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# **Intended and Unintended Consequences of Security Assistance in Post-2011 Tunisia**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In Tunisia, the notion and understanding of security, while no longer focused on regime security, remains a top-down, state-security understanding, rather than a societal one. Further, while the 2014 democratic Constitution devised significant checks and balances between the branches of government, even in the security field, external security assistance facilitated the centralization of security decision-making in the hands of the President of the Republic.

**KEYWORDS:** Tunisia, security, security assistance, Constitution, counter-terrorism

## **THE UNIQUENESS OF THE TUNISIAN CASE**

With the exception of Tunisia, post-2011 Arab states have reversed back either to highly authoritarian modes of governance or to protracted conflict, in both cases showing incapacitated central states, where, albeit in different forms and to varying degrees, an ongoing process of hybridization of the security forces directly impacts on constrained and contested sovereignty (Sayigh 2018). While hybridization in the twentieth century was a top-down process, frequently intended as a coup-proofing strategy by elites in power fearing for their regime survival, since 2003 in the case of Iraq, and since 2011 in the cases of Syria, Libya, and then Yemen, it has become

an unintended consequence of state fracture, which has always taken the shape, among other aspects, of a plethora of informal security providers (Sayigh 2018).

Against this backdrop, Tunisia stands out as an outlier, not only in terms of the democratic political process which has characterized its post-2011 trajectory, but also insofar as, despite serious and prolonged security threats, the process of securitization has led to the strengthening of central security forces and their centralization in the presidency of the republic, benefiting from a supposed technical and post-interventionist security assistance (SA) by Western countries (Hanau Santini and Tholens 2018).

This by no means suggests that the country has not seen a multiplication of actors and organizations in the security field and discourses, but it does suggest that centripetal dynamics have had the upper hand both over domestic centrifugal forces (mostly terrorist groups in the mountains bordering with Algeria or in some southeast areas bordering with Libya) and, also, over external actors' security sector agenda. In other words, after initial disarray and uncertainties, the process of change in the security sector has been increasingly centralized and verticalized thanks to the new 2014 Constitution and the newly elected President of the Republic later that year.

Few remember the April 2002 terrorist attack against a synagogue in Djerba as having brought about deep changes in how the terrorist threat was to be countered in then Ben Ali's Tunisia. The nature of terrorist threats before 2010 was concentrated on Islamist terrorism, albeit in a less intense form and presence than the one that has taken shape and rooted itself in the center and northwestern areas of the country since 2011. And yet, between 23 December 2006 and 3 January 2007, Operation Soliman raided a cell of armed Salafists and signaled a decisive victory against domestic terrorism (Bourgou 2015). Since the 2010–11 uprisings, Tunisia has become a target of terrorist attacks, carried out by local and regional terrorists and has exported thousands of jihadists to Syria and Iraq.

In 2013, the country suffered from major setbacks in its perception of stability and safety, when two prominent politicians, Choukri Belaid

and Mohamed Brahmi, were assassinated. These tragic events threatened to derail the country's fragile trajectory towards democracy, increased domestic political polarization, and mistrust vis-à-vis the Islamist party Ennahda, thereby stalling potential reforms, mostly in the Ministry of the Interior (Moi). The targeted political violence morphed into wide-scale terrorist attacks in 2015, in March at the Bardo national museum in Tunis when twenty-one civilians were killed, and in June at a hotel beach in Sousse, where thirty-eight tourists were killed. In November 2015, a bus of the Presidential Guard in the capital was targeted by a terrorist attack, killing a dozen officers. It was only then that the political will emerged and sweeping changes in the security sector were carried out. After the attacks in the capital and coastal area came the time of attempted terrorist infiltrations in the southeast, when a group of self-declared Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS/Daech) fighters, Tunisians, but coming back from Libya, attacked police and National Guard stations in Ben Guerdane in March 2016, killing thirteen civilians and six from the security forces. The terrorist attack perpetrated against the city of Ben Guerdane by radicalized Tunisians was met with fierce resistance by both the security forces and the city's inhabitants. The citizens' resistance transformed Ben Guerdane in the national imaginary from a cross-border area, prone to illegality, marginal and scarcely loyal to the nationalist project to a nationally recognized symbol of unity and fighting spirit. The role of unarmed ordinary citizens was crucial in helping the security forces crash terrorists (Simoncini 2019). The National Guard was again the target of terrorists in July 2018, when six officers were killed in Ghardimaou, on the borders with Algeria.

Since 2011, and even more 2014, the Tunisian terrorist camp has evolved, it has internally diversified and has multiplied in numbers, quadrupling, and almost all concentrated in the areas of Kasserine and El Kef. This has occurred notwithstanding the increasing pressure by the Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the National Guard. The MoD is responsible for the counter-terrorism (CT) efforts in the military exclusion zones in the mountain regions close to Algeria and Libya, a demanding task as Tunisia shares 459 kilometers of borders with Libya, where there is no central authority able to sign and implement a security agreement with Tunis. Therefore, in order to make these borders less easily penetrable, in the past few years, fences have been

built and are currently in the process of being provided with electronic surveillance by the United States and Germany. Moreover, in 2014, Tunisia signed a security cooperation agreement with Algeria to secure the shared borders and increase the exchange of information (Profazio 2017) and a renewed one in March 2017. On the other hand, the Mol is the leading CT agency in the rest of the country. While clashes between terrorist groups and security forces continue in the mountainous areas in the center-west of the country, recently casualties have increased among terrorists, while decreasing among the security forces. The proliferation of terrorists throughout the country has been enabled by the tacit support offered by local populations present in these areas. This support, rather than manifesting the outcome of a process of ideological radicalization, has often been the consequence of coercion and threats by these groups, or in the best-case scenarios, as a consequence of economic incentives and benefits offered to historically and economically neglected populations.

The central and border areas have historically suffered from a tacit but institutionalized disaffection from the elites, which has manifested itself in prolonged disinvestment and economic marginalization (Hanau Santini 2018). This has not been directly caused by the country's relative scarcity of energy resources, but mostly by a combination of an export-led growth model, strong asymmetric economic ties with Europe, and a regionalist bias in favor of the country's coastal areas. Numbers speak to the persistent underfunding of the interior regions: suffice it to think that over one-third of the country's industrial complexes are located in Grand Tunis, the area surrounding the capital. It is no exaggeration to argue that interior regions have been not only neglected but also have been treated as "mere sites for the extraction of raw materials" (Kherigi 2016). Despite post-revolutionary strides at the national level in terms of progressive political transformations, the historical and economic legacies of exclusion of southern and interior regions have continued to weigh heavily on the existing regional inequalities (Cimini 2018). The center-west region of the country, including Sidi Bouzid, Kairouan, and Kasserine, has remained the poorest, with poverty rates doubling the national average, reaching 32.3 percent in 2014 (Ayari and Reiffers 2015; Zorob 2017). The region of Kasserine, whose population is

500,000 inhabitants, saw the highest number of injured and killed civilians in the 2010–11 protests. Despite the adoption of over 1900 infrastructural developmental projects since 2011, totaling almost 1 billion dinars in value, only a tiny minority has been implemented, while the rest have remained on paper (Mejri and Zriba 2016).

Especially at times of national political stabilization, after the adoption of the Constitution in early 2014, the new round of legislative elections in October 2014 and the first presidential elections in late 2014, a new wave of popular mobilizations started to spread from these regions, and Kasserine in particular, to the rest of the country since 2015 and 2016. Almost seven thousand protests in 2016 and eight thousand in 2017 occurred throughout the country (FTDES-OST 2017). The intensity of these contentious outbursts, their geographic diffusion, the interlinkage of different local developments and infrastructural instances across governorates, and the public perception of social turmoil presented a striking number of similarities to the 2010–11 protests. From Kasserine, protests diffused across sixteen governorates, among them Sidi Bouzid, Siliana, Beja, and Kairouan. This second wave of contentious action started in January 2016 in Kasserine, in the center-west of the country, and expanded nationwide (Chennaoui 2016).

Needless to say, the combination between the historical legacy of social exclusion, economic marginalization, post-revolutionary promises of inclusive development, and the reality of path-dependent concentration of investments and projects in favored regions has led to various forms of contentious politics, ranging from informal political participation, to extreme acts of resistance and self-immolation, to marches to Tunis. At a deeper level, the gap between promises and reality might have heightened the perception of abandonment by the central authority, legitimizing forms of passive support to scattered groups of terrorists, incentivizing trade of illegal goods, exchanging deterrence and material rewards for protection. This dynamic has hardly been taken into account by both national authorities as well as external donors engaged in technical SA to the country. The political nature of these grievances and the ways in which they have and are being articulated locally represent not just the re-appropriation of agency at the subnational level, but the insufficiency of the supposedly

technical assistance in the security field by external actors. It also acts as a stark reminder of the half-hearted reform attempts by post-2011 security sector reform. Rather than focusing on the “security for whom” aspect, efforts have concentrated on defusing threats to the state, embodied by terrorists, but failing to address some of the deeper causes enabling the survival and contributing to the multiplication of terrorists in marginal areas of the country.

## **INTERNATIONAL SECURITY ASSISTANCE AND REFORMS DURING THE COUNTER-TERRORIST STRUGGLE**

As was briefly mentioned above, most fighters in these marginalized areas are Tunisians, from throughout the country, who are supplied by local populations in terms of both their survival needs and thanks to cross-border trafficking, through weapons and equipment sale (Herbert 2018). The original terrorist group was Katiba Uqba ibn Nafi (KUIN), directly associated with Al Qaeda in the Maghreb, whose presence is concentrated in Mount Chaambi and Ouargha. Following defections from KUIN, a new group was formed in 2014, Jund al-Khalifa (JAK-T), which proclaimed its loyalty to ISIS and whose visibility emerged in 2015 with the killing of civilians along- side the targeting of security forces (Herbert 2018). JAK-T, as compared with KUIN, similarly to the behavior of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, has shown brutal tactics in its dealing with local populations, based on intimidation and coercion, alongside economic rewards, so as to elicit loyalty and deter any form of cooperation with army or police forces.

The MoI is the primary responsible for tackling internal security challenges, border security and counter-terrorism through the national police and the National Guard, while the MoD and the armed forces officially have only auxiliary roles (Hanlon and Herbert 2015, 39). “However, due to the increasing security challenges, the armed forces became increasingly active in combating these threats” (Varga 2017, 12). This has also been made possible by a significant increase of the MoD budget, especially in relative terms if compared with the MoI (Grewal 2016). “Namely, while in 2011 the defence budget with its \$623 million stood at just 56% of the Ministry of the Interior’s (MOI) resources, the ratio has increased to 72% for 2016 with the MOD receiving \$951 million” (Varga 2017, 12). Until 2011, it was the General

Directorate for the Safety of the State (Direction de Sureté de l'Etat), within the Mol, that was specialized in preventing and countering radicalization and terrorism in the country. In the wake of the popular uprising and the demands for a profound reshaping of the security sector, increasing its accountability and legitimacy, in March 2011 the directorate was dismantled and alongside it, between 2011 and 2012, the intelligence system suffered from the same fate (Bourgou 2015).

In the wake of the bloody terrorist attacks of March and June 2015, after a heated debate, the Tunisian parliament adopted a new CT law, which was passed on 24 July 2015, with a majority of 174 out of 217 votes. It replaced the 2003 Anti-Terrorism Act, approved during a favorable international conjuncture after 9/11, and constantly criticized for being used, given its broad definitions of terrorists and terrorism, by the Ben Ali regime against political dissidents (CRLHDT-ALTT 2008). The law improved the 2003 text, as the words "reparation damages to victims" and "an exception to extradition or deportation" (HRW 2015), appeared, together with the requirement that the judiciary exercise greater oversight of surveillance and other activities (CRLHDT-ALTT 2008). Despite these changes, however, the new text has been referred to as a return to a "police state" with regard to those provisions related to the extension of the period of detention and the (re)introduction of the death penalty (CRLHDT-ALTT 2008).

The 2015 CT law posited terrorism at the heart of the creation of a new intelligence system, which saw the role of the military gradually increase, while the security system as a whole failed to be reshaped, arguably because of intra-organizational divergences over the contents and nature of reform attempts in the Mol (Bourgou 2015; Pluta 2018). Because of the slow pace of change vis-à-vis any endeavours of reform within the Mol, even the attempt to reunite civil and military intelligence within a single agency collapsed. This has also shown itself in the cherry-picking attitude by the Mol when it came to engage in external donors' SA reform packages, such as the European Union's (EU) security sector reform (SSR) package, officially adopted in 2015 and worth €23 million. The package was premised on a "needs' assessment" approach, and one of the key aspects that delayed the process was the appointment of European experts deployed to the Tunisian Mol, something which contradicted and



risked undermining a sense of renewed national sovereignty in security affairs. The EU has been one among several international actors engaged in SA, notably the Geneva-based Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF) in Tunis, and the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) "Prevention, Preparation and Response to Crisis," financed by Canada, Japan, the UK, Belgium, and the United States.

The project pushed by the UNDP revolves around two activities: the promotion of "community policing"; and the promotion of accountability of the security forces through the adoption of a code of conduct and the creation of a commission of ethics. The former is particularly interesting as community policing—based on the creation of new police stations, distinguishing between administrative and criminal sections, accompanied by local committees gathering members of local civil society—has been pushed for even in the absence of oversight and accountability mechanisms on the conduct of police forces. The risk that this system, benefiting from increased legitimacy, granted by United Nations (UN) sponsorship, could lead to hyperlocalized surveillance, as was the case under Ben Ali (Hibou 2006), is not left unnoticed (Pluta 2018).

Alongside international organizations, Tunisia experimented with a new model of enlarged multilateral SA, espoused at the 2015 G7 meeting in Elmau, Germany, and ongoing to this day. The G7 format was first enlarged to Spain, Belgium, and the EU and progressively to Switzerland, Turkey, and the UN (Peinaud 2018).

G7+ meetings started in July 2015, having as counterparts representatives of the Tunisian MoD, Mol, and the presidency of the republic in the person of Rear-Admiral Kamel Akrouf, advisor to the President of the Republic Beji Caïd Essebsi in all matters of security and defense. This is made possible by the president's crucial role in the National Security Council (NSC), whose members are the prime minister, the president of the parliament, the ministers of justice, defense, foreign affairs, and finance, as well as the president of the National Intelligence Center over which Essebsi presides. The NSC is responsible for safeguarding the state's vital interests, the integrity of its territory, the security of its people, and the protection of its natural

resources. It is in charge of implementing the national strategy for fighting extremism and terrorism, assessing internal and external challenges and responses to potential threats, and orienting foreign policy according to national security priorities. Under President Essebsi, the NSC provided the impetus for the drafting of a new national strategic document, the “National Strategy against Terrorism and Violent Extremism,” which was adopted in November 2016, but never published. The strategy’s four pillars for countering the terrorist threat neatly correspond to the EU’s 2005 CT strategy: prevent, protect, pursue, and respond. Despite the semi-presidential nature of the post-2014 institutional set-up, which shares power even in matters of security, in practice, since the election of President Essebsi, security policy-making has become more centralized and less consensual than foreseen in the constitutional text, and yet increasingly efficient in terms of the performance of the security sector in preventing threats and coping with domestic and external challenges. Despite the existence of several bodies dealing with security and defense issues within both the parliament and the government, the presidency has centralized decision-making, using the NSC and the president’s security advisor, facilitating coordination but, as compared with the period 2011–13, downplaying the role and relevance of parliamentary debate and neglecting the search for a more collegial attitude across the government’s different branches.

Namely, the president, through the so-called kingmaker of the Tunisian security policy-making, Akrouf, coordinates the Tunisian security decision-making process. Akrouf eases tensions between different ministries’ bureaucracies, facilitates compromise, and reports back to the president. Finally, he ensures feedback into the decision-making process of presidential inputs.

As a coordination framework, the G7+ has not acted as a transformative mechanism as it was mainly aimed at sharing information among partners on the ongoing security-related bilateral initiatives focusing on training and equipment. It operates through an executive committee, meeting every three months and providing strategic guidelines, sharing the state of the art of SA and reforms, and organizing a number of operational working groups. It has enabled a more efficient coordination of efforts among international donors

without losing national control of bilateral action, as would have been the case with an EU-only mechanism. In addition, it has obliged the Tunisian authorities to come together, formulate shared demands, and design an overall strategy upon which specific requests could be formulated, thereby avoiding the duplications that had been frequent since 2011 (Hanau Santini and Cimini, 2019).

The G7+ operates across four different working groups: the protection of tourist/sensitive sites, co-led by Tunisia and the UK; borders, co-led by Tunisia and Germany; ports and airports, co-led by Tunisia, France, and the UK; and CT, co-led by Tunisia, France, and the EU. Since summer 2017, a fifth working group on fighting radicalization has been added, led by the EU and Belgium on the international side and the Ministry of Justice on the Tunisian side. On the Tunisian side, the lead was within the Mol until the end of 2016, and has been within the MoD since January 2017. Several international donors lament the somewhat more rigid, hierarchic, and bureaucratic operating procedure of the MoD as compared with the Mol.

Different donors have shown to possess different priorities and agendas, as embodied in who led which working group, but also different visions of how different security challenges were best dealt with, be it in isolation or faced in conjunction with other dossiers. For example, while for the UK terrorism was a crosscutting theme, the Germans insisted on having a separate working group, with a narrow military outlook and a focus on intervention. This, however, failed to substantiate its output as effectively as have other working groups.

Having suffered the most casualties in Sousse, the UK government immediately offered assistance in training Tunisian security forces to protect tourist locations better, and has co-led the ports and airports security group. Overall, the UK has supported Tunisia, in terms of development assistance between 2011 and 2017, with over £24 million (interview with the British Embassy, Tunis, June 2017). From 2018, having positively assessed Tunisian progress in the sensitive sites working group, the British have carried out more projects in the border working group. In the wake of the 2015 attacks, the British had formally discouraged their nationals from traveling to Tunisia. In that context, in order to reassure them and have their travel warning

cancelled, the Tunisian authorities tasked the UK with mapping critical aspects in the tourism infra- structure and helping them improve these.

On borders, the Germans have taken the lead. Since late summer 2015, a cell of the German federal police has been installed within the German Embassy in Tunis so as to provide direct assistance, especially along the eastern border with Libya, to the Tunisian border police (posted at checkpoints) and the National Guard (patrolling the border) (interview with the German Embassy, Tunis, April 2017). In September 2016, a bilateral agreement was signed between the Tunisian Interior Minister, Hedi Madjoub, and his German counterpart, Thomas de Mazière, aimed at increasing intelligence-sharing and providing regular and continued training to Tunisian security personnel.<sup>1</sup>

Between mid-2015 and June 2017, the German federal police trained five hundred officers, 80 per cent of them from the National Guard and the remaining 20 per cent from the border police (interview with the German Embassy, Tunis, June 2017). Other contingent events have also played a part in rising German involvement in the Tunisian security sector, including the cessation of activities in Egypt as a consequence of the trial against the director of the German Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Cairo, leading several German foundations to halt their work in Egypt between 2013 and 2016 (Gorzewski 2016).

As far as France is concerned, the focus has been on first intervention training for the National Guard and police units at the entry level—though it is envisaged to extend this progressively to those in further stages of their careers—in order to make low-ranking officers capable of coping with a sudden threat before the arrival of specialized forces. Once again, the Sousse attack, and the then-chaotic and delayed reaction of police units, reinforced the need to adopt a new approach, and a new “doctrine” aimed at developing and improving quick reaction capacity, starting from those serving at the forefront even in supposedly safe spaces—and this not only in Tunisia but also in Europe following the dynamics of recent terrorist attacks.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, in terms of CT, France is engaged in supporting two main projects: first, Tunisia’s efforts in digitizing an identity database, in order to make

information-sharing, on both a national and an international level, more efficient and rapid; and second, a “red line” in support of those families whose members have been somehow affected by jihadist propaganda.

The G7+ could be characterized as a bureaucratic exercise, where states fill in a matrix in which they include all security-related projects and activities. The voluntary nature of the scheme implies that highly confidential information or projects can be omitted and not shared among participants. The expected added value that the G7+ is supposed to deliver consists of a more proactive approach by the Tunisians, which could, and should, in the eyes of the G7+ members, provide more detailed inputs on the security evolution on the ground in terms of challenges and actual needs, impact assessment, and formulation of specific reform demands. So far, however, the format has mostly consisted of European and international actors using the G7+ scheme to avoid duplications of training, equipment, and funding, as well as getting a sense of what other countries are doing/offering in terms of SA. The existence of different agendas among donors has not been solved by the G7+, and secrecy over some security initiatives remains high even between partners, given the sensitive nature of this issue area (Hanau Santini and Cimini, 2019).

The G7+ framework increased the visibility of the United States—Tunisia’s biggest donor for SA—in the security sector. The United States has been the single state devoting the most resources to the country’s security, tripling its military aid in 2015 (Gaub 2017), something which was appreciated by Tunisian policy-makers and ministry officials not just because of the entity of the funding but for its more pragmatic approach and limited red tape. In comparison with the aforementioned €23 million of the EU SSR programme, the United States earmarked over US\$86 million for military and police aid and US\$79 million for humanitarian and development assistance.<sup>3</sup> So far, the bulk of US support in SA to Tunisia revolves around—although is not limited to—two axes: military assistance, both infrastructure and equipment; and training. Assistance to the armed forces focuses especially on those troops along the borders with Libya. Since August 2013, a border buffer zone has been created in the far south, and

operational command in the region is in the hands of the military authorities.

Since then-President Barack Obama designated Tunisia as “a major non- NATO ally” in 2015, something which paved the way for an ever increasing role in direct military assistance by the United States, this also increased suspicions of the physical presence of foreign troops on Tunisian soil, given a public opinion that remains at best reluctant vis-à-vis the partnership with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (Ghilès 2018). Both the bilateral security cooperation with the United States as well as that with NATO has strengthened in the context of the post-2014 Global Coalition against Daech. Since the “major non- NATO designation,” namely the MoD, has had to dismiss various rumors, be it about the creation of a US military base in the country, or the creation of an air- base for US drones operating in Libya, or a NATO request to install a military base in Gabes (Marsad Majles 2018). However, Tunisia did offer the United States and NATO selective support in their operations in Libya, including in late 2016 during the fight against Daech in Sirte.

This strengthened military bilateral cooperation with the United States has occurred under the guise of training and equipment, through a number of programs, first and foremost the Anti-Terror Assistance (ATA) program spearheaded by the US State Department with the Tunisian MoI and by the US State Department International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) mostly dedicated to building the new police academy and the training that will take place there. The MoD and MoI share responsibility for detecting, deterring, and preventing acts of terrorism, collaborating thanks to a CT Fusion Center, which has been operational since 2015. As previously mentioned, whereas the MoD took the lead in security efforts in specific zones, such as the mountainous areas close to the Algerian border where terrorist cells are concentrated, or the southern border, the MoI is the lead counterterrorism agency in the rest of the country (US State Department 2015). It remains undisputed, however, that, after decades of neglect and marginalization, the MoD has seen its fortune reversed in the post- revolutionary setting. Under Bourguiba, but especially since 1990, the military had been sidelined, underfunded, and under-staffed as a coup-prevention strategy. The 1990

“Barraket Essahel” affair, named after a small city near coastal Hammamet—in which 244 soldiers of all ranks were convicted for a supposed coup plot to facilitate Ennahdha’s rise to power—brought about Ben Ali’s stigmatization of the army. On the other hand, being kept at arm’s length, far from the political establishment, has enabled the MoD to keep its reputation intact, while maintaining a highly, albeit small, professional army. Since 2011, the army’s status never ceased to shine, not just in material but also symbolic terms (Grewal 2016). Materially thanks to increasing resources, with a rise of 259 percent of the military budget between 2011 and 2016 (Al Bawsala 2016) and also thanks to increasing US funding, especially under the Obama presidency. Since the 2015 the “major non-NATO” designation, namely, the United States tripled its SA to roughly US\$100 million in 2016 (Goodman 2015), signaling the long-term nature of the security commitment, also symbolized by a Memorandum of Understanding signed in May 2015 and a Bilateral Country Action Plan signed in 2017, intended to boost bilateral military and security cooperation. Since 2011, in other words, the MoD, has benefitted from a twofold reputation: for having been kept at the margins of political life and corruption in the two previous decades and for not having shot at 2010–11 protesters. It has acquired increasing resources and has strengthened its position within the country’s security establishment. In the same timeframe, the MoI has struggled to accept reformist programs, both domestic and by external donors, and has muddled through, partially losing out in terms of resources’ allocation and influence to the MoD.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

When, in June 2015, a massacre on a beach in a Sousse resort killed dozens of European tourists, the shock triggered a strong reaction in key European member states, notably the UK, France, and Germany, which offered substantially

increased SA to the Tunisian government. Within a short period, European countries and the Tunisian government agreed on a new mechanism of multilateral security cooperation. The creation of an enlarged G7, including also the EU, facilitated coordination both among external donors and among ministries and security agencies on

the Tunisian side. The centralization of decision-making in the security arena came about thanks to the 2014 Constitution, which acknowledged a key role to the President of the Republic's ability to steer the policy process in the security sector. President Essebsi capitalized on these provisions and on the availability of external donors to oversee rapidly a series of measures significantly improving bureaucratic coordination and overall efficiency. While the country has significantly improved its safety, in terms of both public perception and the prevention of widescale terrorist attacks, the good governance aspect of security reforms has lagged behind. This has also been caused by the only partial adherence of the MoI to the overhaul of the security sector, with different Directorate-Generals pushing for different agendas and overall acting as veto players rather than cooperating actors. The reluctant reformer has favored not only the presidentialization of security decision-making in the hands of the presidency of the republic but also the increasing role played by the MoD, whose budget and recruitment capacity continues to rise. Modernization of the security sector, in other words, remains to be fulfilled.

Second, the notion and understanding of security, while not a regime security as in the Ben Ali era, remains a top-down, state-security understanding. The distance remains between the state and local populations, whose role can be manipulated under the guise of UNDP-sponsored community policing, but who are far from being considered the real subjects defining what security is. More encompassing notions and understandings of security as societal security would enable the central authority to envisage effectively the real scope of the challenge ahead when countering security threats. While local support to terrorist groups in the mountainous areas bordering Algeria is far from being a widespread phenomenon, the deteriorating conditions in these historically politically, and not just economically marginalized, areas risk derailing the path of political stability.

Lastly, both the first and the second aspects point to the need for a rethinking of the supposedly technical and post-interventionist SA by external donors when it comes to a country whose political trajectory remains prone to vulnerabilities and political and security challenges. Far from



impinging purely on Tunisia's management of security threats, external SA has contributed to the verticalization of political power in the hands of the presidency of the republic, weakening the role of parliament in the security field, as that of the prime minister. Further, it has reified the elites' narrative exclusively focusing on the hard security dimension of the terrorist threat, disregarding the social, cultural, and economic bases accounting for the increasing local support to terrorists by some populations. The call for an approach envisaging security as a more encompassing policy field, far from being a normative ideal, is justified on a pragmatic level where securitization of managing marginal areas through the prism of either cross-border illegal trafficking or as havens for terrorist activities risks alienating increasing portions of the population.

#### **ENDNOTES**

1. Minister of the Interior, Republic of Tunisia, "Signature d'un accord de coopération sécuritaire entre l'Allemagne et la Tunisie," Tunis, September 26, 2016. <http://www.interieur.gov.tn/fr/>.
2. Interview at the French Embassy, Tunis, June 2017.
3. For more information, see <http://securityassistance.org/tunisia/>.

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