

BETWEEN RISK AND RESILIENCE

Youth experiences in Southeast Tunisia, Ben Guerdane and Dehiba

RESEARCH SUMMARY

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This paper summarizes key findings of a European Union and Canadian-funded study undertaken in February 2017 in Ben Guerdane and Dehiba to investigate youth perceptions and behaviors of risk and resilience, focusing on push and pull factors and indicators of involvement in violent extremism, armed criminality, and dangerous migration and the factors and strategies that youth use or access for resilience.



Youth are essential actors in the success of Tunisia's democratic transition and social development; however, they continue to face endemic high unemployment and marginalization. Youth in the border communities of Ben Guerdane and Dehiba experience this phenomenon acutely, given the remoteness from the central state, their reliance on cross-border trade, and the draconian security measures employed in response to threats of violent extremism and the porous Libyan-Tunisian border. Youth in these communities are often perceived as complicit in violent extremism and armed criminality, furthering the stigmatization of citizens and the state's use of security controls, rather than the active engagement and development of these regions.

In order to explore these assumptions, qualitative research undertaken in February 2017 sought to understand the perceptions and behaviors of youth in these contexts with respect to their involvement in risk behaviors, including violent extremism and dangerous migration, as well as the mitigating factors and mechanisms that contribute to youth resilience.

KEY FINDINGS

Risk

- Social, economic, and political **marginalization** is a common key grievance and potential push factor towards risk behaviors
- **Violent extremism** is viewed not as a risk behavior, but as a key threat facing youth and the community in Ben Guerdane. In Dehiba, it is seen as largely irrelevant
- **Armed criminality** is uncommon among youth. While household arms are prevalent and the trade of arms is recognized, their use is restricted to hunting and celebrations
- **Dangerous migration** is a key risk for youth; however, many youth, particularly in Ben Guerdane, understand it as an opportunity, despite being cognizant of the risks
- Parallel trade, consumption of drugs, and reckless driving are common risk indicators, that may arise due to lack of opportunity and boredom

Resilience

- **Strong family and social networks**, religious faith, and engagement in education are key factors contributing to resilience
- Resilience is perceived by many youth as an internal capacity and based on **personality types**
- **Civil society and religious institutions** have the potential to be key actors in promoting resilience

UNDERSTANDING MARGINALIZATION

Marginalization is a daily reality for youth in Ben Guerdane and Dehiba, and it is understood as both a cause and consequence of the lack of opportunity, unemployment, and inability to engage in respectful and sustainable livelihoods. Due to the distance of these border towns from the centers of power, most youth feel abandoned by the Tunisian state. Youth have a strong impression that their region has potential, but years of distance and disadvantage have left it with unfulfilled promises and neglected investments. As one youth in Dehiba noted, “There are projects, like Forsati or Karama. These are projects that don’t really exist. When we go and ask for information, nobody can tell us about them.”

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This sense of being outside the care of the Tunisian state, coupled with a strong reliance of local communities on cross-border trade with Libya, furthers an identification with Libya and in some respects, replaces a feeling of exclusion from Tunisia. As one youth from Ben Guerdane stated, “Ben Guerdane is forgotten; we say that we don’t even exist on a map... We have the impression that we are not a part of this country.” As a result, many youth feel no purpose staying in a state that has given them nothing. When asked where they saw themselves in five years, many youth said “overseas,” referring to migration to Europe either through illegal or legal means. Nonetheless, many youth maintain a paradoxically strong sense of patriotism and pride of representing the Tunisian state at the ‘front lines’ in the battle against terrorism and lawlessness that are viewed as key threats emanating from Libya.

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Youth believe that their marginalization means that most Tunisians are unaware of these nuances – their needs, their potential, their identities – which enables the state to impose their own identification and stigmatize them as deviants in society. Many youth understand that people in greater Tunisia perceive them as potential terrorists, and deem their region dangerous and plagued by armed criminality. In reality, youth in both locations emphasized that armed criminality has limited relevance in their communities. Youth also perceive that ongoing misrepresentations by the media and government help aggravate these stereotypes. For example, one youth declared, “We stopped them [the terrorists], on March 7th, but we continue to be associated with it.” Youth articulated an increasing desire to separate themselves from these portrayals, especially after the Islamic State-claimed attack on Ben Guerdane in March 2016. This event catalyzed an anti-extremist narrative among youth, seeking to rectify the stereotype of youth as coconspirators in violence against the state.

THE THREAT OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

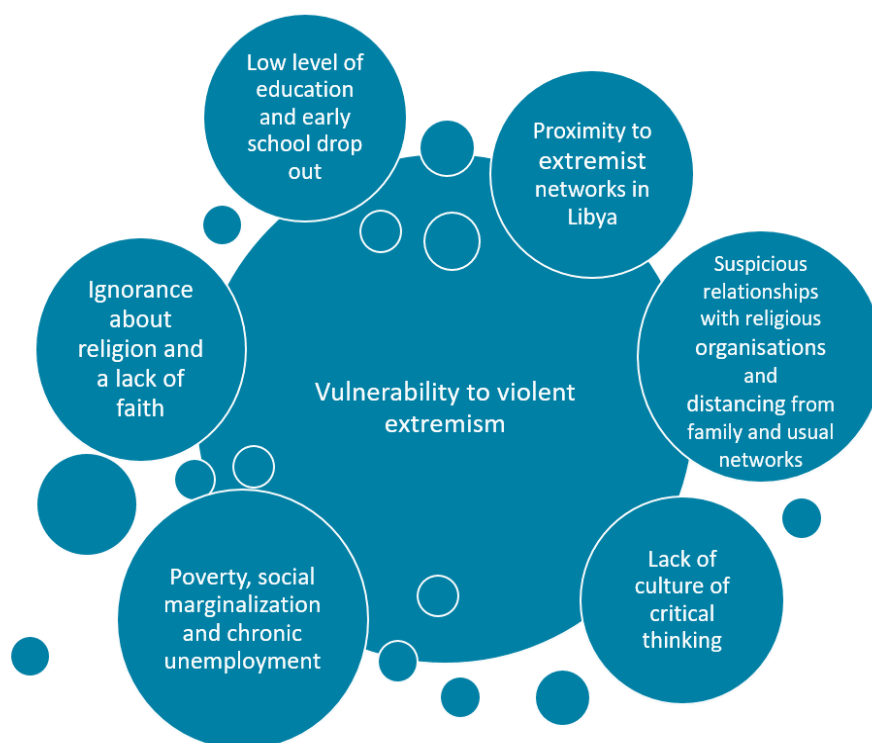


Despite the pressure, problems, and complications, extremism is not here.

While many Tunisians view border towns as hosts of violent extremism, youth in Ben Guerdane understand it not as a force at play within their communities, but as a dangerous external threat, “from overseas,” specifically from Libya. Youth unanimously perceived violent extremism as a negative behavior and analyzed push and pull factors based on their general perceptions of others and stories of the process of radicalization, rather than through their personal experiences. In Dehiba, youth perceived violent extremism as playing little role in their day-to-day lives. As one young woman acknowledged, “Despite the pressure, problems, and complications, extremism is not here.” However, for many youth in Ben Guerdane, the risk of violent extremism is omnipresent and viewed as one of the greatest perils they face.

Youth typically understand violent extremism as intrinsically tied to religious extremism, representing a perversion of Islam developed in certain mosques. They characterize violent extremists as individuals who are typically uneducated, ignorant about religion, and have a weak sense of faith, and are therefore vulnerable to manipulation. Youth consider that these individuals are radicalized through a process of brainwashing, so that they buy into the idea of engaging in foreign Jihad. Despite the negative traits discussed, youth were mindful that no one profile exists, suggesting that the issue is not unique to their communities, or even to Tunisia.

Figure 1: Indicators of vulnerability to violent extremism



THE OPPORTUNITY OF MIGRATION



What life do I have here? What future, to not even take this risk [to illegally migrate]? It is like we are dead. Alive or dead, there is no difference.

The practice of irregular migration is ubiquitous in these communities, and youth spoke about it in terms of very personal sentiments, with experiences, and stories of friends, creating a strong awareness of the practice and the potential outcomes. As one youth stated, “There is the one [friend] who arrived, is working and married, there is another that arrived, but is now in prison, and there is also the one who did not arrive and is dead in the sea. My cousin, he died, he was 20 years old.”

While youth understand the risks associated with irregular migration, many believe that it is not inherently a threat facing youth, but rather, an opportunity. Migration, both legal and illegal, and especially to Europe, is synonymous with success, and viewed as an expression of personal resilience and initiative. Life in Europe represents all the goals that youth are unable to achieve in their own country – employment, security, freedom. It is an escape from family pressure and from societal judgments and stigmas.

Youth acknowledge that an unsuccessful migration attempt could result in detainment, return, or in the worst case, death. However, these risks were not sufficient deterrents for many youth. As one youth stated, “What life do I have here? What future, to not even take this risk [to illegally migrate]? It is like we are dead. Alive or dead, there is no difference.” Furthermore, youth in these communities have easy access to smuggling networks due to the proximity with Libya, the most frequently used point of departure for Europe. Experiences and stories of friends or relatives provide youth with readily available information about the migration process.

Figure 2: Push, pull and contributing factors for involvement in dangerous migration



Push Factors

- Unemployment and lack of opportunities for youth
- Poverty
- Family and social pressures/ expectations
- Social, economic and political marginalisation
- Lack of family support for networks
- Insecurity (environmental and political)
- Boredom and lack of engaging activities



Pull Factors

- Perceived potential for opportunity and financial/ social success
- Witnessing a friend/ relative/ neighbour having found success in Europe
- Idea of freedom (from poverty, social restrictions and traditional expectations) and different ‘European’ lifestyle

COMMON FACTORS TO RISK TAKING

The factors underpinning the involvement of youth in these behaviors are common and interlinked aspects, which are not necessarily correlated with one particular risk or threat. Rather, these factors could contribute to violent extremism, dangerous migration, and associated risk behaviors such as parallel trade, consumption of drugs, and reckless driving.

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youth leave [school] because to them, study gives them nothing, because they know people who have completed university and are still unemployed.

In addition to marginalization, lack of belonging, and unemployment, youth recognize that poor education is a notable push factors. Financial difficulties, which push youth to support their families through involvement in parallel trade, as well as a lack of interest in education and a lack of investment in education facilities, result in a widespread phenomenon of early school dropout. Moreover, a high level of unemployment among university graduates further reinforces this trend, as youth perceive that education does not equate to social or economic mobility. One youth emphasized that “youth leave [school] because to them, study gives them nothing, because they know people who have completed university and are still unemployed.”

Experiences of consistent boredom and pervasive idleness, due to unemployment and a lack of engaging community activities, plague youth and contribute to their propensity to engage in risk behaviors. Leisure activities such as football and coffee drinking for men, and internet and television for women, provide youth with a brief outlet. However, the centrality of these ‘recreational’ activities in the lives of youth demonstrates the extent to which youth lack alternative options that can fulfill their interests, desires, and goals. As one youth stated, ‘here...there is only football.’

Despite the assumption that family and social networks play an unanimously positive role in the lives of youth, some youth, particularly young males who dream of starting their own families, saw this influence as a stressor compelling them towards risk-taking behaviors. The perceived failure of youth to meet their families’ expectations as well as financial reliance on parents, increases their sentiment of helplessness, and in some cases, leads youth to engage in risky parallel trade or dangerous migration.

UNDERSTANDING RESILIENCE

The factors that contribute to resilience are a combination of internal personality traits, social networks and relationships, and external opportunities. Youth identified resilience as certain individual traits, notably, personal pride, positivity, integrity, and faith, which are often innate and contingent on personality types, but which they believe are difficult to learn. Youth also indicated intelligence and level of education as key markers of resilience.



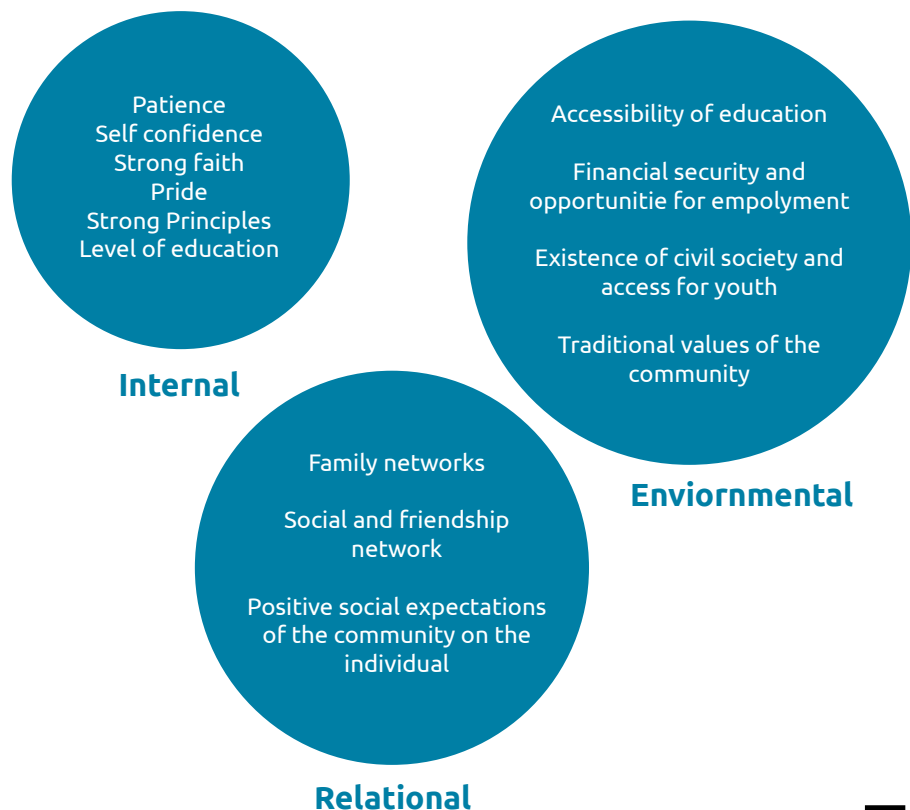
We have learned that despite everything, the marginalization, the poverty and the lack of opportunity, we must keep our heads high.

Family relationships contribute to youth resilience in multiple ways. On the one hand, family pressure and expectations and youth fear of repercussions if those expectations are not met, serve as a barrier to engage in risk activities. In the case of irregular migration, youth may fear reprisals from their families or the shame that a failed migration might cause them and their families. On the other hand, youth benefit from support networks that permit and encourage them to engage in positive behaviors, as one youth stated, “It is them [my parents] who support me, and stop me from falling off the good track.”

Financial security is one of the key external factors in resilience; however, the strategies to gain financial independence are not always practical or safe. Some youth spoke of “finding a pot of money,” or equally, engaging in parallel trade or irregular migration as primary pathways to financial security, and by extension, resilience. Youth view these quick-fix solutions as means to circumvent more mundane ‘risks,’ such as smuggling. However, dignified employment and a fair salary were favored as approaches to reduce dependence on smuggling and provide the security and stability desired by youth.

Youth are cognizant that these factors have the potential to build their resilience, and many youth actively strive to attain them. The fact that most youth in Ben Guerdane and Dehiba refute violent extremism, armed criminality, and other risk behaviors despite the harsh conditions of their communities is itself an expression of resilience. As one youth noted, “We have learned that despite everything, the marginalization, the poverty and the lack of opportunity, we must keep our heads high.”

Figure 3: Factors of resilience (internal, environmental, relational)



PATHWAYS FORWARD

Promoting youth resilience must go beyond common assumptions of youth experiences on the peripheries, and instead seek to account for their own perceptions of the external threats and internal risks they face, as well as the opportunities and potential already within their reach.

Youth envision involvement in activities offered by religious institutions, civil society, and educational establishments as key forums to build their internal capacities and access the resources to enhance their resilience. Civil society can provide youth with a space to be active, engaged, and to use their energy and creativity, as well as resources and social networks to help them understand and mitigate the risks they may face. Religious institutions are central to teaching youth accurate and tolerant interpretations of religion and building their moral foundations.

Promotion of economic development and pathways to alleviate regionalized youth unemployment must stand as a priority, with renewed engagement from the private sector and the state. Meanwhile, outlets from civil society, educational, and religious institutions offer youth an opportunity to construct positive identities regardless of ongoing marginalization and personal shocks. Despite the challenges they face, youth continue to define themselves in positive terms and crave constructive ways to demonstrate their potential to their communities and broader Tunisian society.