

FRAGILITY IN TUNISIA: A TEST CASE FOR INTEGRATED SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE

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Introduction

Security is one of the key challenges for Tunisia's democratic transition, since the 2011 revolution ousted the authoritarian regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. International actors (NATO, the European Union, key EU Member States and the United States) immediately provided assistance to facilitate the reform of Tunisia's security sector and to bolster the capabilities and the effectiveness of its armed forces. However, a stark deterioration of the security situation within the country since 2015, as well as in neighbouring Libya, has shown the Tunisian security forces' persisting difficulties in maintaining stability and protecting their citizens. In addition, the government's failure to deliver economic reforms, combined with growing socioeconomic discontent, have significantly slowed down Tunisia's progress towards democratic and economic development, which in turn has increased the country's fragility and vulnerability to a variety of threats, for instance by making Tunisia a hot spot for ISIS recruitment.

Today's Tunisia is less a potential model for democratic transition than a test case for the nexus between security-development and cooperation among international actors, given the need for democratic development to be supported by development actions, financial assistance, and adequate security support. Tunisia is also a test case for transatlantic cooperation, in light of rising competition among different actors and the uncertainty surrounding the approach of the Trump administration towards NATO and the Mediterranean, as well as volatile domestic politics in many EU countries as a result of the rise of populist movements.

This policy brief looks at the evolving security situation in Tunisia by appraising the relations with key providers of security support (NATO, the EU, individual EU Member States, and the United States). It is argued that, despite significant increase in support for Tunisian security since 2015, a lack of coordination and an integrated security-

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development strategy may erode part of the country's progress towards stability. Looking to the future, enduring incoherent, uncoordinated assistance or even a reduced commitment from the international community are to be considered as indirect, yet key drivers of fragility and violence, as new "empty spaces" prone to radicalization may emerge.

Security Challenges and Trends

Since the 2011 Jasmine Revolution, Tunisia has undergone a fragile democratic transition. Unlike other Arab countries, the country has been seen by the international community as an example of peaceful transition and political compromise, thus far avoiding degeneration into civil war or military intervention to restore order. However, Tunisia's progress towards building a stable democracy is increasingly in danger, the pace of reforms having slowed down greatly since the 2014 elections, the economy remaining weak and domestic discontent and social unrest on the rise. Naturally, security is also part of the picture. Challenges to Tunisian security include a difficult domestic security environment, an unstable region, insecure borders and ineffective security forces, which together constitute fertile ground for jihadi terrorism.

Domestically, the situation severely deteriorated in 2015, with the terrorist attacks at the Bardo museum (18 March), the mass shooting at a beach resort in Sousse (26 June) and the attack on a military bus in downtown Tunis (24 November), all claimed by the Islamic State and perpetrated by young Tunisian men. As a matter of fact, the Tunisian youth has become vulnerable to radical influence, generating around 3,000 foreign fighters, and a growing presence among the ranks of the Islamic State in Syria, Iraq and Libya. Root causes of the growth of radical jihadist elements and their success among young Tunisians are factors such as poverty, economic marginalization and a lack of opportunities, in combination with a sense of injustice and repression (Petré, 2015). In addition to that, outrage and fear sparked by a fragile security situation – due to kidnappings, beheadings and other incidents – have become the "new norm" in several Tunisian cities and remote areas.

Conflicts and turmoil in neighbouring countries obviously pose another major threat to Tunisian security. Porous borders allow Libya's chaos to spill over into Tunisia, and back. Islamist militants, many of whom were freed from prison after the fall of Ben Ali, have fled to Libya to become key fighters for the Islamic State. Some militants have recently begun to return, smuggling in explosives and weapons for attacks on the capital. According to the Tunisian security forces, the gunmen that carried out the attacks at Bardo and Sousse were trained in Libya.

Against this backdrop, Tunisian security forces have been forced to quickly reform and cope with new threats, revising an ill-equipped and dysfunctional apparatus. Those efforts

have partially succeeded, though significant challenges remain. A state of emergency was declared after the Sousse attack. Greater cooperation between the National Guard and the Tunisian armed forces proved successful in producing joint operations against Islamist groups. Efforts to counter terrorism have also progressed. Since 2011, the Defense Ministry's budget has grown by an average of 21 percent each year (Grewal, 2016), with a steady stream of new weapons contracts and international partnerships – the United States, for instance, have tripled military aid to Tunisia in 2015. Post-revolution Tunisian armed forces have increased in strength. Yet, reforms are still needed to maximize efficacy, and tools such as a comprehensive defense strategy would enable a more forward-looking approach to security threats.¹ Furthermore, fully fledged reform of the security sector, generating effective police and security forces, has not occurred yet, mostly because of the absence of political leadership, sustained legislative initiatives and due to mutual distrust among political parties.²

International Security Assistance

The international community, and in particular the United States, NATO, the European Union and key EU Member States, have taken bolder steps since the 2015 terrorist attacks to improve Tunisian security and prevent the country from becoming a hub for ISIS, which would thwart a peaceful and democratic transition to democracy. Initiatives are manifold, and range from technical assistance to bolster the capabilities and know-how of Tunisian security forces, support for security sector reform, aid for the military (weapons, equipment, training), and enhanced counterterrorism and intelligence cooperation. This section reviews the security links between Tunisia and key Western powers.

United States: Increased Military Aid

The United States has significantly increased its military and police aid, as well as arms deliveries to the Middle East and North Africa region since 2009. Tunisia is no exception. Three weeks after the Bardo attack, the US administration announced that it would triple military spending for Tunisia and training for its armed forces. In 2016, the White House requested a sharp increase in military aid to Tunisia, up to \$99 million, compared to a budget of \$32.9 million in 2014 (Goodman, 2015). The 2017 budget is being considered by the US Congress as part of the “Combating Terrorism in Tunisia Emergency Support

1 For a detailed overview and figures of the modernization of the Tunisian military after Ben Ali, see: Grewal, S. (2016, February 24). A quiet revolution: The Tunisian military after Ben Ali. Carnegie Middle East Center. Retrieved from <http://carnegie-mec.org/2016/02/24/quiet-revolution-tunisian-military-after-ben-ali-pub-62780>

2 On Tunisian security sector reform, see: Sayigh, Y. (2015, March 17). Missed opportunity: The politics of police reform in Egypt and Tunisia. Carnegie Middle East Center. Retrieved from <http://carnegie-mec.org/2015/03/17/missed-opportunity-politics-of-police-reform-in-egypt-and-tunisia-pub-59391>

Act of 2017” – the bill is scheduled to be approved by April 2017 (“All Bill Information (Except Text) for H.R.157”, 2017).

The Obama administration also granted Tunisia the status of “major non-NATO ally” (MNNA) on 10 July 2015³, a distinction that carries a higher level of strategic military cooperation with the United States. For instance, it allows the US government to devote additional funding to joint counterterrorism research and development projects for Tunisia, or promote increased US-Tunisia military cooperation in combat operations.⁴ In practical terms, US support to Tunisia covers training of special forces and military equipment, such as bulletproof vests, helmets, shields and personnel gear, night-vision goggles for the National Police and the National Guard, 12 Black Hawk helicopters, missiles and machine guns, supplied through the US government’s Foreign Military Sales Program. Additional support to Tunisian counterterrorism efforts comes through the Defense Department’s Counterterrorism Partnership Fund.

NATO’s Role after the Warsaw Summit

The 2016 Warsaw Summit prioritized security challenges coming from the Southern flank in NATO’s agenda, requesting allies to enhance initiatives and strengthen cooperation with partners in the fields of counter-terrorism, stabilization, defence capacity-building, maritime security and border control. Allies agreed to provide increased military support to countries in the Middle East and North Africa that are targets of Islamic extremism, including Tunisia.

As part of the Alliance Maritime Strategy, NATO’s contribution to maritime security in the Mediterranean amounts to one operation (Sea Guardian) and Standing Naval Forces integrated into the NATO Response Force (NRF).⁵ Operation Sea Guardian was launched in October 2016, to support maritime situational awareness, counter-terrorism at sea and capacity building in the Mediterranean. NATO’s Standing Maritime Group 2 was deployed in the Aegean Sea in February 2016 to conduct reconnaissance, monitoring and surveillance in the territorial waters of Greece and Turkey, as well as in international waters, in an effort to cut the lines of human trafficking and illegal migration.

Besides the provision of security at sea, NATO has also boosted support to strengthen Tunisian capacities to counter terrorism. Since July 2016, NATO has been advising the

³ See: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/07/10/presidential-memorandum-designation-republic-tunisia-major-non-nato-ally>

⁴ For details of the implications of the MNNA status, see: Oruganti, G., & Ruffner, T. (2015, July 14). US-Tunisia security cooperation: What it means to be a major non-NATO ally. Security Assistance Monitor. Retrieved from <http://securityassistance.org/blog/us-tunisia-security-cooperation-what-it-means-be-major-non-nato-ally>

⁵ NATO’s Standing Naval Forces are composed of two Standing NATO Maritime Groups (SNMG 1 and 2) and two Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Groups (SNMCMG 1 and 2). SNMGs are multinational, integrated maritime forces made up of vessels from various Allied countries and available to perform different tasks. SNMCMGs are multinational forces that engage in search and explosive ordnance disposal operations.

Tunisian authorities on the development of a Tunisian Intelligence Fusion Centre and giving training to the Tunisian Special Operations Forces, namely on intelligence procedures in support of counterterrorism activities. NATO's support to Tunisia constitutes a change in NATO's strategic posture in the fight against terrorism, insofar as defence capacity building tools are understood not as purely reactive or in response to ongoing conflicts, such as in Iraq and Libya, but also in a preventive manner, as in Tunisia, or Jordan: stable and functioning states, with effective armed forces, are not only more likely to prevent terrorist attacks, but also reduce and manage the migration flows and illicit trafficking across land and sea borders, which, in turn, has a stabilizing effect at the regional level.⁶

The EU and Key Member States

The battle against militants and terror groups has been cause for growing concern for the EU. For this reason, security cooperation has been deepened in the area of counterterrorism and prevention of violent extremism and radicalization, although this has so far happened outside the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) framework. The 2016 Joint Communication *Strengthening EU support for Tunisia* states that the EU should help Tunisia in “building national capacities and provide expertise on issues such as preventing radicalization, border management; encouraging rule-of-law and prosecution; strategic communications; addressing foreign terrorist fighters and organized crime” (European Commission & HR/VP, 2016). The EU-Tunisia Action Plan 2013-2017 lists among the priority actions “enhancing cooperation in areas such as democracy and human rights, foreign and security policy, cooperation in the fight against terrorism” (European External Action Service [EEAS], n.d). The EU has allocated 23 million euros to support a programme for the reform of the security sector in Tunisia as part of the Action Plan, focusing on the modernization of the internal security forces in line with human rights standards, including the reform of evaluation, recruitment and training systems. The programme also advises the Tunisian State on the establishment of an inter-ministerial crisis cell, and strengthens technical and operational capacities of land border security services to support the fight against cross-border crime, with new rapid operational centres created in Medenine, Tataouine, and Kasserine. This support is complemented by the justice reforms, supported by the EU with a budget of 40 million euros. Other security-related budget lines have included the Instruments contributing to Stability and Peace, with a contribution of 4 million euros in 2015.

That said, military support and security cooperation with Tunisia remain firmly in the hands of key Member States. After 2015, France stepped up cooperation, and has trained police

⁶ On this point see Marrone, A. (2016). What's new on NATO's southern flank: Security threats and the alliance's role after the Warsaw Summit. Security Policy Working Paper 22. German Federal Academy for Security Policy. Retrieved from https://www.baks.bund.de/sites/baks010/files/working_paper_2016_22.pdf

and assault teams, supplied analysts and border security personnel, coordinated intelligence operations, and helped open a military training centre in Gafsa. In late 2015, Paris approved a 20-million-euro package to equip Tunisian special forces and intelligence operations.

Germany provides Tunisia with equipment and training regarding border security and security sector reform, including electronic surveillance systems as part of the 125-mile barrier along the border with Libya, designed to deter terrorism. The German federal police opened a permanent office in Tunis to work more closely with local authorities.

The United Kingdom has also stepped up counterterrorism training activities and equipment for Tunisia since 2015. The UK supported the establishment of Strategic and Planning Units within the Tunisian Ministry of Interior to assist in security planning. British training teams have been sent to Tunisia in 2016 to assist authorities in countering illegal cross-border movement.

Italy signed an agreement with Tunisia in 2011 to tackle migrant trafficking under the package of "Agreements for Security in the Mediterranean and prevention of illicit trafficking," through which Rome has provided the Tunisian navy with 12 patrol boats. Further support from Italy has included capacity building and training in the fields of border, aeromarine security, and joint initiatives with the Italian army and Carabinieri to build capacities in improvised explosive devices and counter-terrorism.

Linking Security and Development

In the post-Cold War and post-9/11 era, attempts by the international community to link the provision of security with development assistance, particularly in the framework of post-conflict peacebuilding and conflict prevention, have often fallen short of expectations or encountered different challenges, in the field as well as in the coordination and implementation of policy instruments due to institutional constraints, different organizational cultures or concerns and competition for funding. Despite being explicitly integrated in the international agenda through repeated commitments by states and international organizations⁷, the gap between security and development in foreign interventions is still wide, exacerbating internal and external drivers of country fragility.

Against this backdrop, threats to Tunisian security, particularly terrorism, cannot be defeated by military means alone, nor by a purely security-centred approach. As outlined

⁷ See, in particular, the World Bank's World Development Report 2011 on "Conflict, Security and Development." Retrieved from http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWDRS/Resources/WDR2011_Full_Text.pdf

earlier in this paper, vulnerability to Islamic terrorism is deeply rooted in Tunisian society and exposed to economic or political downturns. The priority of strengthening security inevitably overlaps with the need to ensure sustainable aid for Tunisia's economy to grow, support to the development of democratic institutions and good governance practices, engagement of civil society and promotion of social inclusion. For these reasons, Tunisia can be seen as a test case for the implementation of the security-development nexus, at what could be considered as a defining moment for the coordination – and coherence – of foreign support.

Development aid to Tunisia has been substantial, provided in parallel with security support. Since the revolution, international financial institutions have provided assistance in the form of loans and grants. The World Bank Group has, so far, pledged almost \$3 billion in loans to post-revolutionary Tunisia. In a speech at the Tunisia International Investment Conference on 29 November, 2016, the World Bank's vice-President Hafez Ghanem confirmed that the new 2016-2020 partnership strategy between Tunisia and the World Bank contains financial envelopes as large as \$5 billion for the whole period (The World Bank, n.d.).⁸ In 2016, the International Monetary Fund agreed with Tunisia on a four-year \$2.8-billion fund facility (International Monetary Fund [IMF], n.d). Additional funding has come from the African Development Bank, which amounted to \$2.1 billion from 2014 to 2015 for projects and technical assistance operations.

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has boosted aid and support to economic reform. A loan agreement signed in June 2016 provides Tunisia with access to up to \$500 million in affordable financing from international capital markets. This is the third guarantee that the US has provided Tunisia with – the earlier ones being for \$485 million in 2012, and for \$500 million in 2014 – and a major component of other types of US foreign assistance to Tunisia under other instruments which has amounted to \$750 million aid since 2011. USAID programmes focus on three pillars: (a) democracy and governance, supporting democratic consolidation, accountability and social cohesion, and in particular civil society organizations; (b) jobs and economic growth, through loan guarantees, access to capital, technical assistance, for instance to the Ministry of Finance on the economic reform agenda, and competitiveness of small and medium sized enterprises; (c) science, technology, innovation and global partnerships (USAID, 2016). Current programmes include private sector investments and growth, employment, policy and business reform and the link between education and the job market, through training, capacity building, public-private partnerships initiatives, and technical assistance to ICT firms.⁹

⁸ See also the Speech by World Bank vice-President, Hafez Ghanem, at Tunisia International Investment Conference "Tunisia 2020." Retrieved from <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/speech/2016/11/29/speech-at-tunisia-2020-opening-ceremony>

⁹ Data on US foreign aid to Tunisia are available here: https://explorer.usaid.gov/cd/TUN?implementing_agency_id=1

The EU has more than doubled its financial contribution in cooperation with Tunisia since 2011 and established a “Privileged Partnership” in 2012. The European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) constitutes the main EU financial instrument to provide assistance to Tunisia under the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2020. ENI aid provided over 1 billion euros in grants and other aid forms from 2011 to 2015, with 886 million budgeted from 2014 to 2020, to encourage inclusive economic growth and strengthen the foundations of democracy, human rights, civil society and security sector reform. Overall, the combination of grants, macro-financial assistance, and loans, including those from the European Investment Bank, brings the total support to Tunisia to approximately 3.5 billion euros from 2011 to 2016. Furthermore, since April 2016, the EU and Tunisia have been negotiating a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA).

Conclusions

Undoubtedly, by boosting security as well as development support to Tunisia following the 2011 revolution and in the aftermath of the 2015 terrorist attacks, Western powers have made it clear that a strong, democratic and stable Tunisia is their direct strategic interest. Overall, responses have been adapted to evolving country-specific circumstances, taking into account new risks to democratic transition, growing security threats and, most importantly, developing a new approach¹⁰ to jointly tackle interconnected challenges, trying to fill the holes in security support, with a wide range of development programmes and financial aid.¹¹ However, efforts have only been partially successful, with the security and development agendas being generally (although not always) uncoordinated. Understanding Tunisia’s drivers of fragility, and acknowledging the need for integrated security-development responses did not generate a grand strategy for Tunisia, nor did it help to increase synergy in the field. In particular, two sets of vulnerabilities can be exposed: (1) external and (2) internal/domestic challenges.

1. External vulnerabilities

- a. **Transatlantic cooperation:** a coherent transatlantic strategy for Tunisia is missing and would be beneficial to increase coordination of efforts and better division of labour among the EU, its Member States and the US; however, complex domestic politics in many EU countries and the likelihood of a more isolationist US foreign policy under

¹⁰ This mostly applies to the EU and its Member States and is in line with the provisions on resilience included in the EU Global Strategy, according to which “a resilient state is a secure state, and security is key for prosperity and democracy” (EU Global Strategy, p. 23). Retrieved from https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/sites/globalstrategy/files/eugs_review_web.pdf

¹¹ On this point, see 2016 Joint Communication “Strengthening EU Support for Tunisia,” p. 5.

the Trump administration cast doubts on the chances to develop a shared strategy and commit adequate resources in the medium term. Given the reluctance of Tunisian authorities to extensively use the NATO and CSDP frameworks, the most plausible scenario involves a continuation of security support provided by individual EU Member States through bilateral channels, combined with sustained EU involvement (political and financial) through neighbourhood instruments in support of Tunisia's democratic transition, which altogether may partly compensate the risk of reduced US military and development aid.

- b. **Libya:** like it or not, Tunisia will remain unsafe in the absence of a functional Libyan government, and a functioning Libyan state able to re-establish authority and consolidate security institutions. The spread of the Islamic State in North Africa is a regional problem, that requires regional solutions. Given the obvious limits of unilateral border patrols and security checkpoints, a degrading of jihadi terrorism in Libya will inevitably expose Tunisia to further terrorist attacks carried out by returning foreign fighters, and other forms of violent extremism. There cannot be a stable Tunisia as long as Libya remains fragile.

2. Domestic challenges

- a. **Security Sector Reform:** building Tunisian military capacities and providing armed forces with appropriate equipment and weapons to counter terrorism should not overlook the need for democratic oversight, respect of human rights standards, accountability, and continuous engagement with civil societies and local communities. In other words, it is important that arms sales do not overshadow security sector reform objectives, in order to ensure that strengthening the military or police forces does not alter the domestic balance of power between political forces, as troubling experiences of Western governments in Afghanistan and Iraq have demonstrated. Ultimately, as an Atlantic Council report argues, it is the depth of Tunisia's political and institutional progress that will determine the country's success and its capacity to resist internal and external threats (Burwell, Hawthorne, Mezran, & Miller, 2016).
- b. **Empty spaces:** finally, a comprehensive security strategy for Tunisia should link more effective border management instruments, to prevent cross-border crime, trafficking and the inflow/outflow of trained ISIS fighters. It should also have a societal dimension, engaging populations in remote and rural areas and impoverished urban neighbourhoods, who are less accustomed to the presence of the State as a provider of security and more vulnerable to unrest and terrorist recruitment. A security strategy for Tunisia should take into account the means to avoid the formation of "empty spaces," a concept elaborated by the Italian Member

of Parliament Andrea Manciuilli, defining those areas where political, economic and social vacuums create a fertile ground for Islamic terror, leveraging on the frustration and disillusionment of the population, or tribal tensions.¹² Against this backdrop, understanding defence capacity building (in NATO, as well as in individual nations) as a conflict prevention tool, rather than a reactive instrument, may contribute greatly to increasing the effectiveness and comprehensiveness of security support.

¹² Andrea Manciuilli, MP, is the President of the Italian Delegation at the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. A definition of the “empty spaces,” with regard to Libya, is provided here: http://www.portaledifesa.it/index~phppag,3_id,1551.html

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