

Even as Tunisians have approved a new constitution and the country has one of the Arab world's most educated populations, militants are recruiting more openly there than in any other country.

**The New York Times**<http://nyti.ms/1rbNGHY>

AFRICA | NYT NOW

# New Freedoms in Tunisia Drive Support for ISIS

By DAVID D. KIRKPATRICK OCT. 21, 2014

TUNIS — Nearly four years after the Arab Spring revolt, Tunisia remains its lone success as chaos engulfs much of the region. But that is not its only distinction: Tunisia has sent more foreign fighters than any other country to Iraq and Syria to join the extremist group that calls itself the Islamic State.

And throughout the working-class suburbs of the capital, young men are eager to talk about why.

“Don’t you see it as a source of pride?” challenged Sufian Abbas, 31, a student sitting at a street cafe in the densely packed Ettadhamen district with a half-dozen like-minded friends.

Tunisians have approved a new Constitution by a broad consensus, and a second free election is to take place this month. The country has the advantage of one of the Arab world’s most educated and cosmopolitan populations, numbering just 11 million, and it has some of the most alluring Mediterranean beaches.

But instead of sapping the appeal of militant extremism, the new freedom that came with the Arab Spring revolt has allowed militants to preach and recruit more openly than ever before. At the same time, many young Tunisians say that the new freedoms and elections have done little to improve their daily lives, create jobs or rein in a brutal police force that many here still refer to as “the ruler,” or, among ultraconservative Islamists, “the tyrant.”

Although Tunisia’s steps toward democracy have enabled young people to express their dissident views, impatience and skepticism have evidently

led a disgruntled minority to embrace the Islamic State's radically theocratic alternative. Tunisian officials say that at least 2,400 Tunisians have traveled to Syria and Iraq to join the group — other studies say as many as 3,000 — while thousands more have been blocked in the attempt.

“The Islamic State is a true caliphate, a system that is fair and just, where you don't have to follow somebody's orders because he is rich or powerful,” said Ahmed, a young supporter of the Islamic State who, like others interviewed, did not want to give his family name for fear of the police. “It is action, not theory, and it will topple the whole game.”

While only a minority of Tunisians have expressed support for the militants, it seemed that everyone under 30 knew someone who had traveled to fight in Syria or Iraq, or someone who had died there. In interviews at cafes in and around Ettadhamen, dozens of young unemployed or working-class men expressed support for the extremists or saw the appeal of joining their ranks — convinced that it could offer a higher standard of living, a chance to erase arbitrary borders that have divided the Arab world for a century, or perhaps even the fulfillment of Quranic prophecies that Armageddon will begin with a battle in Syria.

“There are lots of signs that the end will be soon, according to the Quran,” said Aymen, 24, who was relaxing with friends at another cafe.

Bilal, an office worker who was at another cafe, applauded the Islamic State as the divine vehicle that would finally undo the Arab borders drawn by Britain and France at the end of World War I. “The division of the countries is European,” said Bilal, 27. “We want to make the region a proper Islamic state, and Syria is where it will start.”

Mourad, 28, who said he held a master's degree in technology but could find work only in construction, called the Islamic State the only hope for “social justice,” because he said it would absorb the oil-rich Persian Gulf monarchies and redistribute their wealth. “It is the only way to give the people back their true rights, by giving the natural resources back to the people,” he said. “It is an obligation for every Muslim.”

Many insisted that friends who had joined the Islamic State had sent

back reports over the Internet of their homes, salaries and even wives. “They live better than us!” said Walid, 24.

Wissam, 22, said a friend who left four months ago had told him that he was “leading a truly nice, comfortable life” under the Islamic State.

“I said: ‘Are there some pretty girls? Maybe I will go there and settle down,’ ” he recalled.

Leaders of Ennahda, the mainstream Islamist party that leads the Tunisian Parliament, said they had overestimated the power of democracy alone to tame violent extremism. Said Ferjani, an Ennahda leader who has often cited his own evolution from youthful militancy to peaceful politics, said in an interview that he now believed economic development would be just as important. “Without social development, I don’t think the democracy could survive,” he said.

He also acknowledged that in the afterglow of the revolution, Ennahda had put too much hope in winning over young extremists and too little emphasis on security measures to control them. The Ennahda government “did not get the mix right,” Mr. Ferjani said. “But since then, from our end, it is zero tolerance.”

Imen Triki, a lawyer at a nonprofit that has represented more than 70 returning Tunisians, described the thinking of many young ultraconservative Islamists, known as Salafis: “If I am going to get arrested and beaten here anyway, I might as well go where I can have an impact.”

Tunisian officials say that as many as 400 Tunisians have returned from Syria or Iraq and that many have been arrested. Lawyers who represent them say many testify that they were tricked into going.

Ms. Triki estimated that as many as 60 percent of those who come back profess disappointment at the strife between the Islamic State and its former partner, the Nusra Front, the Qaeda-affiliated Syrian rebel group. “They never thought there would a fight between Muslims,” she said. “They find that they have been deceived and sold like mercenaries.”

Charfeddine Hasni, 30, an information technology worker who said he backed the Islamic State, acknowledged that friends had returned dismayed.

“They thought it would be like joining the side of the Prophet Muhammad, but they found it was divided into these small groups with a lot of transgressions they did not expect, like forcing people to fight,” he said, recalling one friend killed by his own fellows in the Nusra Front. “But they are not a real army, so they are hard to control, and these are personal mistakes,” he added.

Unemployed college graduates — a large group in Tunisia, where education is inexpensive but jobs remain scarce — are prime candidates for jihad, their friends and Tunisian analysts say. But there are also accounts of affluent M.B.A. students or peasants going as well. Almost all have now gravitated from other factions to join the Islamic State, according to their friends and the statements of Tunisian officials.

Some families approve. Chiheb Eddine Chaouachi, 24, a medical student, said that both he and his family supported the decision of his brother Bilal, 29, a Salafi theologian, to move with his wife to the Islamic State’s de facto capital of Raqqa, Syria, even though the brothers’ personal lifestyles differed widely.

“Sometimes I pray, and sometimes I don’t,” Chiheb Eddine said. “I am very social.” But, like many Tunisians whose practices sometimes seem to contradict their piety, he nonetheless said he hoped that the Islamic State would “win.”

“Maybe when the war is over, we will all be in an Islamic state, for all practicing Muslims, under Shariah,” he said with a shrug, adding that he had asked his brother directly about the Islamic State’s beheadings and other atrocities. “He said, ‘Don’t believe it,’ and I trust my brother.”

Indeed, in dozens of conversations with young Tunisians, almost no one, whether sympathizers or critics, believed the news reports of the Islamic State’s mass killings or beheadings. “It is made up,” echoed Amar Msalmi, 28, a taxi driver. “All of this is manufactured in the West.”

All dismissed the existing Arab governments as corrupt and dictatorial, and all held a dim view of Ennahda. Most struggled to name a credible Muslim institute or scholar uncorrupted by service to some earthly power.

But some noted that a dearth of scholars could also be another sign of the coming apocalypse, along with the declaration of a new caliphate.

“We have been told in the sayings of the Prophet that this is going to happen soon,” said Ahmed, one of the young men at a cafe.

Hend Hassassi contributed reporting.

A version of this article appears in print on October 22, 2014, on page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: New Freedoms in Tunisia Drive Support for ISIS.

---

© 2014 The New York Times Company