state.

c. CSOs could support a public campaign of awareness-raising to dispel the association between conservative religiosity and extremist violence. This could particularly highlight the positive public works being conducted by all religious actors across the spectrum of practice and belief.
References

1 Interview with former security official.
2 Haim Malka and Margo Balboni, Tunisian Fighters: In History and Today (CSIS, June 2016); Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler, The Caliphate’s Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic State’s Foreign Fighter Paper Trail, (Combating Terrorism Center, April 2016).
3 Specifically, Saifallah Ben Hassine (aka Abu Ayyad al-Tunisi) and Tarek Maaroufi.
5 Stefano Torelli, Fabio Merone, and Francesco Cavatorta, “Salafism in Tunisia: Challenges and Opportunities for Democratization,” Middle East Policy Council 19, no. 4 (2012); Monica Marks, “Who are Tunisia’s Salafis?” Foreign Policy, September 28, 2012.
9 The CTC Sentinel estimates the size of the Salafi community at 10,000, while the International Crisis Group estimates the number at 30,000. See Anne Wolf, “Tunisia: Signs of Domestic Radicalization Post-Revolution,” CTC Sentinel 6, no. 1 (2013); and Tunisia: Violence and Salafi Challenge respectively. Neither estimate claims to be empirically based.
11 Marks, “Who are Tunisia’s Salafis?”
13 Interview with Monica Marks, December 18, 2015.
14 Gartenstein-Ross, “Ansar Al-Sharia Tunisia’s Long Game.”
17 “Tunisia declares Ansar al-Sharia a terrorist group,” BBC, August 27, 2013.
18 Interview with Anne Wolf, February 12, 2016.
20 “Tunisia to close down Salafist-run mosques,” Al Jazeera, July 20, 2014.
21 Interview with Monica Marks, December 18, 2015; interview with Zaytouna University professor, April 27, 2016.
24 Interview with Ennahda youth activist, October 17, 2016.

26 Interview with Ennahda youth activist, October 17, 2016; interview with former Ministry of Religious Affairs official, April 29, 2016.

27 Local imam and religious activist during focus group discussion in Tunis, October 19, 2016.

28 Interview with leader of imam association, October 18, 2016.

29 Interview with Ennahda youth activist, October 17, 2016.

30 Focus group discussion with religious actors in Bizerte.


34 Conversation with local researcher, April 19, 2017.

35 Interview with local council member in Libyan town near border with Tunisia, April 18, 2017.

36 Interview with leader of imam association, April 28, 2016.

37 Local imam and religious teacher during focus group discussion in Tunis, October 19, 2016.


39 The act of declaring a person to be a *kafir* or unbeliever.

40 ‘*We Want an End to the Fear*’ Abuses Under Tunisia’s State of Emergency (Amnesty International, 2017).

41 It is important to caveat this point by noting that the Ministry of Religious Affairs has generally had very little resources to devote to any sort of programs. The vast majority of its resources are consumed by paying imams’ salaries, according to former Ministry officials.

42 Interview with Zaytouna University professor, April 27, 2016; Interview with Ministry of Religious Affairs official, October 20, 2016.


44 Interview with Ministry of Religious Affairs official, October 20, 2016.


46 One poll from the International Republican Institute, for example, conducted in April 2017 found that 68% of respondents rated the overall performance of the government as bad. *Public Opinion Survey of Tunisia: April 19 – April 26, 2017* (International Republican Institute, June 2017).

47 Focus group discussion with religious actors in Bizerte.

48 Interview with Tunisian parliamentarian, April 28, 2016.

49 Interview with former Ministry of Religious Affairs official, April 29, 2016.

50 Anne Wolf; interview with Ennahda party member, April 27, 2016; interview with former Ministry of Religious Affairs official, April 29, 2016.

51 Though the enrollment has increased in recent years, the student body is still less than two thousand.

52 Wolf, “The Radicalization of Tunisia’s Mosques.”

53 Interview with Ennahda party member; interview with CPR parliamentarian.

54 Interview with Tunisian parliamentarian, April 28, 2016; interview with Zaytouna University professor, April 27, 2016; interview with civil society activist and researcher, April 27, 2016.

55 Interview with leader of youth engagement CSO, October 20, 2016; interview with civil society activist and researcher, April 27, 2016.

56 Interview with local researcher and analyst, April 26, 2016.

57 Interview with freelance researcher and professor from University of Sousse, October 18, 2016.
About ICRD

Founded in 1999, the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) is a Washington-based non-profit organization whose mission is to bridge religious considerations with international politics in support of peacemaking. ICRD carries out its mission by practicing faith-based diplomacy and working to:

1. Decrease religion's role as a driver of conflict;
2. Increase the capacity and number of religious peacemakers;
3. Increase the role of religious clergy and laity in peacemaking; and
4. Increase policy-makers' awareness of and receptivity to the potential contributions of religious peacemakers.

While traditional diplomacy often includes religious actors in its deliberations regarding the management of violent conflict, the deeper spiritual convictions that compel people of faith toward understanding, respect, and cooperation in lieu of conflict are too often overlooked as tools for bridging differences between antagonists. ICRD adds measurable impact to the latter by intervening in conflicts where:

- US diplomacy has abandoned or has not yet engaged the area of conflict;
- Official diplomats cannot reach important conflict actors;
- Religious adherents are actively involved in the conflict or are ineffectively engaged in seeking peace; and
- ICRD has access to relationships of trust that can be brought to bear on the problems at hand.

Throughout its eighteen years of work, ICRD has been involved in some of the most intractable conflict spaces on the globe. Among its many accomplishments, ICRD has facilitated community support for the peace agreement ending the civil war in Sudan, pioneered faith-based reconciliation in Kashmir and Syria, trained Yemeni peacemakers in conflict resolution and addressing violent extremism, facilitated curriculum and pedagogy enhancement in the madrasas of Pakistan, helped secure the release of Korean missionaries held hostage by the Taliban, enhanced educational reform in Saudi Arabia, and supported reintegration and reconciliation efforts in Colombia.