International Republican Institute

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KALAA KEBIRA, TUNISIA

VULNERABILITIES TO CORRUPTION ASSESSMENT REPORT

August 2018

I.   INTRODUCTION

The International Republican Institute (IRI) is a non-profit, non-partisan organization headquartered in Washington, DC. IRI works with civil society and governmental partners throughout the world to strengthen democratic practices and empower democratic leaders. With support from the National Endowment for Democracy, IRI has created a Vulnerabilities to Corruption Approach (VCA) to assist local governments in identifying risks to corrupt practices as a first step for improving transparency and accountability at the municipal level.[1]

As the sole democratic success of the Arab Spring, Tunisia has made considerable democratic and economic progresses since the end of its revolution in 2011. However, corruption continues to be a serious challenge that weakens the rule of law and acts as a driving factor for violent extremism in the country.[2] On July 9, 2018, INLUCC and IRI expanded their existing Memorandum of Understanding to include and implement the VCA program in Kalaa Keibira, validating and reflecting the municipality's commitment to transparency. Kalaa Kebira was among the earliest municipalities to partner with INLUCC on local transparency reform and was deemed an appropriate partner given its track record in promoting open government initiatives and the commitment by the municipal council to advance an anti-corruption agenda.

The municipality of Kalaa Kebira is one of the largest entities in the Sousse Governorate, one of the 24 sub-national units across Tunisia. The city is located directly West of Sousse and has a population of approximately 58,000. Kalaa Kebira's economy is largely driven by the nearby city of Sousse where many citizens commute daily to work.

II.   METHODOLOGY

The VCA assessment in Kalaa Kebira was conducted by three IRI staff, representing the Washington D.C. and the Tunisia offices, on a three-day site visit to the municipality from July 9-11, 2018. To gain a comprehensive perspective on the challenges, reform efforts, and opportunities for collaboration in Kalaa Kebira, IRI's VCA focused on stakeholders' perceptions to assess vulnerabilities to corruption within government processes and practices. The assessment team conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 individuals, 3 of which were women. For each interview, an introduction clarified what kind of information was sought, the origin of the IRI team, the purpose of the evaluation and the benefits that the final report would bring to the municipality. IRI used a local facilitator to acquire contacts and informants for the assessment primarily from the municipal council, prominent civil servants and local civil society leaders.

The number and type of interviewees selected was intended to broadly represent civil society, elected officials, municipal staff and community leaders. All interviews were conducted in Tunisian Arabic and later translated and transcribed by a translator who was also present in the various field meetings. The interview protocol used for this assessment was based on similar VCA assessments conducted in Mongolia, Ukraine, Indonesia, Cambodia, El Salvador and elsewhere in Tunisia.

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[1] The VCA is a methodology that IRI created that bolsters anti-corruption efforts by partnering with local stakeholders through a steering committee comprised of representatives of both government and civil society. The VCA identifies corruption-related risks and gaps in government processes and supports government responses to these issues. It comprises four steps: explore, assess, enact and showcase. This report represents the outcome of the assessment step.

[2] http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2017-6-1_vea_report_-_beja.pdf

Through the exploratory phase of the VCA process, IRI determined the scope of this assessment in partnership with local stakeholders. Prior to the assessment mission, IRI conducted a basic political economy analysis of Kalaa Kebira to preemptively identify windows of opportunity and potential bottlenecks for reform. The interviewees identified additional transparency-related challenges, and these are reflected in this assessment report. The report is structured around two primary findings: poor delivery of administrative services and the public lack of consistent opportunities to engage on transparency issues and hold the local government accountable.

III. PROGRAMMATIC CONTEXT

IRI conducted the VCA during the political decentralization process and right after the historic local government elections in May 2018. Nearly seven years after the Tunisian Revolution, the local elections signified the country's next step towards elected, representative governance at all levels. Tunisians were able to democratically elect municipal councils that, under the concurrent decentralization process, are mandated to oversee economic growth and public service delivery in respective municipalities. While this is an invaluable opportunity for Tunisians to be more directly represented at the local level, the structural changes also created institutional challenges. An additional challenge for Tunisia's democratic consolidation has been the rise of violent extremist organizations (VEO.) To diagnose the local drivers of violent extremism (LDVE), IRI conducted a violent extremism (VE) assessment in five governorates, one of which was the Sousse Governorate. IRI's VE assessment identified vulnerabilities on the local level with a specific focus on how undemocratic and insufficient governance leads to greater violent extremism vulnerability and VEO recruitment. This assessment exposed local-level corruption as a dominant source of grievances among VE-vulnerable populations.

Such result from the VE assessment on corruption as major source of grievances was consistent with IRI's ongoing polling as well. IRI polling data from December 2017 shows that Tunisians are in support of tackling corruption and that Tunisians perceive the need for democracy to meet expectations and produce tangible improvements in their living conditions. However, only 24 percent of Tunisians say they are either satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of public services in the country, revealing a tremendous gap between expectations and reality. Concurrently, one of the primary recommendations from IRI's *Understanding the Drivers to Local Extremism Report in Tunisia* was the need to "address corruption by introducing measures to make municipal processes more transparent, publicize information on these processes and job opportunities, and provide information on public grants and funding."

To help bridge the expectation gap and address challenges in government services, IRI focuses on training political parties, strengthening civil society, conducting public opinion research and providing technical advice to the national government. By supporting decisive action against corruption, IRI is complementing its existing work supporting democratic consolidation in Tunisia in a way that is responsive to the priorities expressed by Tunisian citizens and democratically elected authorities.

IV. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Poor delivery of administrative services creates incentives for corruption.

Problem Statement

A persistent challenge for citizens in Kalaa Kebira is to get legal documents notarized and to acquire construction licenses. Based on the interviews conducted in Kalaa Kebira, many respondents found the service provided by the municipality were sub-standards. Interviewees were repeatedly frustrated by the onerous documentation necessary to procure construction licenses and the lack of capacity of the civil service to support and help citizens on these matters. In addition, the municipality is currently facing a labor shortage that has exacerbated the already understaffed municipality and hampered the staff's ability to process requests efficiently and effectively.

Key Strengths

1. **The municipal council and civil society are willing to improve municipal service delivery**. Respondents from across civil society, civil service and elected officials affirmed that they were eager to engage with the municipal council to improve service delivery in the municipality. The buy-in from these key stakeholders is crucial to drive institutional change and systemic improvements for better delivery of administrative services.

2. **Resumption of staff hiring following the finalization of municipal budget.** A challenge expressed by nearly all the municipal workers and elected officials was the employment deficit caused by the retirement of eight (8) employees over a very short period. As the municipal council renewed its commitment to improving service delivery, funds were readjusted to allow the hiring of staff for key positions. Thus, not only administrative services benefited from higher quality and higher speed of processing but also all public servants' workload became manageable.

Key Vulnerabilities

1. **Inconsistent delivery of services by municipal servants spurs widespread perception of corruption.** Respondents have reported general dissatisfaction with the amount of time required to process documentation and certification requests. In addition, respondents reported frustration because they would often be notified that their requests required new documentation, only to then continue encountering additional challenges. Anecdotally, some respondents noted that they had heard of forms being rejected because the applicant had used a word incorrectly on the form. Others noted that some citizens in the municipality tried to get around this tedious process by paying bribes. A common finding from the local drivers of violent extremism report was the 'grievance cycle', in which poor service delivery is perceived as corruption which spurs mistrust and dissatisfaction with the government ultimately begetting the perception that government officials are corrupted. One respondent said that he didn't believe that corruption was as widespread in the municipality as other citizens believed. Rather, civil servants were so overburdened that they were unable to complete their jobs in a timely and professional manner, leading citizens to perceive the poor service as a consequence of not paying bribes

2. **Frustration with the attention received due to perceived corruption issues foments resentment in the community**. This further contributes to a culture of resentment and distrust which ultimately causes citizens feeling apathetic and disinterest in local politics.

Recommendations

1. **Offer professional development opportunities for municipal staff.** Although municipal staff capacity is constrained by structural and external variables, municipal leadership should undertake greater efforts to provide opportunities for the municipal staff, particularly in the licensing and urban planning office, to engage with their counterparts in neighboring communities, share best practices with regards to customer service and discuss lessons learned throughout the Sousse Governorate.

2. **Develop a clear communication strategy for the municipality.** The municipality should develop a clear communication strategy that targets community leaders, relevant civil society organizations and citizens-at-large. For instance, engaging in awareness raising campaigns should ensure that citizens are better informed on the municipality's initiatives and on the oversight opportunities available to them. Communication strategies should also include citizens in rural communities who do not always have as much access to information, oversight and accountability opportunities.

3. **Engage civil society in creating oversight opportunities.** Greater efforts should be made to leverage and cooperate with civil society to provide oversight opportunities to citizens on public administration matters such as public procurement, budgeting, construction and licensing. Cooperating with civil society on public concerns and challenges can ultimately build trust among the two and generate buy-in for the new initiatives the municipality is planning.
   a. **To note**: An additional challenge highlighted by many respondents was the low number of citizens who pay their taxes. By offering citizens a chance to oversee government spending, citizens of Kalaa Kebira can restore public trust and will be better informed and more inclined to pay their due taxes.

4. **Provide clearer guidance and incentives for workers**. A persistent challenge was that municipal staff are often dependent on instructions they receive from the governorate. Unfortunately, the governorate lack of clarity often affects the capacity of the municipality to provide feedback to the citizens. To start addressing this challenge, municipality could develop standard norms and procedures on administrative services, streamlining principles of good customer service practice and code of conduct/ethics for public servants. In addition, the municipality could provide incentives for hardworking employees to accommodate labor shortage through methods like public recognition, preferential choice of office space, extra time off, etc.
   a. **To note:** Although outside of the scope of this assessment, many interviewees brought up the rigidity of the *code d'urbanisme,* or municipal planning code. This inflexibility leaves applications reviewers less empowered to interpret forms and applications and seems to be causing frustration of citizens and civil servants. To address this, the national government should consider offering clearer instructions on the code and/or allow for greater flexibility of interpretation of the law.

The public lacks consistent opportunities to engage on transparency issues and hold the local government accountable.

Problem Statement

The citizens of Kalaa Kebira have very few opportunities to build necessary trust in public institutions and to effectively provide the necessary checks on local government. Citizen's faith in public institutions remains low, by one account, only six percent of the municipality routinely pays their taxes to the municipal office. Some interviewees considered that low public faith comes from distrust in government's intentions. Therefore, there is the need for improving the quality and increasing the number of opportunities citizens' engagement and oversight in public administration work. More citizens involvement will require more transparency from the public administration and it will improve accountability mechanisms and practices. Currently, there are few structured opportunities for meaningful citizen oversight and few avenues to retrieve public information. Kalaa Keriba is also currently lacking a website.

Key Strengths

1. **Four open municipal meetings will make available to the public all the activities of the municipality on a quarterly basis.** Many informants throughout the assessment commented that the first public forum, scheduled for August 2018, would be the first of its kind in Kalaa Kebira. It would provide citizens with the opportunity to learn more about the policies and practices of the municipality and to ask questions directly to their representatives. Anecdotes from a variety of community leaders and the public in general confirmed to the strong commitment on behalf of the municipal council to improve citizens' engagement with the municipal office. Municipal staff remain keenly aware and take special note of the precarious situation faced by many of the municipality's lower-income and rural citizens, particularly as the municipality expanded to include new areas that do not always have access to electricity, water or sewage.

Key Vulnerabilities

1. **Structural impediments to citizen engagement.** Several interviewees commented on the structural impediments to oversight they face when trying to monitor local government activities. For instance, one interviewee expressed frustration with the lack of clear information on what forms or documents are needed for some services or what resources the municipality can offer. Although the municipality is developing a website, which is expected to come online this year, 2018, the municipal hall remains an underserved resource to spread public information. Even the forms and information provided by the licensing department requires a citizen to reach out specifically to the licensing office in the municipal hall to get the required information. Quarterly public sessions are a laudable step forward in consolidating democratic gains from the recent municipal election in Kalaa Kebira. However, if civil society and citizens do not have access to certain resources and public information, they will have a harder time preparing questions, proposals and feedback to present at the forums.

Recommendations

1. **Engage the citizens of the recently included areas in transparency and accountability initiatives.** Purposefully and proactively including the citizens from the most distant villages and from the recently incorporated rural and underserved areas in participatory governance initiatives help the municipality better meet their needs. Many interviewees commented on the consistent inability of the municipality to meaningfully engage the low-access to services communities on municipal issues. Infrastructural barriers such as poor roads, no electricity/sewage lines, geographic distance and low-grade communication technology such as limited internet, interpersonal networks need

to be assessed and addressed to effectively include more disenfranchised communities. Opportunities to engage these citizens may manifest as:

- **Posting notices or important municipal information both at a central location and in key public locations where communities with low-access to service delivery communities.** Key informants discussed the option to deliver information to far-out communities by regularly and predictably posting paper materials in readily accessible and public locations.
- **Making municipal contact information readily available.** Many citizens do not know how to engage with the municipality or who to contact. Contact information can be displayed on the walls outside of the municipal hall, on the cork boards inside the building, and on the municipality's new website. Information should include names, titles and contact information. Points of contact for each department should also be displayed as citizens may have questions but are unsure who to direct them to.

2. **Improve the municipality's online presence**. The municipality should continue to invest in their digital platform to provide citizens with important municipal information and develop online services. The Kalaa Kebira website ought to house the information necessary for document certification and license requests, invest resource and build a website that could be utilized to streamline application requests and offer a platform for citizens to submit their documents online. Some additional opportunities for the municipality online are:

- **Capitalize on social media:** As Tunisians increasingly adopt and operate smart phones and digital platforms such as Facebook and Whatsapp, the municipal council should upload more content into its Facebook page and create a WhatsApp thread to spread information more efficiently and reach younger audiences. This Facebook page could become a parallel tool to the website for the municipal office to share updates, points of contact for various offices and provide other useful information.
- **Develop an online communication strategy for the municipality:** Social media at large, websites, and other online tools are important mediums of engagement and information sharing with the public. To best utilize these tools, the municipality should develop an online communication strategy. Important question to be answered for the strategy document include:
  - *Who is the target audience for the municipality's online presence?* (youth, low-education, low-broadband access, people who live far from the municipality, etc.)
  - *What does the municipality want to achieve through its communication strategy?* (improved citizen awareness of initiatives, policies or public services,
  - *How will the municipality engage online (*Who will manage the accounts and what will be posted as well as the frequency of said posts.)