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DRIVERS OF EXTREMIST SYMPATHIES

Security, Ideology, and Firearms in Lebanon and Tunisia

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Fire engulfs a municipality building during clashes between anti-government protesters and security forces in the northern port city of Tripoli, Lebanon, 31 January 2021. Source: AFP/Fathi Al-Masri

About the authors

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Overview

Lebanon and Tunisia share a common struggle against extremism, but the social, political, religious, and ideological make-up of each country is quite different. By comparing perceptions of violent extremism in these two countries, this Briefing Paper identifies potential common determinants of extremist sympathies and behaviours. It also examines the relationship between firearms and extremist affinities, a link that has received insufficient attention to date. The Briefing Paper is based on a general population survey conducted in the two countries in September–November 2023, in which 3,339 adults were interviewed about their views on key elements of their lives, violent extremism, and firearms. The survey revealed a clear linkage between firearms and violent extremism, though manifested differently in the two countries. Its findings have implications for other countries struggling with violent extremism and the proliferation of firearms, both in the Middle East and North Africa region and beyond.

Key findings

- A notable proportion of adults interviewed in Lebanon (16%) and Tunisia (20%) exhibited some degree of sympathy for violent extremist organizations.
- Chronic insecurity and the absence of effective state-provided security play a significant role in fostering affinity for violent extremist groups. Other strong predictors of extremist sympathy include adhering to Salafist interpretations of Islam, expressing religious intolerance, or demonstrating a willingness to sacrifice oneself for a 'cause'.
- There is a strong link between the possession of extremist views and the demand for firearms, although this linkage is a complex one and manifests itself differently in Lebanon and Tunisia.
- In Lebanon, where possession of firearms is widespread, respondents with firearms in their household (15% based on self-reporting or 21% based on neighbour assessments) were 28% more likely to sympathize with extremist groups.
- In Tunisia, where personal firearm ownership is rare, those who believed that firearms were essential in their community (13% of respondents) were 57% more likely to sympathize with extremist groups.

Introduction

In 2022, the Small Arms Survey published a Report, in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme, that represented a landmark in research on violent extremism. That Report relied on a series of surveys of public perceptions of the drivers of violent extremism in selected border areas in Chad, Libya, Niger, Nigeria, and Sudan (Florquin et al., 2022). Building upon this research, this Briefing Paper looks at two new countries: Lebanon and Tunisia. It examines the same drivers analysed in the earlier study, while seeking a more nuanced understanding of the link between perceptions of firearms and attitudes towards extremism.

This Briefing Paper draws on a general population survey—a quantitative questionnaire building upon the survey used for the 2022 Report—carried out among the adult resident population in Lebanon and Tunisia.[1] The paper is divided into four main sections. The first, drawing on the scientific literature, introduces the factors or 'drivers' that are often associated with affinity towards violent extremism. The second provides an overview of Lebanese and Tunisian societies, highlighting their respective experiences with violent extremism, potential contemporary drivers of violent extremist affinities, and the presence of firearms in these countries. The third and fourth sections present study findings regarding public attitudes towards, firstly, extremist groups and, secondly, firearms. The conclusion examines some of the linkages between extremism and firearms and identifies some important policy implications in this regard. An annexe offers additional, more detailed information on the study's methodology.

Drivers of affinity for extremism: a primer

The scientific and policy literature around violent extremism, especially when considering preventive strategies, is usually focused on factors that contribute to an individual's or a community's openness to adopting extremist political or religious views and their disposition to potentially resort to violence in pursuit of these views or ideals. Based on existing literature and respondents' affinity towards violent extremism, a list of potential drivers of violent extremism was developed and analysed by the 2022 Report, which this paper builds upon.[2] This Briefing Paper uses statistical methods to examine those drivers in further detail. The paper's scope

of inquiry was extended to establish the nature of the links between perceptions of firearms and propensity to adopt extremist views. More specifically, this paper examines the relationship between firearm ownership and violent extremism from two distinct angles: firearm ownership as a driver for affinity for violent extremism and the impact of affinity for violent extremism on firearm ownership. These linkages have not yet received sufficient attention in the research community and can play a key role in informing and influencing relevant policy choices.

In this Briefing Paper, the term 'affinity for violent extremism' is used to refer not only to active support for violent extremism, or the participation in groups engaged in such activities, but also to susceptibility to violent extremist ideologies or actions (see 'Drivers and indicators' in the methodological annexe). The underlying study for this Briefing Paper was conducted among the general population,[3] which prevents analyses of the backgrounds, motivations, and attitudes of individuals who are currently, or have formerly been, involved in violent extremist activities as active participants or supporters.

An annexe to this Briefing Paper provides the sets of variables used to capture sentiments surrounding each of the drivers discussed below.

The literature retains the following key drivers of affinity for violent extremism:

- **Hardship and deprivation:** Hardship and deprivation can—but do not always—drive violent extremism (Allan et al., 2015, p. 43; Neskovic, 2020, pp. xi–xii). There is some evidence to suggest that violent extremist groups widely recruit among marginalized groups—for example, unemployed young men with frustrated aspirations and little stake in society in certain settings, such as the Sahel and North Africa (Allan et al., 2015, p. 45). The previous Report also found mixed results when trying to link material deprivation with extremist sentiments; the correlation was relatively clear in north-eastern Niger, but less clear-cut in the other locations analysed (Florquin et al., 2022, p. 114).
- **Community attachment:** The level of integration into the social fabric and the ability of communities to engage, employ, and thus retain their population and preserve the local culture is a potent protective factor against violent extremism (UNDP, 2016, p. 24). Low levels of such integration among individuals, or a community's lack of potential to ensure such integration, can put them on a pathway leading to criminality or violent extremism.

  The literature on radicalization, which may lead to violent extremism, and the prevention of violent extremism offers important insights into the role of community attachment. For example, a 2016 report found that the reintegration of former extremists into society can prevent their continued radicalization, which in turn contributes to the prevention of violent extremism (UNDP, 2016, p. 26). This report contends that having those former extremists, as well as groups at risk, feel that they are an integral and contributing part of the community—for example by being involved in important dialogues, having access to employment, and identifying with the society's culture—pushes them away from extremism (pp. 27–28).
- **Lack of adequate state-provided security and justice:** Resentment of the state's failure to provide security and justice may drive individuals and groups towards violent extremism. Specifically, lack of security or rule of law may not only allow violent extremists to operate, but also provide those groups with an opportunity to impose their own order and, as the perceived strongest actor, to attract recruits (Elworthy and Rifkind, 2005, pp. 20–32; USAID, 2011, p. 3). Other studies have also underlined the linkages between weakened state security and the population resorting to various means of self-defence, including the acquisition of firearms (de Bruijne and van Voorthuizen, 2022; Small Arms Survey and PRESCOM, 2021, pp. 25, 49–50).
- **Sentiment of chronic instability and insecurity:** A potential product of the previous driver is that people may sometimes feel their environment is insecure and unstable if the state or government fails to provide security and justice to its citizens. Some argue that, in such circumstances, violent extremism gains traction among the population, but not necessarily in all contexts or among all citizens (Allan et al., 2015, p. 14; Rundell, Lazard, and Badi, 2022, p. 53). People may also feel insecure and experience injustice, and even resort to extremism, if the security sector institutions are oppressive. A 2015 study, for instance, stated that Boko Haram in Nigeria was initially a peaceful group (until 2003) that resorted to violent extremism after suffering harsh government repression (Pantucci and Jesperson, 2015, pp. 2–7). In addition to the above circumstances, a sentiment of insecurity and injustice may also be present among populations experiencing conflict, be it domestic or international, including terrorist or criminal attacks targeting their community. Violent extremist groups may manipulate these situations to increase their recruits and promote their values and ideas (Allan et al., 2015, p. 7; Zoubir, 2017, p. 138).
- **Government inability to provide basic services:** Extremist groups in various contexts often fill a gap left by official authorities struggling to provide basic services, such as education, welfare, and healthcare. Various studies have provided evidence of such cases, indicating that in these contexts popular support for extremism and extremist groups tends to increase (Allan et al., 2015, p. 22; Gelfand et al., 2013, p. 497).
- **Exploitation of ethnic and religious identities:** Violent extremist groups can exploit identity-based conflicts and community grievances, and instrumentalize ethnic or religious cleavages (de Silva, 2017, p. 5; World Bank and UN, 2018, p. 191), particularly in the context of weak or failed state structures (Allan et al., 2015, p. 22). Extremist recruitment often thrives on extreme or exclusive interpretations of the relevant religion (Allan et al., 2015, pp. 21–22, 47). Moderate religious influences and beliefs, on the other hand, may deter individuals from resorting to violence (Bar, 2004, p. 31; Egginton, 2011), or from arming themselves.
- **Absence of political participation:** Political theory suggests that accessible avenues for effective political participation decrease the likelihood of unconventional political behaviour, such as protests or violent action (Julkif, 2022, p. 108). Communities and individuals that cannot engage freely in political discussions, openly discuss their political views, or partake in formalized procedures to shape the future of the community show a greater inclination to support violent extremism.
- **Firearms:** The 2022 Report is one of the few available sources that sheds light on the relationship between attitudes towards and actual ownership of firearms, on the one hand, and affinity for violent extremism, on the other, by examining the former as one of the drivers of violent

extremism, based on affinity towards violent extremism (Florquin et al., 2022, pp. 94–96). The Report found that, in marginalized areas where the state is unable to provide security, non-state armed actors flourish and local populations resort to self-defence. It noted that when such situations collide with an abundant arms supply, as a result of armed conflict and trafficking, small arms proliferation can worsen (Florquin et al., 2022, p. 45). This, in turn, can facilitate the escalation and exacerbation of local conflicts. It may also create fertile ground for violent extremist groups to step in as an alternative source of security, while simultaneously offering them a source of arms through illegal sales, looting, or battlefield capture (Florquin, 2019, p. 3; ICCT, 2021, pp. 1, 16).

This Briefing Paper examines the personal characteristics and dispositions that may increase an individual's likelihood of harbouring affinities for violent extremism, thereby potentially rendering them more susceptible to recruitment or to supporting such groups through other means. It is important to note, however, that the decision to engage in violent extremism is a deeply individual choice that cannot be fully explained by external factors alone. An individual's background, life experiences, and situation do not determine whether they will join a violent extremist movement, but these elements may increase the risk of this—and therefore offer pathways for effective preventive efforts.

Violent extremism and firearms in Lebanon and Tunisia: key parameters

Lebanon and Tunisia suffer from forms of violent extremism that derive from historical, security, religious, and economic factors unique to each country. The findings of this paper align with those in the literature in that at least part of the population in both countries share feelings of marginalization, detachment from state institutions, and broad dissatisfaction (measured through indicators of hardship and deprivation) that have nurtured extremist sympathies. This marginalization was exacerbated by another shared feature—one that has affected both violent extremism and firearms proliferation—which is proximity to areas of conflict. Such proximity also contributes to the population's sense of chronic insecurity and chronic instability. Lebanon's experience with firearm ownership and trafficking, however, differs considerably from that of Tunisia. The following sections examine some of the key contextual parameters—with a focus on marginalization, proximity to conflict, and availability of firearms—and how these play out in Lebanon and Tunisia.

Marginalization

In Lebanon, violent extremism is a serious threat to the country and society, particularly in the context of its own internal sectarian, economic, and political divisions (Lebanon, 2018, pp. 11–12). Throughout much of its history, Lebanon has grappled with political, sectarian, and ideological conflicts, both internal and cross-border (Ajil, 2022, p. 1; Humud, 2019, p. 1). Lebanese sectarian tensions reached their peak between 1975 and 1990, when the country experienced a long and bloody civil war that involved domestic, regional, and international actors (Sune, 2011). The Taif Agreement of 1989 concluded Lebanon's civil war by entrenching a political system that was based on sectarian identity and featured the distribution of the main posts of government, including state security, among the Christian, Sunni, and Shia communities. This arrangement looked promising at first, but had serious negative repercussions, especially with the rise of Hezbollah as a strong political party and a popular resistance movement, and the decline in the influence of the Sunni Muslims after the assassination of their representative, Rafik al-Hariri—head of the Sunni Future Movement Party (Ajil, 2022, pp. 4–5).[4]

After the assassination of al-Hariri in 2005, Sunni Muslims, especially those in poor urban Tripoli in northern Lebanon, became increasingly detached from the Future Movement Party and grew closer to Salafist groups.[5] Those Tripolitanian communities were extremely dissatisfied with the political, social, and economic marginalization caused by the Lebanese political order (Daniel, 2024, pp. 121, 131). Tripoli's Sunnis have suffered from various manifestations of hardship and deprivation—exemplified by political marginalization and exclusion; high rates of poverty; high rates of unemployment; and lack of access to social assistance, proper housing, education, and healthcare. With these grievances in mind, Sunni Muslims also believe that the state is on the side of the Shias and the Christians, and that Sunnis are usually discriminated against by state institutions, particularly the Lebanese Armed Forces (Ajil, 2022, p. 7). This forms the backdrop to the demonization of Sunni Muslims from the north as terrorists and jihad sympathizers on the one hand, and the rise of extremism among those communities on the other (Ajil, 2022, pp. 7–9; Gade, 2017, p. 188; Knudsen, 2020, pp. 206–9).

The genesis of violent extremism in Tunisia is somewhat different. Extremism appeared during former president Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali's ruling of Tunisia,[6] particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet various social, security, and political challenges emerged following the 2011 revolution that overthrew Ben Ali and paved the way for violent forms of extremism inside Tunisia (Lahlou and Fahmi, 2020, p. 8). In 2011, Tunisians protested against government corruption, rising unemployment, social inequalities, and political repression, among other things. Although the post-2011 elected presidents promised change, the transition period was marked by persistent corruption, political instability, and economic deterioration, which exacerbated Tunisians' loss of faith in state institutions, especially within marginalized border populations (Zemni, 2021). These challenges were further exacerbated by the autogolpe ('self-coup') carried out by President Kaïs Saïed in 2021, after which he dismissed the government, suspended the parliament, and endorsed a new constitution (Yerkes and Alhomoud, 2022). President Saïed's actions have caused general disillusionment and intensified the risk of unrest within a nation that has seen little to no progress made in addressing their voiced grievances (ENACT, 2023, p. 5; Munteanu, 2024, p. 2).

In parallel to the general sense of dissatisfaction, marginalization, and detachment from the state, jihadist formations mushroomed in the country, taking advantage of Tunisia's instability and its disappointed revolutionary youth (Petré, 2015, p. 1).[7] These groups have also taken advantage of the long-marginalized border populations.[8] These populations have long relied on informal trade routes connecting them to neighbouring countries, namely Algeria in the west and Libya in the east. Following the 2015 terrorist attacks in Tunisia, perpetrated by young Tunisians,[9] the government increased the securitization of border areas (Meddeb, 2021, p. 1). This had immediate implications for the economic situation of the local communities. Jihadist groups succeeded in appealing to a number of members of these communities by filling in the gap in the government's provision of social services

(Petré, 2015, p. 2). In parallel, post-2011 Tunisia became one of the countries with the highest number of foreign fighters per capita in the world, with an estimated 3,000 to 7,000 Tunisians joining violent extremist groups in Iraq, Libya, or Syria (Trauthig, 2021, p. 22).

Data from the survey confirms that 69% of the Lebanese respondents felt somewhat excluded from decision-making processes that shape their future and 66% of their Tunisian counterparts felt the same.[10] Of these respondents, 54% in Lebanon and 58% in Tunisia said that they did not feel at all involved in local politics. This indicates that a large portion of the population in both countries feel marginalized (Small Arms Survey, 2023).

The data collected in Lebanon provided further insights into the sense of marginalization across sectarian groups. The data confirms that the sense of marginalization is felt among certain Lebanese sectarian communities. Indeed, the Lebanese Sunnis feel the most neglected and marginalized, especially in their local communities, though other groups also have significant grievances in this regard. For example, Shia Lebanese were more likely than Sunni Lebanese to feel discriminated against based on their religious affiliation. Interestingly, the Sunnis feel they suffer most from discrimination based on any grounds (see Figure 1).

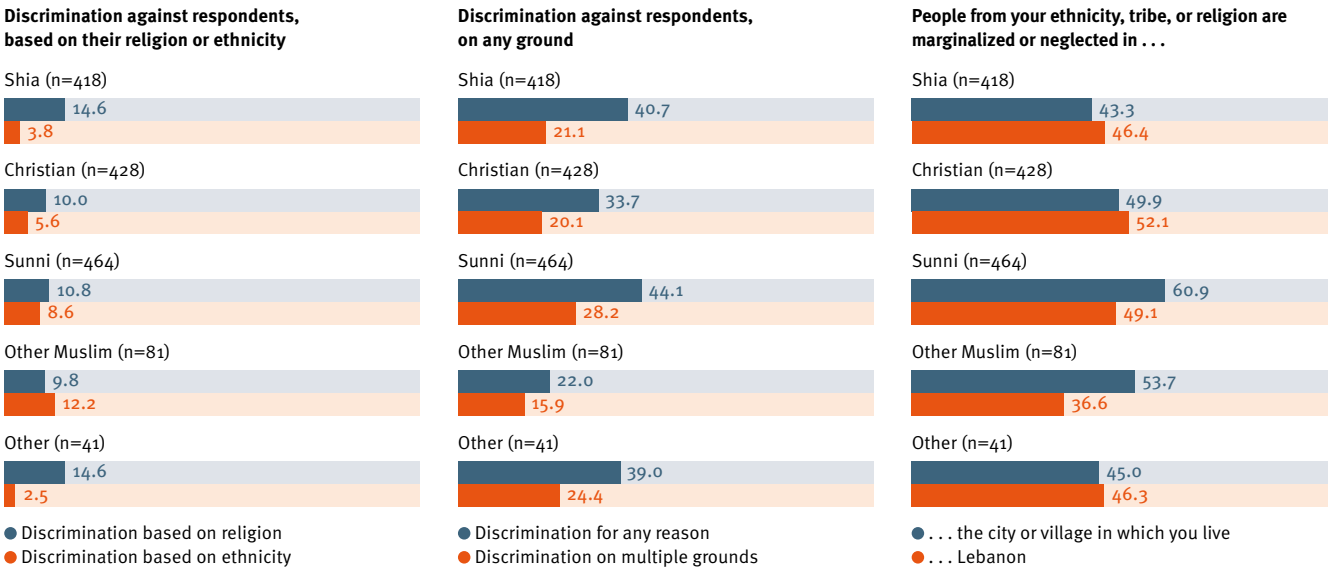
Proximity to conflicts

Neighbouring conflicts have played an important role in both Lebanon and Tunisia in various ways, mostly by exacerbating internal tensions and the sense of insecurity among the population, and by contributing to illicit flows of arms. In the Lebanese case, the Syrian civil war has not only resulted in a large influx of refugees, but also deepened the divide between Sunnis and Hezbollah sympathizers (Ajil, 2022, p. 8). Hezbollah has historically been an ally of the Syrian regime, which is evident in the various forms of support it provided to the regime during the war in Syria, while Lebanese Sunnis were against the Syrian regime. This polarization quickly escalated, and Sunni extremism in Tripoli, Lebanon's second largest city and a hotbed of extremist support, rose—in part as a spillover of the Syrian civil war (Lefèvre, 2014, pp. 3–4). In light of the growing domination and perceived impunity of Hezbollah, extremist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) gained support in northern Lebanon, and many Tripolitanians joined them to fight the Syrian regime, and, indirectly, Hezbollah (Ajil, 2022, p. 5). In addition, one of the by-products of the neighbouring Palestinian–Israeli conflict is the presence of various Palestinian refugee camps inside Lebanon, which are populated by Palestinian Sunnis. Lebanon's 12 Palestinian refugee camps also remain largely neglected and outside of state control, and suffer from the absence of any social or economic support (USDoS, 2022a). Some of the residents of these rather marginalized camps may become susceptible to extremist recruitment and infiltration (Andersen, 2016, p. 34).[11]

The Syrian civil war contributed to the expansion of arms smuggling activities with neighbouring Lebanon. Specifically, and unlike Tunisia, certain illicit arms transfers are destined for specific Lebanese factions; Hezbollah received military support from Iran, with the latter supplying, among other things, small arms and light weapons, as well as advanced weapons and missiles, contributing to the expansion and diversification of Hezbollah's arsenal.[12] Those transfers were largely smuggled across the Syrian borders or through seaports and airports (GI-TOC, 2023a, p. 3). Furthermore, the Syrian civil war contributed to the advancement of techniques for smuggling Iranian arms to Lebanon, as the conflict resulted in Iranian presence on Syrian territory, which provided a land bridge that enabled arms and weapons to go from Iran, through Iraq and Syria, to reach Hezbollah in Lebanon (Jones et al., 2024, p. 8).[13]

Similar to Lebanon, regional conflicts have contributed to various relevant dynamics in Tunisia. First, jihadist groups in Tunisia encouraged their followers to fight abroad, including in other countries in the region, such as Libya and Syria. Between the ousting of the Ben Ali regime, in 2011, and 2021, approximately 3,000–7,000 Tunisians left Tunisia to fight in Iraq, Libya, and Syria with many fighting in the name of the group known as IS (Trauthig, 2021, p. 22). Although the intensity of terrorist attacks has generally waned after 2015[14]—with no similar attacks reported in 2022, and only one reported in 2023 (Al Jazeera, 2023; USDoS, 2022b)—the threat of violent extremism in Tunisia still persists, especially given the sustained instability in neighbouring countries and the increasing number of foreign fighters returning to Tunisia (Fruganti, 2022).[15] Second,

Figure 1 Experience of discrimination and marginalization, by religious affiliation, Lebanon (%)



Source: Small Arms Survey (2023)

Libya was not only a destination of particular prominence to foreign fighters from Tunisia, but also a source of arms trafficked across the borders of Tunisia (Kartas, 2013, pp. 22–25). The Tunisian authorities, for example, informed the UN Panel of Experts on Libya that most military materiel used in terrorist attacks within Tunisia came from Libya (UNSC, 2015, p. 48).

The survey data provides some relevant insights, demonstrating, for example, the potential for neighbouring conflicts to trigger firearms trafficking. While many Lebanese survey respondents said they did not know where firearms are coming from to their area, they most frequently identified Syria as their point of origin, followed by Turkey,[16] Russia, Iran, and the United States (see Figure 2).[17]

Tunisian survey respondents overwhelmingly dismissed the possibility that firearms would be smuggled to their community (61% said there is no such flow of firearms to their community); however, the few who were aware of firearms trade or trafficking also named Libya as the primary source of firearms. Besides Algeria, they also named the United States, Russia, and Turkey as additional source countries (see Figure 3).

Figure 2 Source country of firearms, Lebanon

From which countries are firearms coming to this area? (all respondents, %)

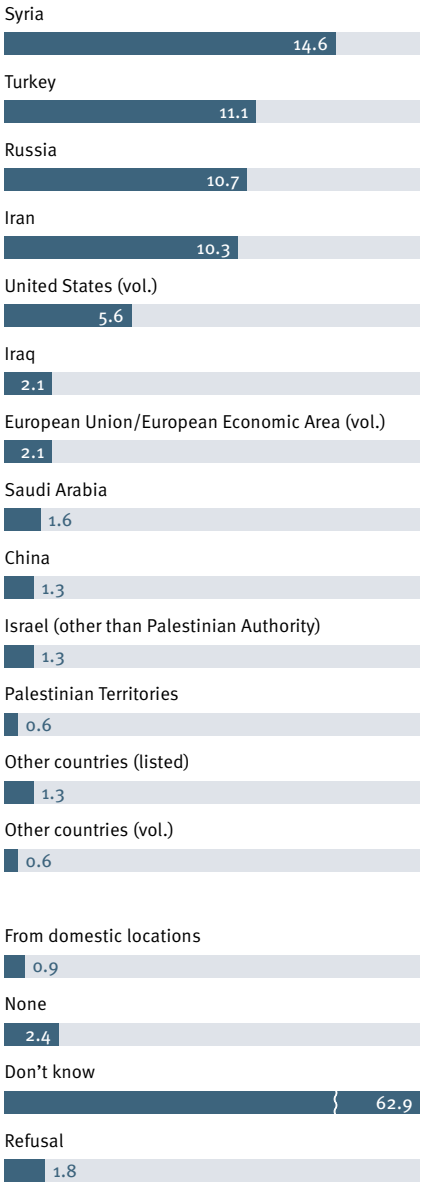


Figure 3 Source country of firearms, Tunisia

From which countries are firearms coming to this area? (all respondents, %)

Note: '(Vol.)' stands for voluntary responses, not offered by the questionnaire.

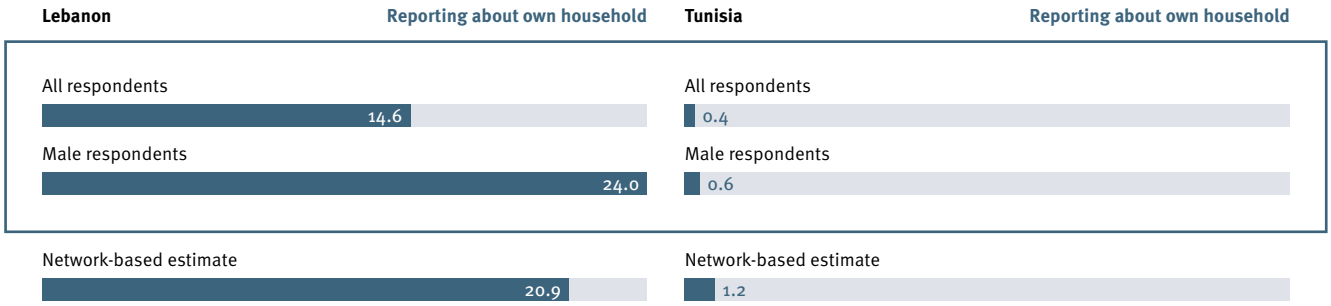
Source: Small Arms Survey (2023)

Varying role of firearms

While civilian possession of firearms is a feature of Lebanese life, the opposite is true in Tunisia, where almost no privately owned firearms can be found. The Lebanese law bans civilians from carrying or owning firearms and weapons of any size, and all types of associated ammunition (Lebanon, 1959, art. 25).[18] Nevertheless, in 2018, Lebanon was ranked ninth among the 25 top-ranked countries and territories with the highest estimated rates of civilian firearms holdings,[19] and second (after Yemen) in the Middle East for gun ownership per capita (Karp, 2018, p. 4). In the past five years or so, proliferation of small arms has further expanded in Lebanon due to rising demand among the civilian population, in the context of internal insecurity and economic instability (Yassine and Baaklini, 2024). Lebanon is in the midst of an ongoing economic collapse, and suffers from high theft rates, as well as the continuing failure of the state to prevent crime or political violence. Lebanese citizens today tend to turn to 'self-defence' to protect themselves and their families by purchasing arms on the black market, resulting in a rise in unlicensed arms purchases among the civilian population;[20] some households own not only basic pistols, but also RPG-7s, grenades, drones, machine guns, and Kalashnikov rifles (GI-TOC, 2023a, p. 3). In the aftermath of the port explosion in Beirut in August 2020, the demand for weapons surged, particularly with respect to semi-automatic firearms of Russian or US origin (GI-TOC, 2023a, p. 3). The areas identified as experiencing detachment from the state and its institutions, as well as a rise in violent extremism, are also recognized as the destination of smuggled arms, especially through smuggling networks on the borders between Syria and Lebanon (LBC International, 2023).[21] Those borders have a long history of smuggling all sorts of commodities, including arms (Haddad, 2011, pp. 95–99, 135).

The Tunisian authorities have generally been able to control the country's territory, through strengthened security measures (GI-TOC, 2023b, p. 5). Civilian ownership of firearms in Tunisia is almost non-existent. Tunisian law does not guarantee a right to private gun ownership, and civilian possession is regulated through licensing systems and background checks. Applicants also need to demonstrate a 'genuine reason' for holding a firearm (Strazzari and Zampagni, 2018, p. 437). While the rate of civilian ownership of firearms in Tunisia is low,

Figure 4 Civilian firearm possession rate (% of households)



Source: Small Arms Survey (2023)

the country has a long-standing history of informal cross-border trade, which the government tolerated to maintain social peace within peripheral regions that generally suffer from poverty and high unemployment, and as a way to boost the formal economy (ICG, 2013, pp. 2, 8; Kartas, 2013, p. 17; Meddeb, 2021). The government maintained informal, unwritten rules with the cartels involved in the informal trade, however, which clearly forbade trafficking in drugs and arms (Gallien, 2024; Kartas, 2013, p. 17). This does not mean that trafficking in these commodities did not exist under Ben Ali's rule; there are also indications that, since the 2010–11 uprisings—and particularly after the fall of the Qaddafi regime—drug and weapons smuggling across Tunisia's borders has intensified (ICG, 2013, pp. 14–16; Marsh, 2017, p. 84).[22] Due to the weakened security as a result of the uprising, Tunisia began to witness an increase in small-scale arms smuggling across its borders with Libya, and larger arms smuggling operations from Algeria (Kartas, 2013, p. 10).[23]

In addition to being a recipient of smuggled arms, Tunisia has also been a transit country for arms and ammunition smuggled from Libya to other countries (GICHD and UNODA, 2023). For example, items looted from the Libyan military stocks in 2011 have been transported through the Tunisian desert to Mali through Algeria (Marsh, 2017, p. 82; UNSC, 2013, p. 27). Likewise, in 2020, the Tunisian Ministry of Interior announced the seizure of Turkish assault rifles en route to Libya that were being smuggled through Tunisia (Saidani, 2020).

The current survey confirms that there is widespread civilian firearm possession in Lebanon, indicating that about one in four to one in five[24] households possess a firearm, depending on the method of inquiry. Remarkably, the reporting of household possession of firearms in Lebanon is even higher among male respondents, at 24%. This is in sharp contrast with Tunisia, where civilian firearm possession is extremely rare, accounting for about 1% of households (see Figure 4).

Unsurprisingly, and in contrast to Tunisia, the general availability of arms in Lebanon means that civilians have easy access to firearms. This is confirmed by the current survey, with 44% of survey respondents (59% of men) in Lebanon indicating that acquiring a firearm is 'fairly' or 'rather' easy for a civilian, whereas only 27% stated that this was 'very difficult' or even 'impossible'. The current survey indicates, however, that access to firearms varies depending on the respondents' sectarian background. Shia respondents were slightly more likely than Sunnis in Lebanon to confirm that access to firearms is 'easy' (39% and 35%, respectively). Yet Christians were significantly more likely to believe that it was easy to acquire a firearm in Lebanon (62%); this was also reflected in the rates of firearm possession, with Christians being the most armed (at least with privately owned firearms) of the three largest sectarian communities in Lebanon.[25]

Box 1 Opportunities in challenges

During an early phase of fieldwork for this Briefing Paper, in September 2023, clashes broke out in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. Later that year, around halfway through the fieldwork, various Palestinian militant groups carried out the 7 October attacks in Israel, and data collection continued throughout the initial five weeks of Israel's subsequent wide-scale military operations in the Gaza Strip. Over the course of those five weeks,[26] Israel began its operation by launching a heavy aerial bombing campaign on 13 October, followed by an extensive ground operation on 27 October. Those developments—and the associated massive destruction, displacement of citizens, and casualties among the civilians in the Gaza Strip—were widely covered by Arab media outlets. As noted in the methodological annexe, those developments posed logistical challenges, particularly in Southern Lebanon. The attacks and their aftermath also, however, provided an opportunity to observe how such a major event—historically known for triggering pan-Arab solidarity and potentially driving individuals to join extremist causes—might impact public attitudes in real time.

Somewhat surprisingly, when comparing the data collected before and after 7 October,[27] there was very little change in most of the attitudes tracked by the survey, including sympathies to extremist values and groups. In Lebanon, the level of extremist affinity[28] remained virtually the same (15.6% before the attacks compared to 16% after), while in Tunisia it even declined (from 23% to 17%).[29] At the same time, discontent towards Israel and Jews in general surged sharply, particularly in Tunisia. The proportion of Tunisian respondents who were 'extremely disgruntled' against Israel jumped from 63% before the attacks to 79% after the first week of October 2023. Lebanon, however, saw only a modest increase in this extreme level of discontent, rising from 76% to 80%, as antipathy towards Israel was already high before the attacks. Similarly, dissatisfaction with Western powers rose notably, with the percentage of 'extremely disgruntled' respondents in Lebanon increasing from 46% to 59%, and in Tunisia from 39% to 59%. Trust in international institutions, such as the UN and the International Committee of the Red Cross, also waned, with disgruntlement with these organizations in Lebanon increasing from 28% to 34%, and in Tunisia from 15% to 25%.

While these events clearly influenced how people in both countries viewed certain global and regional actors, most other indicators measured by the survey showed little to no change.[30] One notable shift, however, was an increased affinity for firearms in Lebanon, where the proportion of respondents who either already owned or desired a firearm rose from 15% to 21% following the attacks.

Affinity for extremism in Lebanon and Tunisia

This section focuses on perceptions of extremist activities and groups in Lebanon and Tunisia based on the survey data, beginning with an examination of levels of sympathy towards extremism in both societies, and going on to explore the specific drivers of affinity for extremism in the two countries.

Affinity for extremism in Lebanese and Tunisian societies

Levels of affinity for extremism are similar in Lebanon and Tunisia: 16% of respondents in Lebanon and 20% in Tunisia expressed some form of sympathy towards violent extremist groups (see Table 1).[31] Socio-economic factors do not reveal strong differences between those who sympathize with such groups and those who do not. In Lebanon, people with violent extremist affinities are more often men, and tend to be more educated and to work full time. They are thus more affluent and, correspondingly, somewhat older than those who do not have extremist affinities. The picture is somewhat different in Tunisia where gender differences are much less pronounced, and extremist groups garner somewhat more sympathy among youth and job seekers. The differences in most cases are relatively modest, however, suggesting that other factors are in play.

Key drivers of affinity for violent extremist causes or groups

This section analyses the key drivers of affinity for violent extremism, with a specific focus on Lebanon and Tunisia, highlighting their similarities and differences (see Figure 5 and 6).

Binary logistic regression analysis, where the dependent variable was an affinity for extremist groups, revealed similarities, as well as differences, between the key drivers in Lebanon and Tunisia. Figures 5 and 6[32] present the final models that—after eliminating the factors that did not significantly influence the dependent variable—comprise the key positive and negative drivers of extremist affinity.[33]

There are clear similarities between Lebanon and Tunisia in the key drivers of affinity for extremism, at least in broad terms. Factors related to chronic insecurity and the absence of effective state-provided security play a significant role in both countries. In Lebanon, respondents who expressed strong dissatisfaction with the performance of security forces, and those who felt insecure, exhibited a greater-than-average propensity to express sympathy towards extremist

Table 1 Socio-economic profile of those with affinity for extremism, and those without*

Attribute	Type	Lebanon		Tunisia	
		Affinity to extremism (15.8%)	No	Affinity to extremism (19.7%)	No
Sex of respondent	Male	55	44	51	48
	Female	46	56	50	52
Age group	15–24	16	20	20	15
	25–39	29	32	30	32
	40–59	34	29	29	31
	60+	22	18	20	19
Time spent in full-time education	0–7 years	22	21	43	40
	8–12 year	36	39	25	29
	13–16 years	23	26	28	26
	17+ years	18	13	4	5
Economic activity status	Working full time	36	26	27	30
	Working part time	15	19	13	14
	Not working but looking for work	7	8	6	9
	Retired	7	4	6	9
	Not working and not seeking work	4	6	6	5
	Student	3	5	14	6
	Homemaker	28	32	28	27
Relative economic status compared to 'most families in the community'	Worse off	19	19	9	10
	About the same	58	63	68	66
	Better off	21	17	22	22

Note: * 'Affinity' here is defined as either (a) completely agreeing with a positive characterization or (b) completely disagreeing with a negative characterization of certain well-known violent extremist groups.

Source: Small Arms Survey (2023)

Figure 5 Key drivers of affinity for extremism, Lebanon

Likelihood of 'having at least one extremely positive view of violent extremist groups' in various population groups

Model summary of logistic regression analysis, odds ratios

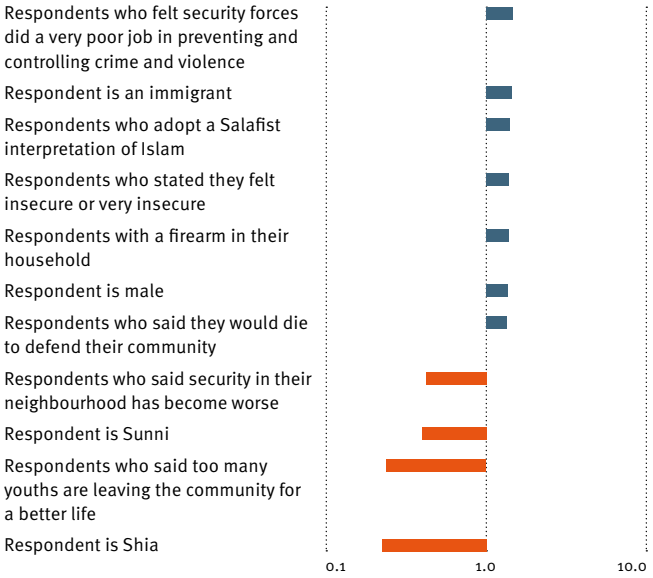
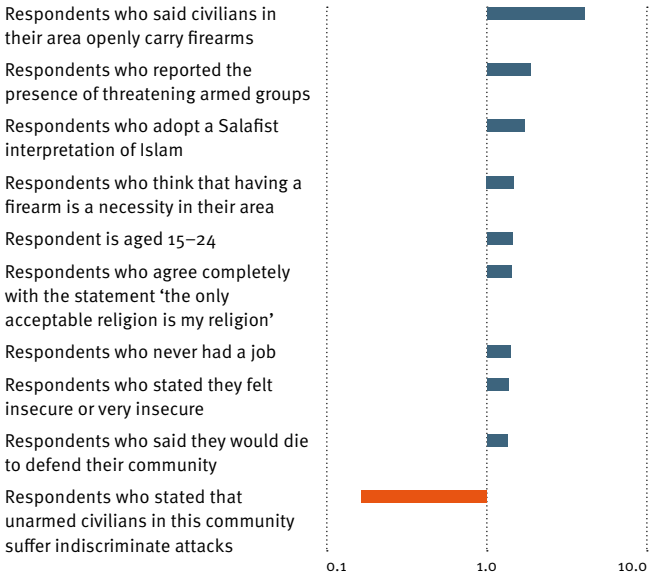


Figure 6 Key drivers of affinity for extremism, Tunisia

Likelihood of 'having at least one extremely positive view of violent extremist groups' in various population groups

Model summary of logistic regression analysis, odds ratios



Note: Odds ratios[34] are derived from a logistic regression model, where values above 1 indicate a higher likelihood of the outcome occurring, while values below 1 suggest a lower likelihood. Orange markers indicate negative drivers.

Source: Small Arms Survey (2023)

groups. Similarly, in Tunisia, feelings of personal insecurity emerged as a significant driver of affinity for extremism, alongside the presence of armed groups and residing in environments where civilians openly carried firearms. While the latter population groups are relatively small in Tunisia (3% and 2%, respectively),[35] the likelihood of those within these groups developing extremist sympathies is considerably elevated.

The ideological and religious motivations behind extremist affinities are also visible in both Lebanon and Tunisia. Individuals who adhere to Salafist interpretations of Islam[36] were significantly more likely to sympathize with violent extremist groups compared to others—a finding made even more striking by the fact that non-Salafist Sunnis (and Shias in Lebanon) were much less likely to exhibit such sympathies. In Tunisia, the belief in the exclusivity of one's religion—specifically, the strong conviction that their religion is the only acceptable one—also emerged as a key driver of extremist affinity.

Another notable factor is the professed willingness to sacrifice one's life for one's community, with 34% of respondents in Lebanon and 43% in Tunisia indicating their readiness to die defending their community. An expressed openness to self-sacrifice stands out as a significant determinant of individual affinity for violent extremist groups in both countries.

There are also notable differences between the two countries in the drivers of affinity for extremism, specifically in relation to immigration status, firearm ownership, economic status, gender, and age. In Lebanon, immigrant status (17% of survey respondents were immigrants) and firearm possession at home (15% of the sample) significantly increased the likelihood of extremist affinity. These factors were not influential in Tunisia, where the immigrant population was minimal (1% of the sample), and the reported rate of firearm possession even lower (less than 1%). In contrast, certain manifestations of economic hardship in Tunisia emerged as significant drivers of extremist affinity, with individuals who had never held a job being more likely to express sympathy towards extremist groups.

Barriers to political participation did not statistically contribute to extremist affinity, contrary to expectations.[37] In both Lebanon and Tunisia, political disenfranchisement[38]—whether active (such as a lack of ID preventing voting) or passive (such as not voting or discussing politics)—was not a significant factor in expressing sympathy towards violent extremist groups. While some of these factors were associated with slight increases in the likelihood of extremist affinity, this was not statistically significant.[39] In Lebanon, no form of hardship and deprivation asked about in the survey proved to be a significant predictor of extremist affinity.

Certain security-related factors appear to decrease extremist sympathies. In Tunisia, individuals who had experienced terrorism (defined as 'indiscriminate attacks against innocent civilians') in their communities (4% of respondents) demonstrated a significantly lower propensity to develop extremist sympathies. Similarly, Lebanese respondents who reported deteriorating security in their neighbourhoods (33% of respondents) were also far less likely to sympathize with extremist groups compared to others. Those who reported that youth were leaving their communities also exhibited much lower levels of extremist affinity than others. These attitudes may stem from the perception that extremist groups are, at least in part, responsible for these adverse changes.

Affinity for firearms in Lebanon and Tunisia

Firearms proliferation and civilian firearm possession rates differ significantly in the two countries. The survey data confirms that Lebanon is one of the most firearm-saturated countries in the world.[40] In Tunisia, however, civilian firearm possession is almost non-existent, with no more than 1% of households owning a firearm (see Figure 4). Despite this difference, the survey asked respondents in both countries whether they wanted

a firearm. Respondents could indicate whether they already owned a firearm, would like to own one, or had no desire to own one. When combining the first two categories—those who already own a firearm and those who would like to own one—the sharp difference between the two countries largely collapses: 18% of respondents in Lebanon and 14% in Tunisia expressed a preference for personal firearm ownership. This measure forms the dependent variable in the analysis below, referred to as 'firearm affinity'. The following analysis reviews the key drivers in both countries that appear to underpin the development of such an affinity.

Affinity for firearms: socio-economic factors

As mentioned, 18% of the general population in Lebanon and 14% in Tunisia were found to have an affinity for firearms. In both countries, firearms tend to attract men far more than women (see Table 2). While no strong age patterns were observed in Lebanon, in Tunisia those with a greater affinity for firearms were notably younger than the rest of the population. In both countries, the fact that more affluent, economically active individuals with higher levels of education were more likely to express an affinity for firearms underscores the status differences between men and women, and reinforces the highly gendered nature of firearm ownership aspirations. Financial wealth serves as a predictor of firearm possession in countries where civilian ownership is more widespread, simply because firearms are expensive and not everyone can afford to purchase one.

Affinity for firearms: key drivers

The survey data reaffirms that firearms tend to be more appealing to individuals who report having inadequate state-provided security or living in chronic instability, where the safety of one's family and property is not reliably guaranteed.

In Lebanon, a wide range of attributes associated with these dimensions emerged as key determinants of firearm affinity (see Figure 7). For example, those with experience of local security being provided by militias are more likely to desire firearms. While the percentage of respondents in this group is very small—approximately 1%—they are almost six times more likely than others to want, or to possess, a firearm. In addition, experiencing armed group attacks, perceiving the police as ineffective in preventing crime, feeling insecure in one's neighbourhood, witnessing indiscriminate attacks against civilians in the community, and observing civilians openly carrying firearms all contributed positively to firearm affinity.

Additionally, in Lebanon, an interest in active political resistance also appears to be a driver of firearm affinity. Those

Table 2 Socio-economic profile of those with an affinity for firearms, and those without*

Attribute	Type	Lebanon		Tunisia	
		Affinity for firearms (17.9%)	No	Affinity for firearms (14.4%)	No
Sex of respondent	Male	70	40	67	46
	Female	30	60	33	54
Age group	15–24	19	19	26	14
	25–39	33	32	30	32
	40–59	34	29	24	32
	60+	14	20	19	20
Time spent in full-time education	0–7 years	15	23	35	42
	8–12 year	32	40	36	27
	13–16 years	31	25	26	26
	17+ years	21	13	4	5
Economic activity status	Working full time	43	24	34	29
	Working part time	16	18	14	13
	Not working but looking for work	11	8	9	8
	Retired	6	4	11	8
	Not working and not seeking work	5	6	5	5
	Student	4	5	8	8
	Homemaker	15	35	18	29
Relative economic status compared to 'most families in the community'	Worse off	16	20	9	10
	About the same	60	63	59	68
	Better off	23	16	31	21

Note: * Persons who said they had a firearm for themselves or would like to have one were considered to have an affinity for firearms.[41]

Source: Small Arms Survey (2023)

who participate in demonstrations or feel that their religion or ethnicity is marginalized within their community are much more likely to want firearms than others. All of these factors significantly contribute to an individual's affinity for firearms in Lebanon, even after controlling for age and gender.

In contrast, in Tunisia, where civilian firearm possession is far rarer and likely less normalized,[42] the drivers of firearm affinity[43] are more ideological and political in nature—sometimes even linked to extremist sympathies (see Figure 8). Beyond insufficient state-provided security[44]—which is a driver of firearm affinity in both countries—individuals who express Salafist views, are aware of at least one violent extremist group via social media, exhibit extremist sympathies, are extremely disgruntled with the government, or express a willingness to die for their community are significantly more likely than others to develop an affinity for firearms. Moreover, individuals who reported experiencing severe environmental challenges[45] were also more likely to desire a firearm.

Interestingly, individuals who show little interest in politics (discussing it less than once a week) are significantly less likely to desire firearms in both countries. This trend is also observed among those who occasionally lack access to clean water for their families in Tunisia. In Lebanon, both Sunni and Shia respondents expressed a lower affinity for firearms compared to others.[46] Additionally, in Tunisia, those who took pride in their community's culture demonstrated a markedly lower affinity for firearms compared to those who held more critical views.[47]

Conclusion

A key question in the study of violent extremism is whether support for it drives demand for firearms or whether the opposite is true: demand for firearms, as well as their availability, increases support for violent extremism. This research finds evidence of both tendencies in Lebanon and Tunisia, confirming a connection between extremist support and access to, and demand for, firearms.[48] While the relationship manifests itself differently in the two countries, the fact that firearms rank among the most significant drivers of affinity for violent extremism suggests that this linkage likely extends beyond these two countries.

In Lebanon, firearm possession is relatively widespread and normalized, even though much of this possession is illicit from a strictly legal perspective. Wealth correlates with firearm ownership: 24% of those who considered themselves better off than others in their community reported having firearms at home, compared to only 9% of those who felt worse off. Access to firearms appears relatively straightforward for those with means and ambition in the country: 44%

Figure 7 Key drivers of affinity for firearms, Lebanon

Likelihood of 'wanting or having a firearm' in various population groups

Model summary of logistic regression analysis, odds ratios

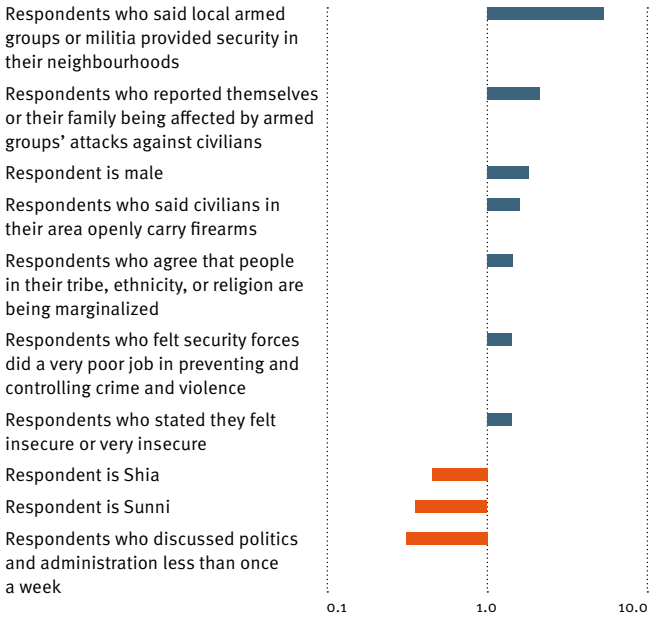
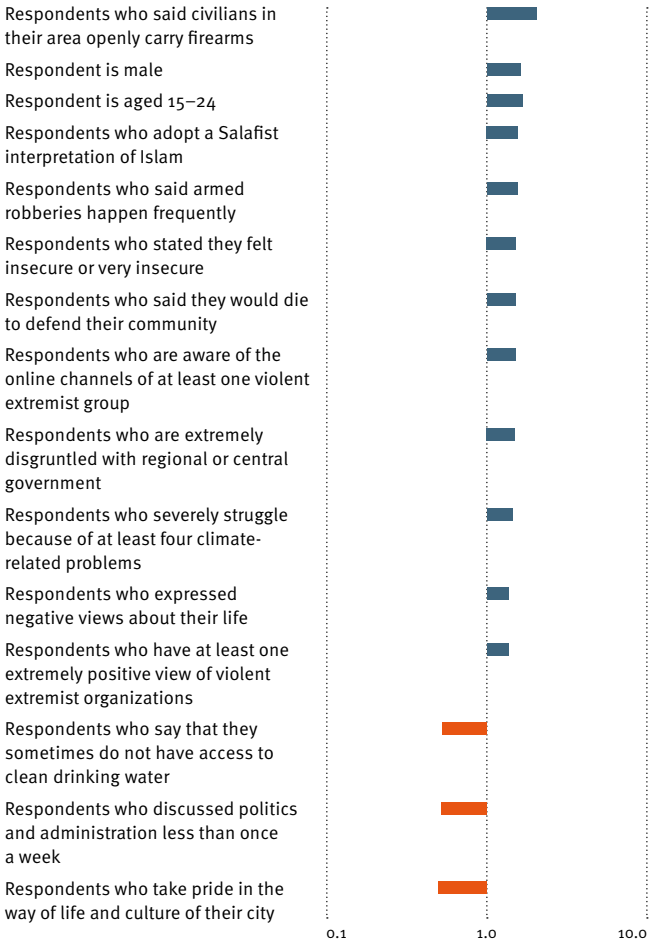


Figure 8 Key drivers of affinity for firearms, Tunisia

Likelihood of 'wanting or having a firearm' in various population groups

Model summary of logistic regression analysis, odds ratios



Note: Odds ratios are derived from a logistic regression model, where values above 1 indicate a higher likelihood of the outcome occurring, while values below 1 suggest a lower likelihood. Orange markers indicate negative drivers.

Source: Small Arms Survey (2023)

of Lebanese respondents believed it was easy for civilians to obtain firearms, while only 3% of Tunisians shared this view. Conversely, 7% of Lebanese and 37% of Tunisians thought it was impossible for civilians to acquire firearms.

The findings of the survey confirm that people in Lebanon do not need a special cause, such as extreme religious or political views, to develop an affinity for firearms.[49] Yet the same factors that drive individuals to possess or desire firearms—such as a lack of state-provided security and chronic instability—also contribute to extremist sympathies in Lebanon; the two issues are therefore not completely separate. In fact, firearm ownership is one of the drivers of extremist affinity in the country: respondents with a firearm in their household were 28% more likely to express sympathy for extremist groups.

In Tunisia, while personal firearm possession does not drive extremist views statistically—linked to the very low prevalence of firearms—the perceived necessity to own a firearm in the area one lives in does. Those who believe that having firearms is essential in their community (13% of surveyed Tunisians) are 57% more likely to have extremist sympathies compared to those who do not share this belief. Thus, although firearm ownership was not a significant driver of extremist sympathies in Tunisia, broader attitudes towards firearms are linked to supporting violent extremist groups in the country.

Unlike in Lebanon, the relationship between firearms and extremism in Tunisia is not unidirectional. In Tunisia, extremist affinity makes individuals 43% more likely to desire firearms. Additionally, awareness of violent extremist groups on social media increases the likelihood of firearm affinity by 64%. These findings suggest that, in populations where firearms are not widely available, the spread of extremist-leaning attitudes may drive increased demand for firearms. Whether such demand can be met is another matter. For the moment, in Tunisia access to firearms is relatively restricted—most likely due to the authorities' tight control of the country, which has prevented proliferation.

For governments seeking to prevent the spread of violent extremism, better management of firearms is crucial. Controlling their proliferation and preventing their misuse by civilians and non-state actors would help reduce sympathies towards extremist groups. In Lebanon, the government must first enhance its capacity to protect civilians from domestic and foreign threats and increase their sense of security, and then manage and control arms in the hands of civilians and non-state actors. By doing so, it can help to prevent the public from developing extremist sympathies, particularly in response to security concerns.

Civilian possession of firearms creates a self-perpetuating cycle. Lebanese living in firearm-saturated environments are more likely to seek out firearms themselves. In Tunisia, individuals attempting to acquire firearms are likely to have a higher-than-average likelihood of holding extremist sympathies. In the Lebanese context, targeted policies, such as improved policing, as well as better firearm registration and tracking, could help mitigate this risk. In Tunisia, besides attending to the safety and security needs of citizens—that is, ensuring increased physical safety and security in communities in which this is not sufficiently present—addressing the ideological drivers of affinity for violent extremism would also contribute to reducing civilian demand for firearms. Conversely, the development of policies that aim to address extremist sympathies in Tunisia should also consider affinities to firearms in the country.

To build peaceful societies and move away from destructive ideologies and firearm violence, governments need to provide their citizens with safety and security—ensuring they can live without threat to themselves or their property. This in turn fosters national development and prosperity. ●

Annexe: survey methodology

This Briefing Paper relies on a general population survey measuring public perceptions of the push-and-pull factors of violent extremism and linkages with small arms availability and trafficking in Lebanon and Tunisia. The survey was built around a randomized sampling method and quantitative questionnaire. A reputable fieldwork implementation partner operating in the countries selected for the research, ELKA Consulting, was commissioned to organize fieldwork and collect the data during September–November 2023. The selected countries were chosen based on three factors: previous research suggesting that these countries are potentially vulnerable to violent extremism; a relatively small territory; and accessibility to survey subjects.

Overall, the study is built on a multi-stage random sample of 3,339 respondents. Interviews were carried out with 1,601 people aged 15 and older in Lebanon and 1,738 in Tunisia using a largely identical questionnaire, administered during face-to-face interviews at the respondents' homes (see Maps A1 and A2). This questionnaire was built heavily on the regional questionnaire used by the Small Arms Survey and UN Development Programme in an earlier study in North Africa and the Sahel.[50]

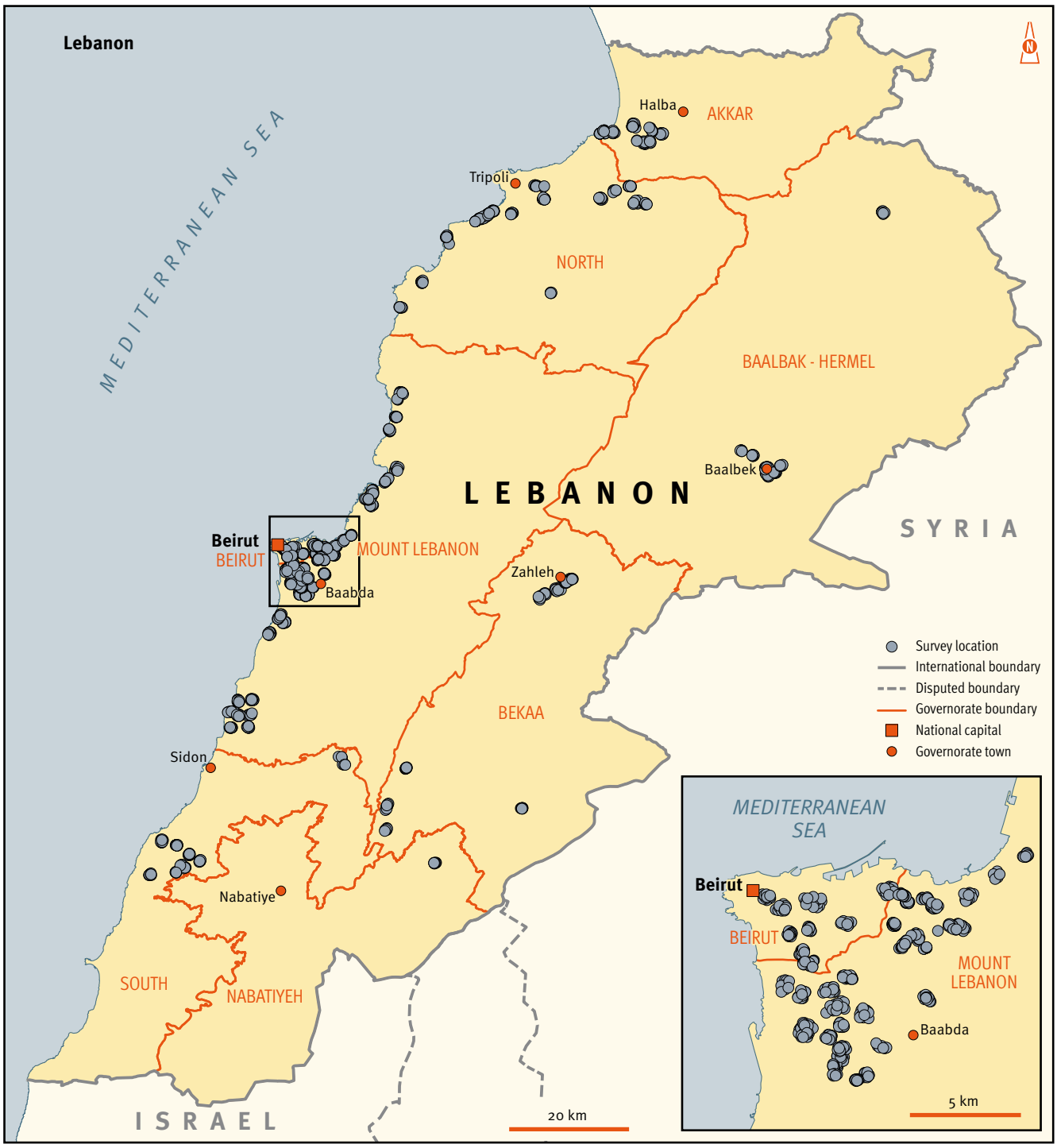
A number of challenges were encountered in the course of the research (see Box 1). Data collection in certain regions of Lebanon and Tunisia had to be aborted before reaching the initial interviewing target. During the data collection in Lebanon, the security situation deteriorated drastically, first inside the Palestinian refugee camps, and later the escalations in the Palestinian–Israeli conflict and the spillover into Lebanon rendered some areas of Lebanon, particularly in the south, unsafe for research.[51] In the case of Tunisia, local researchers collecting data on the ground were summoned by the authorities and requested to stop their activities.

Drivers and indicators: variables used in the analysis

For the logistic regression analyses, binary indicators were generated for each of the dimensions discussed, identifying groups of interest that could, both collectively and independently, help explain why certain individuals may develop an affinity for firearms or sympathize with violent extremist organizations. The causal relationship was determined through establishing respondent groups that have a significantly higher likelihood than others of developing such sentiments. The indicators considered and tested as potential drivers in our modelling are presented in the paper, grouped under the following categories that comprised the conceptual model for this analysis.

Hardship and deprivation: For this Briefing Paper, hardship and deprivation is operationalized in a multi-pronged set of indicators involving material deprivation (starvation, joblessness), psychosocial distress (negative life evaluation, childhood trauma), repression, and environmental struggles. Climate-related problems and struggles create circumstances that may produce a sense of insecurity and instability among the population, exacerbating the already precarious situation of vast population groups. For example, floods may destroy food and food-producing farms, resulting in a sense of insecurity, or droughts

Maps A1 and A2 The survey locations in Lebanon and Tunisia



Source: Small Arms Survey (2023)

may lead to issues with food and water. Such climate-related problems may also damage infrastructure and result in the displacement of millions of people from their homes (IRC, 2023). Repression or intentional marginalization of certain segments of society—a politicized form of hardship—also motivates people to mobilize behind extremist groups (Elworthy and Rifkind, 2005, p. 24). Economic or environmental hardship, on the other hand, could potentially trigger a higher-than-usual affinity for self-reliance in a number of areas, including self-defence (ICG, 2020; Sola and Warner, 2024, p. 2017).

The following individual indicators were used to measure this dimension:

- having one's own ethnicity or religion marginalized;
- having negative views about life;
- having a negative childhood experience;
- never having had a job;
- having gone without enough food for the family, at least 'sometimes'; and
- being exposed to severe climate-related struggles.

Community attachment: The following positive and negative indicators were used to measure this dimension:

- taking pride in the way of life and culture of their city;
- reporting that youth are leaving the community for a better life;
- being willing to die to defend their community; and
- being an immigrant.

Lack of adequate state-provided security and justice: Unfortunately, questions about widespread or systematic political repression are typically not tolerated in regimes with autocratic tendencies—the very places where asking them would have the most value. The indicators therefore focus on the weaknesses of security provision, when the state monopoly on violence is challenged. The following indicators were used to measure this dimension (concerning the local area where the respondent lived):

- security forces are doing a very poor job of preventing crime and violence;
- civilians openly carry firearms;
- armed robberies occur frequently; and
- militias provide security.

Chronic instability and insecurity: Closely related to the dimension of systemic or chronic insecurity, the questionnaire asked several questions about the presence and activity of armed groups in the local area of the respondents. Armed groups included those aligned with violent extremist causes as well as others, such as criminal groups. The rationale of elevating this particular aspect as a distinct dimension lies in the linkages between the presence or threats of armed groups and local recruitment as well as communities arming themselves against such threats contributing to firearms proliferation or at least increased demand. The sense of insecurity is captured in this study by asking the respondents if they:

- feel insecure;
- have experienced worsening security in their area;
- can report the presence of threatening armed groups;
- can report armed groups' attacks; and
- can report indiscriminate attacks in the community that killed or injured innocent civilians (that is, terrorism).

Government inability to provide basic services: To capture this driver, the following indicators were used:

- dissatisfaction with education offered to children;
- disgruntlement with the local or national government; and
- lack of clean drinking water (sometimes or often).

Exploitation of ethnic or religious identities: This driver was examined through the following indicators (religious affiliation was used as an indicator only in Lebanon, as sectarian differences do not exist in Tunisia):[52]

- the respondent fully agrees with the statement 'the only acceptable religion is my religion';
- the respondent adopts a Salafist interpretation of Islam;
- (in Lebanon) the respondent is Christian;
- (in Lebanon) the respondent is Sunni; and
- (in Lebanon) the respondent is Shia.

Absence of political participation: To capture this dimension, the respondents were asked about their forms and history of, as well as their capacity to engage in, political participation, producing the following set of indicators:

- lacking a valid passport or ID (systemic non-participation);[53]
- not voting in the last national elections (voluntary non-participation);
- rarely discussing politics (less than once a week); and
- participating in demonstrations (participation in non-conventional political action).

Affinity for firearms: This paper seeks to understand the dynamics behind affinity for firearms. Affinity for firearms was also, however, of interest when linked to cases of affinity for extremism—whether demand for firearms can be construed as one of the drivers of sympathizing with violent extremist organizations or causes. The association was also investigated from the opposite direction (see 'Affinity for violent extremism' below). The following indicators were used for the purposes of this analysis for assessing affinity for firearms:

- the respondent personally has or wants[54] a firearm (also used as a dependent variable);
- the respondent believes that having firearms in their area is a necessity; and
- the respondent has a firearm in their household.

Affinity for violent extremism: Conversely, the analysis below considers affinity for violent extremist groups as the other key outcome to examine. In cases of affinity for firearms, affinity for extremism and extremist organizations is a dimension of interest if demand for firearms is derived from sympathizing with violent extremist organizations or causes. The following indicators were used for the purposes of this analysis for assessing affinity for violent extremist groups:[55]

- the respondent holds at least one extremely positive view about violent extremist groups (also used as a dependent variable);
- the respondent is aware of the online channels of at least one violent extremist group; and
- the respondent believes that it is better that these violent extremist groups exist.

The model computes the odds ratios, and their significance levels, for each indicator. Odds ratios help explain how different indicators influence the likelihood of an outcome happening. In binary logistic regression, the outcome has two possibilities (for example, someone either has or does not have an affinity for extremism). The odds ratio shows how a

Logistic regression output tables

Table A1 Determinants of firearm affinity, Lebanon

Dependent: 'Want or have a firearm'

Odds ratios from logistical regression analysis

Significance: * p≤0.1; ** p≤0.05; *** p≤0.01

Dimension	Indicator	Prevalence	Odds ratio	Significance
Hardship and deprivation	Own tribe, ethnicity, or religion are being marginalized	48%	1.46	**
	Negative views about life	29%	0.72	*
	Negative childhood experience	14%	1.23	
	Economic status; never had a job	20%	0.95	
	Gone without enough food for the family, sometimes or often	23%	1.10	
	Exposure to severe climate-related struggles	12%	1.00	
Community attachment	Taking pride in the way of life and culture of their city	87%	0.74	
	Youth leaving the community for a better life	97%	0.59	
	Would die to defend community	34%	0.82	
	Respondent is an immigrant	17%	0.82	
Lack of state-provided security	Security forces are doing a very poor job of preventing crime and violence	39%	1.43	**
	Civilians openly carrying firearms	34%	1.89	***
	Frequent armed robberies	4%	1.53	
	Militia provides security	1%	6.40	***
Chronic instability and insecurity	Feeling insecure	66%	1.28	
	Worsening local area security	33%	1.20	
	Reporting the presence of threatening armed groups	14%	1.18	
	Armed groups' attacks	7%	3.26	***
	Indiscriminate attacks in community killing or injuring innocent civilians	15%	1.28	
Government inability to provide basic services	Dissatisfaction with education offered to children	18%	0.79	
	Disgruntled with local or national government	62%	1.23	
	No clean drinking water	28%	0.97	
Religious identity	Fully agree: 'the only acceptable religion is my religion'	46%	1.12	
	Adopt a Salafist interpretation of Islam	21%	1.12	
	Respondent is Christian	30%	0.82	
	Respondent is Sunni	32%	0.47	**
	Respondent is Shia	29%	0.53	**
Political participation	No valid passport or ID	11%	1.03	
	Rarely discussing politics	71%	0.48	***
	Did not participate in demonstrations	4%	1.23	
	Did not vote in last national elections	23%	0.82	
Affinity to extremism	Holding at least one extremely positive view of violent extremist groups	16%	1.23	
	Respondent is aware of the online channels of at least one violent extremist group	22%	1.36	
	It is better that violent extremist groups do exist	2%	0.35	
Control variables	Respondent is male	46%	2.53	***
	Respondent aged 15–24	19%	0.92	

Table A2 Determinants of firearm affinity, Tunisia

Dependent: 'Want or have a firearm'

Odds ratios from logistical regression analysis

Significance: * p≤0.1; ** p≤0.05; *** p≤0.01

Dimension	Indicator	Prevalence	Odds ratio	Significance
Hardship and deprivation	Own tribe, ethnicity, or religion are being marginalized	41%	1.00	
	Negative views about life	22%	1.35	*
	Negative childhood experience	7%	1.55	*
	Economic status; never had a job	21%	1.28	
	Gone without enough food for the family, sometimes or often	18%	0.71	
	Exposure to severe climate-related struggles	13%	1.52	*
Community attachment	Taking pride in the way of life and culture of their city	82%	0.70	*
	Youth leaving the community for a better life	93%	1.59	
	Would die to defend community	43%	1.82	***
	Respondent is an immigrant	1%	1.57	
Lack of state-provided security	Security forces are doing a very poor job of preventing crime and violence	20%	1.22	
	Civilians openly carrying firearms	2%	2.71	**
	Frequent armed robberies	3%	1.69	
	Militia provides security	0%	0.00	
Chronic instability and insecurity	Feeling insecure	18%	1.88	***
	Worsening local area security	16%	0.77	
	Reporting the presence of threatening armed groups	3%	1.39	
	Armed groups' attacks	2%	1.96	
	Indiscriminate attacks in community kill or injure innocent civilians	4%	1.56	
Government inability to provide basic services	Dissatisfaction with education offered to children	10%	1.65	*
	Disgruntled with local or national government	18%	1.85	***
	No clean drinking water	29%	0.71	*
Religious identity	Fully agree: 'the only acceptable religion is my religion'	78%	0.83	
	Adopt a Salafist interpretation of Islam	8%	1.92	***
Political participation	No valid passport or ID	9%	1.03	
	Rarely discussing politics	76%	0.71	**
	Did not participate in demonstrations	4%	0.65	
	Did not vote in last national elections	36%	1.18	
Affinity to extremism	Holding at least one extremely positive view of violent extremist groups	20%	1.43	**
	Respondent is aware of the online channels of at least one violent extremist group	9%	1.64	**
	It is better that violent extremist groups do exist	1%	0.67	
Control variables	Respondent is male	49%	2.19	***
	Respondent aged 15–24	16%	2.10	***

Table A3 Determinants of affinity to violent extremism, Lebanon

Dependent: At least one extremely positive view of violent extremist organizations, such as al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, Daesh/IS/ISIS, or al-Shabaab

Odds ratios from logistical regression analysis

Significance: * p≤0.1; ** p≤0.05; *** p≤0.01

Dimension	Indicator	Prevalence	Odds ratio	Significance
Hardship and deprivation	Own tribe, ethnicity, or religion are being marginalized	48%	0.82	
	Negative views about life	29%	1.15	
	Negative childhood experience	14%	0.79	
	Economic status; never had a job	20%	1.15	
	Gone without enough food for the family, sometimes or often	23%	0.83	
	Exposure to severe climate-related struggles	12%	0.90	
Community attachment	Taking pride in the way of life and culture of their city	87%	1.15	
	Youth leaving the community for a better life	97%	0.42	**
	Would die to defend community	34%	1.27	
	Respondent is an immigrant	17%	1.50	*
Lack of state-provided security	Security forces are doing a very poor job of preventing crime and violence	39%	1.71	***
	Civilians openly carrying firearms	34%	0.92	
	Frequent armed robberies	4%	0.85	
	Militia provides security	1%	0.63	
Chronic instability and insecurity	Feeling insecure	66%	1.49	**
	Worsening local area security	33%	0.58	***
	Reporting the presence of threatening armed groups	14%	1.51	*
	Armed groups' attacks	7%	1.15	
	Indiscriminate attacks in community kill or injure innocent civilians	15%	0.86	
Government inability to provide basic services	Dissatisfaction with education offered to children	18%	0.65	*
	Disgruntled with local or national government	62%	0.86	
	No clean drinking water	28%	0.94	
Religious identity	Fully agree: 'the only acceptable religion is my religion'	46%	1.31	
	Adopt a Salafist interpretation of Islam	21%	1.55	**
	Respondent is Christian	30%	1.34	
	Respondent is Sunni	32%	0.66	
	Respondent is Shia	29%	0.44	***
Political participation	No valid passport or ID	11%	1.46	
	Rarely discussing politics	71%	1.16	
	Did not participate in demonstrations	8%	0.88	
	Did not vote in last national elections	23%	0.99	
Affinity to firearms	Has or wants a firearm (personally)	18%	1.10	
	Having firearms is a necessity	48%	1.05	
	Firearm in their household	15%	1.28	
Control variables	Respondent is male	46%	1.30	
	Respondent aged 15–24	19%	0.74	

Table A4 Determinants of affinity to violent extremism, Tunisia

Dependent: At least one extremely positive view of violent extremist organizations, such as al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, Daesh/IS/ISIS, or al-Shabaab

Odds ratios from logistical regression analysis

Significance: * p≤0.1; ** p≤0.05; *** p≤0.01

Dimension	Indicator	Prevalence	Odds ratio	Significance
Hardship and deprivation	Own tribe, ethnicity, or religion are being marginalized	41%	0.77	*
	Negative views about life	22%	1.07	
	Negative childhood experience	7%	0.98	
	Economic status; never had a job	21%	1.43	**
	Gone without enough food for the family, sometimes or often	18%	1.00	
	Exposure to severe climate-related struggles	13%	1.29	
Community attachment	Taking pride in the way of life and culture of their city	82%	0.97	
	Youth leaving the community for a better life	93%	1.37	
	Would die to defend community	43%	1.27	*
	Respondent is an immigrant	1%	0.00	
Lack of state-provided security	Security forces are doing a very poor job of preventing crime and violence	20%	1.02	
	Civilians openly carrying firearms	2%	5.39	***
	Frequent armed robberies	3%	1.42	
	Militia provides security	0%	0.00	
Chronic instability and insecurity	Feeling insecure	18%	1.26	
	Worsening local area security	16%	1.11	
	Reporting the presence of threatening armed groups	3%	2.34	**
	Armed groups' attacks	2%	1.50	
	Indiscriminate attacks in community kill or injure innocent civilians	4%	0.21	***
Government inability to provide basic services	Dissatisfaction with education offered to children	10%	0.78	
	Disgruntled with local or national government	18%	1.10	
	No clean drinking water	29%	0.92	
Religious identity	Fully agree: 'The only acceptable religion is my religion'	78%	1.55	**
	Adopt a Salafist interpretation of Islam	8%	2.36	***
	Respondent is Sunni	99%	0.58	
	Respondent is Shia	0%	0.00	
Political participation	No valid passport or ID	9%	1.00	
	Rarely discussing politics	76%	1.22	
	Did not participate in demonstrations	4%	1.31	
	Did not vote in last national elections	36%	1.01	
Affinity to firearms	Has or wants a firearm (personally)	14%	1.19	
	Having firearms is a necessity	13%	1.57	**
	Firearm in their household	0.4%	1.32	
Control variables	Respondent is a male	49%	1.06	
	Respondent aged 15–24	16%	1.57	***

specific factor changes the odds of the outcome happening.[56] Significance levels (the 'P>|z|' column in Tables A1 to A4) indicate the likelihood of the result being a statistical error—the lower they are, the more likely that the observation is not due to, for example, sampling error. The final models presented in the figures in the paper only include drivers with a statistically significant effect on the dependent variable.

Abbreviations and acronyms

IS Islamic State

ISIS Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

NSUM Network scale-up method

Notes

1 The survey fieldwork was conducted in both Lebanon and Tunisia between 25 September and 11 November 2023. The number of those interviewed in Lebanon is 1,601, and in Tunisia 1,738. The fieldwork was organized by the Small Arms Survey's partner ELKA Consulting. See additional details in the methodological annexe.

2 See Florquin et al. (2022, pp. 42–26).

3 No special recruitment or identification of former or current violent extremists was included in the research protocol.

4 The Taif Agreement granted Hezbollah access to the political system and allowed it, contrary to all other groups, to keep its weapons. Hezbollah militias also gained significant popularity and respect when they defended Lebanon against Israeli invasion in 1982 and 2006 (Ajil, 2022, p. 5). For more information on Hezbollah's rise in Lebanon, see Ajil (2022) and Rougier (2012).

5 In the 2010s, the Future Movement—under the leadership of Rafik al-Hariri's son, Saad—gradually lost its previous hegemony among Lebanese Sunnis in a number of cities, including Tripoli. This hegemony had been developed by Rafik al-Hariri over at least two decades, mainly through clientelism. Loss of hegemony in those cities was at least in part facilitated by an economic decline, experienced across the country over the same decade. Against this backdrop, the clientelist ties that the Future Movement had developed among Sunni communities in cities such as Tripoli also declined (Gade, 2017, pp. 189–94; Knudsen, 2020, p. 210).

6 For example, an al-Qaeda-affiliated Tunisian group known as the Tunisian Combatant Group was established in 2002 in Afghanistan. See, for instance, UNSC (2011).

7 Following the revolution, successive governments have struggled to meet the high expectations of Tunisian citizens, especially the youth and the marginalized—a challenge that paved the way for violent ideologies to penetrate this frustrated and marginalized segment of the Tunisian population as a way to alleviate their grievances (IRI, 2016, p. 6).

8 For more information on marginalized areas on the borders of Libya and Algeria, namely in the towns of Ben Guerdane and Dehiba in the east and Beja in the west, see International Alert (2016) and IRI (2016).

9 One of these attacks occurred at the National Bardo Museum on 18 March in Tunis, where at least 20 people were killed. In June of the same year, another attack took place on a beach resort near the coastal town of Sousse, killing at least 38 people (Serrano, 2020). Both attacks were perpetrated by young Tunisians (Petré, 2015, p. 1).

10 The numbers presented here include those who do not feel at all involved in the decision-making process (54% and 58% for Lebanon and Tunisia, respectively) and those who feel involved less than others (14% in Lebanon and 9% in Tunisia).

11 This is not to say that the camps are breeding soils of extremism but that the marginalization the camps' residents suffer from may, for instance, be exploited by extremist groups.

12 Hezbollah's arsenal contains between 120,000 and 200,000 rockets and missiles, many of Iranian origin. Iran's contributions to Hezbollah's arsenal are also alleged to include unmanned aerial systems and various small arms and light weapons (Jones et al., 2024, pp. 8–11). See also Schroeder (2024) for information on man-portable air defence systems (MANPADS).

13 Arms smuggling is not a new problem in Lebanon. The Syrian–Lebanese borders have always experienced wide-scale smuggling activities, involving all sorts of commodities, including arms. Various people have been involved in these smuggling networks, including military, intelligence, and other state officials. For more details, see Haddad (2011, pp. 95–99, 135). In addition to the Syrian conflict, the Palestinian–Israeli conflict is another key regional conflict for Lebanon. Within the context of the ongoing war in the Gaza Strip, for instance, there have been serious concerns that the war could encourage more acquisition of firearms and weapons, particularly among military factions (Rida, 2024).

14 From 2016 to 2021, only five attacks were perpetrated in Tunisia, three of which were claimed by IS (Fruganti, 2022).

15 Returning fighters from Syria remain an issue of concern for Tunisia, particularly after the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 (Arab Weekly, 2025).

16 According to a Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC) report, given the rise in demand for firearms, relatively cheap Turkish firearms found their way to the Lebanese black market. In 2023, Turkish arms and weapons were spotted in the black market, again, within northern Lebanon (LBC International, 2023).

17 It is likely that the respondents did not make the distinction between the manufacturing country and countries of transit (often a neighbouring country). It is therefore not possible to determine from these answers whether these firearms were diverted or trafficked from the countries listed.

18 It is important to note that, despite these bans, the law provides for a number of exceptions, and permits the acquisition of a licence.

19 The estimated rates of civilian firearms holdings are based on the number of firearms per 100 residents.

20 The relationship between feeling insecure and firearms proliferation will be examined later in this paper. For a previous examination of this relationship in Lebanon and Syria, see Florquin (2014).

21 Tripoli is among the Lebanese cities that are known as recipients of such illicit shipments of firearms (Roussinos, 2014).

22 The UN Panel of Experts for Libya has documented weapons smuggling to Tunisia for many years. See, for example, UNSC (2013, pp. 25–27, 74; 2023).

23 Cartels along the Algerian–Tunisian borders have historically contributed to maintaining a degree of control over these areas. The volatility of those borders post-2011 is attributed to the collapse of cartels that previously held sway over the area under Ben Ali. By contrast, other cartels, such as those run by the Twazin tribe in Ben Gardanen, near the Libyan borders, have maintained their monopolies, occasionally providing tip-offs that have informed counter-terrorism operations (Armstrong, 2015). See also Gallien and Herbert (2018).

24 This is based on a network-based estimation, using the network scale-up method (NSUM), in which respondents report whether their neighbours have firearms (up to five households).

25 The household firearm possession rate for all respondents, by religious community, was as follows: Christians: 30%; Shia: 10%; and Sunni: 7%.

26 As of January 2025, the wide-scale Israeli operation in the Gaza Strip is still ongoing.

27 Of the questionnaires, 54% in Lebanon and 60% in Tunisia were conducted after 7 October (Lebanon: 744 before and 857 after; Tunisia: 693 before and 1,045 after).

28 See 'Drivers and indicators: variables used in the analysis' in the methodological annexe for an explanation of the method used to measure affinity towards violent extremism.

29 The comparison of the before and after samples should be considered as illustrative only as no effort was made to ensure that the two halves of the sample would be equally representative. The sampling was designed to be representative of the target populations as a whole. The geographical coverage of the before and after samples therefore differs somewhat, depending on the fieldwork organization and progress in different regions of the countries.

30 It is important to note that absence of change in these indicators may be

attributed to the fact that the data collection took place at a relatively early phase of the war and a shift on these indicators may require more time.

31 The survey asked the following question: 'When thinking of, for example, al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, Daesh/IS/Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), or al-Shabaab, to what extent do you think the following applies? Please use a scale where ONE means it does not apply at all and FIVE means it applies completely. Are they . . . ?' Positive characterizations used for this indicator were 'just', 'righteous', and 'advance the cause of Islam'. Negative characterizations used were 'dangerous' or 'evil'. In Lebanon, the question mentioned the al-Nusra Front instead of al-Shabaab.

32 For the full model results, see Tables A3 (Lebanon) and A4 (Tunisia) in the methodological annexe. The tables in the annexe also show the 'prevalence' of each indicator—that is the size of these groups among all respondents.

33 All models included sex and age as control variables to account for potential demographic confounders.

34 Odds ratios measure the likelihood of that outcome based on a particular factor.

35 Group prevalences are indicated in Tables A3 (Lebanon) and A4 (Tunisia) in the methodological annexe.

36 Among the respondents, 21% in Lebanon and 8% in Tunisia adhered to Salafist interpretations of Islam (Small Arms Survey, 2023).

37 For more on expectations that a lack of effective political participation may lead individuals to resort to unconventional behaviours, including violence, to pursue their own interests, see, for example, Julkif (2022).

38 As indicated earlier, large majorities in both countries feel excluded from shaping the political futures of their community, with 54% in Lebanon and 58% in Tunisia indicating that they did not feel involved in local politics.

39 See Tables A3 and A4 in the methodological annexe. Tables A3 and A4 show both the likelihood, through odds ratios, and the significance, which indicates whether the relationship is statistically reliable.

40 The survey confirms widespread civilian firearm possession in Lebanon, even more widespread than the 15% crude household possession rate suggests. Remarkably, male respondents (24%) were considerably more likely to report household possession of firearms in Lebanon than women. (Women are known to be less likely to report household firearms, contributing to latency in firearm possession rates.) Yet another type of inquiry—using NSUM, with respondents reporting whether their neighbours (up to five households) had firearms—indicates that about one-fifth (21%) of Lebanese households possess a firearm.

41 The survey offered the following responses to the question 'Would you like a firearm for yourself?': 'yes, I have one'; 'yes, I would like one'; 'no'; 'I don't know'; or 'refuse to answer'.

42 Security forces are also viewed more favourably in Tunisia compared to Lebanon, with 20% of Tunisian respondents versus 39% of their Lebanese counterparts feeling that security forces perform poorly in preventing crime and violence.

43 In Tunisia, this would generally translate to a mere desire for firearms, given that personal firearm possession remains extremely rare, with only 1% of respondents reporting ownership. It is important to anticipate, however, a certain level of latency in self-reported data, and true rates may therefore be somewhat higher.

44 Examples include frequent robberies occurring in the area and the respondents' feeling of insecurity, and civilians openly carrying firearms.

45 Specifically, these respondents reported experiencing four or more environmental problems leading to severe struggles for themselves or their family. For explanations of the indicators, see the 'Drivers and indicators' section of the methodological annexe, under 'Hardship and deprivation'.

46 Other religions include several Christian sects and Druze.

47 In Tunisia, nearly all tested indicators increased the likelihood of firearm affinity, even if many did not reach statistically significant levels (see Table A2 in the methodological annexe). In Lebanon, however, the picture is more varied; certain significant dimensions, such as the indicators related to community attachment and belonging to any of the three major religions, did not seem to contribute to firearm affinity (see Table A1 in the methodological annexe).

48 For Lebanon, this is access or actual possession, whereas in Tunisia it is desiring access.

49 See Table A1 in the methodological annexe.

50 See Florquin et al. (2022).

51 A detailed methodology and fieldwork report of the data underlying this Briefing Paper are available upon request.

52 In Tunisia, 99% of the survey respondents indicated that they were Sunni.

53 Having a valid ID or passport is usually a requirement for political participation—that is, voting.

54 Due to the vastly different levels of firearm possession rates in Lebanon and Tunisia (see Figure 4 above), this combined effort produced a more coherent approach between the two countries, for the purposes of this analysis.

55 Violent extremist groups refers to violent extremist organizations, such as al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, Daesh/IS/ISIS, or al-Shabaab.

56 For example, if the affinity for extremism odds ratio for a group of respondents is 0.5, the people in this group are half as likely to sympathize with extremist groups compared to others. If the odds ratio is 2, those people are twice as likely to have an affinity for extremism. An odds ratio of 1 would mean that the group is just as likely as everybody else to have such an affinity.

57 In simple terms, * = marginally significant, ** = statistically significant, and *** = highly significant. Any indicator in the tables that does not have stars is not statistically significant, regardless of the likelihood.

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About the **SANA project**

The **Security Assessment in North Africa** is a multi-year project of the Small Arms Survey that supports those engaged in building a more secure environment in North Africa and the Sahel–Sahara region. The project produces timely, evidence-based research and analysis on the availability and circulation of small arms, the dynamics of emerging armed groups, and related insecurity. The research stresses the effects of uprisings and armed conflicts in the region on security-related issues.

Until the end of 2024, the Security Assessment in North Africa received funding from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. It has previously received grants from Global Affairs Canada, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the German Federal Foreign Office, the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the US State Department.

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