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# Applying Principal-Agent Theory to Security Force Assistance: The Atypical Case of Post-2015 Tunisia

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article applies the Principal-Agent model to Security Force Assistance (SFA) in Tunisia, problematising some of its assumptions and advancing complementary notions to capture evolving international and national security practices. By investigating how post-2015 SFA contributed to the reconfiguration and evolution of domestic actors, national strategies, and debates on security in the context of regime change, we argue that it epitomises a counter-intuitive success story of principals-agents' dynamics leading to increased security performance. Meanwhile, SFA evolved from an emergency and state-centric approach, to a partially diversified set of practices embodying more comprehensive and bottom-up understanding of societal and human security.

**KEYWORDS:** Armed forces; counter-terrorism; borders; state security; societal security; Tunisia

The understanding of security in Tunisia has dramatically shifted in the past decade. Prior to the 2010–2011 uprisings, regime security – identified as the physical and political survival of the regime’s elites – was the overarching strategic security paradigm. After the fall of the Ben Ali regime, security became associated with state, rather than regime, security. This broadened the identification of appropriate security recipients (in the eyes of Tunisia’s security officials) to include government institutions, territory and the population as a whole. Since three waves of post-revolutionary terrorist attacks (in 2013, 2015 and above all in 2016 in Ben Guerdane), the discourse about what constitutes Tunisia’s security has further shifted. What has emerged may be subsumed under the rubric of ‘societal security’, closely tied to the idea of community resilience, and commonly meant as the ability to withstand, adapt, and recover from stresses and shocks (European Commission 2012). This conceptual change came with the revised local and international security practices associated with Security Force Assistance (SFA).

In post-revolutionary Tunisia, key issues included the need to reform the police, the main agent through which the previous regime had silenced dissent, repressed contesting voices and committed human rights abuses for three decades; and secondly, the fight against terrorism. Given the high level of surveillance during the Ben Ali regime terrorism was not a persistent threat. In the post-2011 democratic setting, however, the country experienced unprecedented attacks on foreigners and security forces. Demands for normatively inspired human rights-focused reforms of the security services were replaced by a more technical and pragmatic agenda of improving the effectiveness of the security sector in fighting violent extremists. This new priority required the assistance of foreign actors. Initially fragmented and chaotic, post-2015 SFA was progressively coordinated and effective.

Given Tunisia’s dependence on foreign assistance, it is reasonable to refer to a provider-driven environment wherein foreign actors have delegated to local agents in security matters. A principal-agent (P-A) model may be used to investigate how SFA contributed to the reconfiguration and evolution of domestic security actors, national strategies and debates. We frame SFA in Tunisia, however, as an atypical case of the P-A problem. SFA, we argue, has improved the country’s sense of safety needed for the political system’s legitimacy, and enhanced the performance of security forces. Despite the heterogeneity of both external security providers (the principals) and Tunisian recipients (the agents), the alignment of interests between these two ‘sides’ around the common goal of defeating terrorism resulted in operational success in counterterrorism and border management, and some success in terrorism prevention. SFA has also played an unintended political role: specifically, it gave reputational advantages to security actors (for example the armed forces) trying to redeem themselves after the fall of the Ben Ali regime, and paved the way for the strengthening executive power to the detriment of parliament. While doing so, SFA facilitated the adoption of a narrower and more technical toolkit of security approaches and instruments than a Security Sector Reform (SSR) package would have done.

Inspired by a P-A framework initially formulated by Jensen and Meckling's (1976) economic theories, we overcome some of the limits and shortcomings of this approach. First, this model tends to consider principal and agent as monolithic blocs. By contrast, we argue, SFA in Tunisia clearly points to the plural nature of the agency of actors at different points of the SFA relationship. The several principals include the EU and G7plus; within the G7plus are various political sensitivities, priorities and threat perceptions. Each foreign provider has pursued its own agenda, as the operational working groups of the G7plus clearly illustrate.<sup>1</sup> On the side of the agent, various institutional actors, ministries, and security bodies have acted according to diverging priorities and threat perceptions. Paradoxically, principals, though diverse, have acted in a more coherent way than Tunisian agents. Secondly, and in contrast to a key P-A assumption, postulating the principal's difficulty in ensuring the agent's compliance we find that the G7plus have reduced the likelihood of the agent's opportunistic behaviour, while acting as a coordinating mechanism among the principal(s). In doing so, the new SFA format mitigated the absence of a classic bilateral conditionality weighing on the agent.

Methodologically, this analysis principally relies on examination of key documents – first and foremost the two national strategies on counter-terrorism and border management, drafts of confidential reports (matrices of the G7plus working groups) – news reports and personal interviews. In particular, two rounds of semi-structured interviews and several informal conversations were carried out in Tunis and in Ben Guerdane on the Libyan border (November 2019). They targeted a plurality of stakeholders (27 interviewees), including local administrators, civil society actors and labour unionists (19); and European, UN and American diplomats (4) as well as Tunisian security officers and experts (4), who traditionally would be much less approachable.<sup>2</sup>

The article provides an overview of events that characterised the security scenario after regime change. It also reflects upon the viability of the P-A model when applied to post2011 SFA in Tunisia. Thirdly, it explores the reconfiguration of domestic security actors and their role in formulating national strategies and their implementation. The article then looks at the extent to which SFA, explicitly or implicitly, encouraged emergency, technically-driven, short-term responses. Lastly, the article discusses how the Ben Guerdane episode pushed providers and recipients to diversify their approach to include more socially ingrained security mechanisms, epitomised by community policing (Service and Al-Rafie 2020), prevention and de-radicalisation activities.

## **Challenging security scenarios in a post-revolutionary setting**

In the wake of the uprisings, Tunisia's general public, local civil society organisations and various political figures demanded broad reform of the security sector, especially the internal security forces (ISFs), the long-standing instruments of repression and surveillance directly controlled by the Ministry of Interior (MOI). Demands included respect for rule of law-based procedures as well as increased accountability for the MOI, to be achieved through Security Sector Reform (SSR). In 2011, an interim government expressed interest in an EU-led SSR 'package', which alongside security forces' training foresaw reform of the MOI and the judiciary. Adoption and implementation of this package has been excruciatingly slow, and key aspects of the police and MOI's modus operandi have not been revised (Hanau Santini and Cimini 2019a, 2019b).

Two assassinations in 2013 threatened to derail the democratic transition, but it was only in 2015 that the terrorist threat became existential, or so it was depicted by political elites and foreign actors, mostly European. On March 18, 2015, two gunmen attacked the Bardo Museum in Tunis, killing 21 foreigners and a Tunisian security agent. Shortly afterwards, on June 26, a gunman rampaged through a beach resort in Sousse, killing 38 foreign tourists, 30 of them British. Then, on November 24, a suicide attack on a bus in downtown Tunis killed 12 presidential guards and wounded 20 others, including four civilians. This threat to Tunisia's democratic transition and the high number of Western casualties led European countries – and, shortly after, the US and others – to pledge technical rather than normatively driven forms of security assistance. As a result, bigger and more coordinated international SFA prioritised efficiency over transparency and democratic accountability among the security forces (Hanau Santini and Cimini 2019b). More effective security forces were essential to make the country safer, not least for recovery of the vital tourist industry and foreign investment (Grewal 2019).

Post-2015 SFA materialised under a flexible, ad hoc coordination mechanism – the G7plus<sup>3</sup> – aiming to avoid duplication and promote sharing of information among Western countries about their respective security assistance. The G7plus has thus far acted as only a clearing house through which members share information on training activities and equipment supplied to their Tunisian counterparts. The 2015–16 terrorist attacks led to the 'assemblage' of different stakeholders' interests and paved the way for a lighter footprint and more technical form of SFA. The security sector's operational success has since been based on performance in two main areas – counterterrorism and border management.

In contrast to other cases analysed in the special issue, post-2015 SFA to Tunisia has met with a relatively high degree of success. This has to do with political alignment between principals and agents around the common goal of defeating

terrorism. In doing so, SFA enhanced the legitimacy of the new political system and that of security forces too, in as much as they better dealt with one of their most pressing and high-impact challenges. Indeed, after the terrorist attacks, scepticism about democracy had significantly increased (Andersen and Brym 2017).

In 2016, the security approach further changed when a qualitatively different incident took place. On March 7, jihadists from Libya attacked the military and National Guard barracks in the southeast border town of Ben Guerdane, in order to create a stronghold for the Islamic Caliphate in Tunisia. The jihadist attack – with 22 deaths among civilians and security personnel – was rebuffed only with unprecedented collaboration among security forces and the spontaneous support of ordinary citizens. This successful counteroffensive, better known as the ‘victory’ of Ben Guerdane, led to considerable praise for the security forces; the active involvement of dozens of residents symbolised the moral and social ‘redemption’ of a community often stigmatised as alien and unreliable.

Ben Guerdane, close to the Ras Jedir crossing point with Libya, had historically been associated with terrorism and smuggling of contraband, including weapons. By unequivocally siding with the security forces, the alleged criminal nature of the border population was demystified and the name of the city cleared. Unprecedented cooperation between local residents and security forces created a window of opportunity for institutionalising information-sharing. Socially ingrained security mechanisms were premised on an active role of individuals and civil society associations in collaborating with state security agencies. This became the backbone of community policing, a new policy initiative spearheaded by foreign security providers.

To sum up, post-2015 SFA fit with an emergency, performance-driven and state-centric approach, but at the expense of more comprehensive and bottom-up understandings of human and societal security. After what happened in Ben Guerdane, however, more attention was paid to prevention, deradicalisation and local communities (Simoncini 2021) within the original rationale of helping Tunisia’s security forces respond to threats of armed extremists. Yet while post-2016 security practices have increasingly engaged specific sectors of society and historically marginalised areas to co-opt local populations, the revolution’s initial demands of police reform continued to be neglected.

### **The principal-agent theory and SFA to Tunisia**

P-A mechanisms were originally developed by economists and subsequently borrowed by political scientists to explore interactions featuring some degree of power delegation from a principal to an agent as a cost-saving strategy (Nielson and Tierney 2003; Feaver 2003; Salehyan 2010).

While we start with the P-A model, we recognise that some criticisms cannot be ignored. The model builds upon rational choice, whereby the goal is reducing transaction costs, neglecting relational dynamics. P-A, moreover, 'is not a grand theory, but a midlevel framework', as it can provide the description of how authority is delegated but does shed light on the underlying causal mechanisms that lead to a specific outcome (Drieskens and Reykers 2017, 277).

Having said that, we still find that the approach has a heuristic value that we aim to illustrate with the case of post-revolutionary Tunisia. In the introduction to this Special Issue, Rolandsen, Dwyer and Reno (2021) note that the P-A model provides an effective theoretical lens for conceptualising SFA dynamics between providers and recipients, particularly in terms of the challenges they meet on the ground. As Biddle (2017) recalls, this approach moves from the assumption of asymmetric bilateral relations between the provider (principal) and recipient (agent), whereby the provider delegates tasks to the recipient within an asymmetric and highly complex relationship. Conversely, local actors (the agent) benefit from information asymmetries to the detriment of the patron, who is farther away and has less knowledge of the political and security context (Feaver 2003, chapt. 3; Ladwig 2016). Moreover, the more principals available and willing to provide security assistance, the more limited the leverage each provider has to impose conditionality or an agenda vis-à-vis the local agent.

According to Biddle (2017, 126–27), conditions for a successful and effective delegation of authority include: political interest alignment between the two 'contractors', sufficient resources employed by the principal to enable real leverage over the agent, monitoring mechanisms over use of these resources, and conditionality, i.e. strings attached to the aid provided. These conditions are rarely met. SFA is in fact a P-A conundrum where agency losses, major information asymmetries and difficult monitoring are the norm.

In light of this, SFA to Tunisia is both atypical and interesting for at least two main reasons. Contrary to prevailing accounts of SFA, post-2015 Tunisia is a success story. According to the MoI, SFA has contributed to strengthening Tunisian security forces in thwarting attacks, seizing arms, dismantling terrorist cells and handling complex operations such as in Ben Guerdane. While attacks against security forces are periodically recorded (Marsad Security 2020), they have been more amateurish and less deadly than those in 2015–16. In 2019, only 13 per cent of the population were reported as considering terrorism as the biggest challenge Tunisia faced (along with corruption), whereas 48 per cent were more worried about economic challenges (Arab Barometer 2019). Despite the methodological challenges in assessing stable and straightforward causal relationships between SFA and increased security, the very fact that recipients acknowledge this result and that large-scale terrorist events



have not taken place since 2015–2016 provides some preliminary indication of the impact of implemented SFA.

This ‘success’ is owed to the alignment of interests between the provider and the recipient: the Sousse attacks against European tourists sent shockwaves across the political and economic elites of the country, sharing the view that countering terrorism was vital in ensuring that tourism could continue to be an engine of the economy. As Biddle, Macdonald, and Baker (2018) point out, a leading condition undermining SFA operations is a divergence of interests between principal and agent. This ‘misalignment’ limits leverage for the provider in checking, assessing and monitoring the use of assistance provided. In other words, there exists an ‘agency cost’, namely the agent’s likely departure from the principal’s interests (also known as ‘interest asymmetry’), which is encouraged by the traditional agent’s advantageous access to information.

Another aspect of traditional P-A problems is the nature of the principal: the more monolithic, the stronger. Despite the plurality of providers, which theoretically strengthens the recipient’s agency vis-à-vis the providers, donors shared information in order to avoid duplication and ‘shopping lists’ from the Tunisian authorities asking for equipment. Tunisian security recipients acted in a less coordinated way than expected, which undermined the overall performance and success of SFA activities. This was characterised not only by the multiplicity of Tunisian political security actors with differing if not competing agendas, but also by the absence of a comprehensive national strategy of security. Production and adoption of single-issue – whether counter-terrorism or border management – white papers with contradictory language and goals, reflected the Tunisian agent’s lack of cohesion around the definition of interests as a recipient of SFA, as shown below.

Secondly, SFA efforts vary enormously in terms of kind and size, and they take place usually in conflict or post-conflict contexts, where organised violence recently took place or is still occurring. Post-2011 Tunisia falls into this category only insofar as it was exposed to episodic – though consequential – terrorist violence. If and when Tunisia has been classified as a fragile context, this mostly has to do with its regional environment, regional security dynamics, including the conflict in Libya, the 2019 revolts in Algeria, the reorganisation of that country’s regime, and the violent authoritarian reversal in Egypt.

Given its heterogeneous nature, Tunisian agency resembles the notion of assemblages (Holmqvist, Bachmann, and Bell 2015). However, the unbalanced power relation favouring the (multiple) principals, along with the increasing coordination on both sides, clash with the idea of co-dependence, co-production and decentralised practices that assemblage theories usually entail (Doucet 2016).

## Winners and losers among post-2015 security actors

After the uprisings, the Ben Ali regime's centralised power structure experienced a diffusion of authority, while the security apparatus lost its mission as key guardian of the regime. In post-revolutionary Tunisia, the Ministry of Interior and the Presidency lost their monopoly over security affairs and security agencies. In parallel, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) has gained in importance and competed with the Interior for resources in a reorganising system. SFA provision was closely intertwined with these domestic contingencies. Three trends emerged in the reconfiguration of the Tunisian institutional actors involved.

The first trend involves centralising of the security decision-making process in the hands of President Essebsi. Unlike his predecessor, Moncef Marzouki (2011–14), Essebsi capitalised on new constitutional provisions (see Articles 72–88) and the availability of external providers to strengthen the executive's role in security matters. For instance, Essebsi revived and presided over the National Security Council (NSC), thereby marginalising the legislature. He personally engaged in security policy formulation, and got his advisor, Rear-Admiral Kamel Akrouf, to act as intermediary with G7plus donors in all SFA negotiations.<sup>4</sup> While the Constitution (Title 4 in particular) acknowledges a role for the President in determining the orientation of the state in foreign relations and national security, chairing the NSC, and defending the homeland, nowhere is there mentioned a presidential prerogative in contributing to policy documents or strategies.

Secondly, the parliament has underperformed in terms of oversight and because of insufficient funding (Yerkes and Ben Yahmed 2019). Moreover, a combination of factors – the absence of a functioning Constitutional Court, the post-2015 state of emergency, and the 2015 anti-terrorism law – further eroded the parliament's capacity to operate effectively. The parliament's responsibility in security and defence matters are delegated to two post-2011 parliamentary committees, neither of which has played a significant role (Hanau Santini and Cimini 2019b). Against this backdrop, by prioritising result-oriented technical and training assistance, SFA has indirectly contributed to the parliament's marginality.

Finally, the MoD and the armed forces were empowered in at least two ways. First was through increased funding by external SFA and as a share of the government's budget. If the parliament is a partial loser among post-2011 security actors, the army has made up for decades of marginalisation under Ben Ali. In the aftermath of the alleged 1991 coup plot, the police targeted the military and Islamists with arrests, torture, and dismissals<sup>5</sup> (on this point, see also Grewal 2016). This exacerbated tensions between the military and the police, with the latter considerably strengthened.<sup>6</sup> In 2011, however, when most of the populace and new political leaders regarded the police with mistrust, the armed forces re-discovered their role

and gained the confidence of the people. By allegedly refusing to crack down on demonstrators and after going back to their barracks, the armed forces came to be seen as 'guardians' of the revolution and emotionally associated with the idea of the 'nation'.<sup>7</sup> The army in particular still ranks as the most trusted institution among Tunisians. According to a recent survey, 95 per cent of respondents had full confidence in the army, followed by the Presidency of the Republic (78.3 per cent) and the police (77.4 per cent) (SIGMA 2019). In another survey the army was again firmly on top, trusted by 88 per cent, and the police come second with a more polarising 51 per cent (International Republican Institute 2019). Furthermore, exhibiting strong anti-system sentiment, 50 per cent of the population actually called on the military to expand its role beyond security (Albrecht, Bufano, and Koehler 2021).

The deteriorating security environment and burnished reputation of the army have led to the doubling of military salaries since 2012.<sup>8</sup> New contracts and international partnerships, notably with the US, have played a significant role in modernising equipment and adapting training to new challenges. Between the fiscal years 2011 and 2014 alone, the US – through several State and Defence Department programmes – allocated an estimated US\$121 million to Tunisia's military, corresponding to 73 per cent of the total security assistance, and mostly devoted to equipment (Security Assistance Monitor 2015). Between 2015 and 2018 US security aid considerably increased, with the Foreign Military Financing programme earmarking the bulk of funds (Security Assistance Monitor 2015). A wide range of training programmes undertaken by European partners and NATO targeted the Tunisian military (Shah and Dalton 2020). It is important to note, even if training includes elements of rule-of-law and human rights – as is the case for the US and German SFA – the bulk of funding is not channeled towards the structural problems of governance (see Marsh and Rolandsen 2021).

### **Tunisia's national security strategies: An SFA-endorsed state-centred approach**

By mostly focusing on technical assistance and training traditional actors, SFA – first and foremost coordinated through the G7plus – endorsed a myopic state-centric approach to Tunisia's shifting security environment. Post-2011 governments emphasised and institutionalised sovereignty and the inviolability of territorial boundaries as the country's key security pillars, yet failed to develop a comprehensive national strategy for security and defence. This statist view took precedence over concepts prioritising individual and societal dimensions of security that were critical factors of concern to many Tunisians after autocratic rule. They consider citizens, not the state, as the primary referent for security, and shift the

focus from military threats to multiple challenges, such as economic opportunity, identity, and societal coherence, among others.

Against this backdrop, terrorism and borders became key concerns for domestic actors, under the aegis of mainstream SFA. Instead of a single security strategy, two reference documents stand out: first is the National Strategy Against Extremism and Terrorism of July 2016, better known as the Counter-terrorism (CT) Strategy (Republic of Tunisia 2016); second is the National Strategy on Borders, Borders Strategy for short (Republic of Tunisia 2017). The security understandings enshrined in these strategies offer further insights into how principals and agents' interests and approaches intersect and converge, and reveal the dimensions missing in the broader security architecture of the country.

Tunisia's Counter-terrorism Strategy has rested on four key pillars – Prevent, Protect, Pursue and Respond – which mimicked the structure of the EU's 2005 CT strategy.<sup>9</sup> It emphasized the need to prevent violent extremism and raise terrorism awareness among the population (LaFrance 2019). Seemingly, a more bottom-up, participatory approach – supported by the United Nations which is a key partner of Tunisia's National CT Commission – was implemented in the revision of this strategy, originally conceived as a strictly securitised response without parliamentary debate and the involvement of civil society actors.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, strongly encouraged and sponsored by the EU and the US, Tunisia has deployed unprecedented levels of personnel, technology, and resources to secure and manage borders, specifically that with Libya. As previously mentioned, Essebsi's centralising efforts materialised in the way the two strategies were adopted. Not unlike the Counter-terrorism Strategy, in September 2017, the president commissioned the Borders Strategy in a meeting of the NSC.<sup>11</sup> By focusing on sovereignty, it embodies a classic Westphalian approach. Borders became key referents in securing the state, in that 'any security breach of our borders is a threat to the security of the nation, its sovereignty and economy' (Republic of Tunisia 2017, 9).

If borders are crucial to the general concern of 'homeland, economic and social security' as well as political stability, the Borders Strategy identifies as key challenges organised crime, cross-border crime, and above all smuggling and terrorist infiltration (Republic of Tunisia 2017, 2). Such a discourse on 'overlapping illegalities' (Günay and Somnavilla 2020) over-simplifies more complex phenomena, for instance, the scale of the actors involved (individual and small smugglers, organised mafia and networks, etc.) and of smuggled goods (whether licit or illicit). This stigmatising discourse mirrors an oft-cited narrative by central authorities (and external donors) of 'cross-fertilisation' of the informal economy and irregular migration, terrorism and smuggling (Mullin 2015, quoted in Günay and Somnavilla

2020). In doing so, the Strategy reproduces a criminalisation of border communities' informal economic activities, without taking into consideration the detrimental effects that hardened borders have on their livelihood. Notably, the increased level of uncertainty that our interviews confirmed is closely associated with the project of electronic surveillance and the creation of an earthen barrier along the Libyan-Tunisian border between the two official crossing points of Ben Guerdane (in the north) and Dehiba (in the south). Financed by the US and Germany, and run by the Tunisian MoD, the southern border's electronic surveillance has been operational since March 2019, and work continued to extend it further south by the end of 2021.<sup>12</sup>

Soon after the announcement of the creation of this 'wall' without consultation with border communities, local branches of labour unions – the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), Tunisian Union of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts (UTICA) and the Tunisian Union of Agriculture and Fisheries (UTAP) – denounced increasing tensions among those communities (Association of Citizenship and Development of Ben Guerdane 2015). External security providers were locally blamed for a decision going 'against the national interest', and they questioned the value of such a measure in fighting terrorism (Nawaat 2015). In other words, the intention to build a wall was an expression of exclusionary politics for the benefit of a specific constituency: external principals and central authorities in Tunis.

The legitimisation by SFA of the securitisation mantra and the following militarisation of the borders, clearly point to the complexity of assuming that the State can be a provider of security at all times, for instance when it risks making a certain portion of the population insecure in an attempt to secure itself (Bilgin 2003). In questioning traditional security approaches, Wæver (1998, 119) noted how the overwhelming focus was 'on the political, institutional unit – the state – as security unit'. And this is exactly what Tunisia's government and its many SFA providers have been doing, mostly working on defence of borders. The abovementioned Borders Strategy identifies social justice – and in particular targeted development programmes and job-creation – as key pillars of any violent extremism' prevention in the country's least developed regions (Republic of Tunisia 2017, 3). Nonetheless, what could have been interpreted as elements of human security and societal security have been translated on the ground merely as an effort to create a free trade zone and an industrial area close to Ben Guerdane and Dehiba. These initiatives alone are unlikely to solve the endemic socio-economic problems affecting the areas, not the least because of the reduced number of people who could be employed there or benefit from them.<sup>13</sup>

The most recent SFA border initiatives revolve around a multilateral maritime border surveillance project, one of only two such initiatives undertaken in Tunisia.<sup>14</sup>

The project was kick-started by the British in 2017; France and the United States joined later, and Germany, Italy, the EU Delegation and the International Centre for Migration Policy Development followed in 2018. The actors already involved in activities with the Tunisian Maritime National Guard joined the Garde Nationale Maritime (GNM) Steering Group to improve coordination and effectiveness. After all, border management and the fight against terrorism correspond with prominent Principals' interests. Nonetheless, this initiative raised the issue of foreign intrusion, shining a spotlight on otherwise mundane security activities.

### **Whose security in post-2011 Tunisia?**

Operational capacity improved through SFA was pivotal in facing the emergency linked to terrorism. However, security in this context has wide effects and implications. In the postrevolutionary era, as previously argued, emphasis was placed on state security rather than regime security. Until 2011, the survival of Ben Ali's regime had dictated security and defence policy, as demonstrated by the prevailing coup-proofing attitude. Since then, the policy has been formulated to focus on border integrity and monopoly of force.

While Tunisians, as measured by opinion polls and surveys, have positively assessed improved security, notions of what 'security' means continue to differ between civil society and politics. Since 2011, demands for more comprehensive understandings in security, including socio-economic rights, have not been incorporated in the political establishment's conventional approach. But vague understanding that security extends beyond counter-terrorism was evident in the 2019 televised presidential debates, where 'national security' was variously associated with, among other things, socio-economic issues, organised crime, protection of Tunisian production sites (oil and phosphates in particular) from foreign exploitation, and food supply (Wataniya TV 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). Yet candidates seeming to adopt broader notions of security as encompassing social and economic rights did so in a rhetorical way, without spelling out policy proposals.

In 2016, the joint civilian–military effort that derailed the terrorist plan of creating a jihadi stronghold in Ben Guerdane pointed to a further twist, with a widespread public perception linking security to the wellbeing of the community, in other words, societal security. This notion relates to the capability of a society to preserve its essential characteristics in the face of variable circumstances and despite potential or actual threats' (Wæver et al. 1993, 23). This is not how security is talked about by political elites, whose counter-terrorism focus goes hand in hand with a narrow SFA technical assistance programme. A more diversified approach has been emerging since then around prevention and deradicalisation, by involving society more closely into state security activities. SFA in Tunisia has in only a few years moved from ad

hoc emergency measures – such as the 2015 CT strategy – to strategies with a long-term dimension, a more inclusive approach, and with society as both a security actor and a security target to be protected. The concept of security has come to include local, national and international actors, all premised on local communities' resilience.

Unlike earlier approaches to resilience, which put forward a linear, static perspective of a mere return to a previous equilibrium, our understanding of resilience enshrines the proactive and transformative role of local agents. This involves not only a focus on internal capacities and capabilities rather than on external assistance (Chandler 2015), but also consideration of bottom-up input and local ownership as an unavoidable condition for the long-term success of security assistance. This way of thinking about security suggests something similar to the 'local turn' of peace studies and peacebuilding, which have emphasised complexity, local capacities, and human agency (Juncos and Joseph 2020).

Community policing projects (Police de proximité), sponsored especially by the UNDP, are a notable example of this shift. Taking a cue from the efficient cooperation between societal and security forces in Ben Guerdane, providers and recipients have turned their attention to the local level of countering and preventing terrorism. This alternative approach stresses capacity building of police officers, while also working with them, civil society and local authorities (delegations or municipalities) under the framework of local security committees (Comités Locaux de Sécurité, CLS), which elaborate local security plans through bottom-up efforts (United Nations 2017). These community activities include raising popular awareness of three core themes, in shorthand drugs, women and crime prevention. Community policing has a twofold goal. In a phase of democratic consolidation and departure from the long-lasting Ben Ali's 'security pact' with the population (Hibou 2006), it aims at recovering the bottom-up reputation of the police and of the vertical state-society relationship, while avoiding the risks inherent in a former 'police state' such as Tunisia (Barany 2011). Nevertheless, a hidden or unintended consequence of such an approach could easily be securitisation of society, which is more likely in those peripheral areas that historically have had tense relations with the centre of power. Indeed, whereas the CLSs are currently dispersed across Tunisia, they are mostly located in the south and interior regions. The MoI, which was supposed to set up new CLSs on its own, following the good practice inaugurated by the UNDP, has lagged behind.<sup>15</sup>

Since 2016, SFA has developed not just alongside MoD training and assistance programmes, but increasingly also in accordance with MoI priorities and imperatives. In addition to community policing projects, SFA in Tunisia has diversified to focus on countering and preventing violent extremism. Within the G7plus, a fifth operational Working Group was created to counter radicalisation.<sup>16</sup> Simultaneously, Tunisian authorities have stepped up de-radicalisation efforts, in light of the return of foreign

fighters; Tunisia remains one of the main exporters of foreign fighters worldwide (Barrett 2017; Renard 2019). Hence, dealing with individuals coming back from 'conflict zones' had become a pressing issue, sparking debate on whether to deny their entry or, more realistically, how to detain them (Institut Tunisien Des Études Stratégiques 2018). An ad-hoc parliamentary committee was created at the beginning of 2017 to investigate the phenomenon of foreign fighters and the networks behind them with poor results, further pointing to the limited role the parliament had played in security and defence matters (Marsad Majles 2019).

As part of the government's efforts to avoid further radicalisation and recidivism – and in accordance with one of the four pillars of the 2016 national strategy to fight terrorism and extremism – a counter-narrative platform financed by the British Embassy and the British Council has been created to promote awareness-raising campaigns through media.<sup>17</sup> This initiative was criticised for its limited impact and its donor-driven nature (Letsch 2018). In sum, Tunisian authorities, in collaboration with foreign providers, have turned attention to the social appeal and diffusion of terrorism, thus increasingly departing from the narrower technical assistance programmes related to military training and overall capacity building in the defence sector. Officials have broadened the scope of security policies to include developmental activities targeting marginalised regions where the socio-cultural feeling of disenfranchisement has triggered waves of protest and unrest.

## **Conclusion**

Through an analysis of measures taken in the aftermath of devastating terrorist attacks, we have discussed how SFA has empowered the army and confirmed the parliament's marginality in security matters. At the same time, SFA contributed to the broadening of security referents, including societal actors. From an initial strict counter-terrorism focus in the aftermath of the 2015 Sousse attacks, a shift emerged after the 2016 battle of Ben Guerdane which called for diversifying SFA, partly to retain the 'ethos' of security forces and rebuild their relationship with society. Since then, both principals and agents' attention has moved towards the prevention of extremism and de-radicalisation, as evidenced by the creation of the new G7plus working group on counter-radicalisation and by community policing projects. By conceptually framing the case of SFA to Tunisia within principal-agent theory, we pointed to the peculiarity of Tunisia, because of the convergence of interests between providers and recipients which reduced the typical asymmetries suffered by principals whose heterogeneous nature nonetheless did not negatively impact their effectiveness. At the same time, by focusing on terrorism and border management – the pillars of the available domestic security strategies – SFA further promoted a state-centric vision of security. Although effective in countering short-



term threats, SFA unintentionally confirmed different understandings of security by civil society and political groups, and contributed to a tense situation localised at border areas.

Although Tunisia's path from authoritarianism was at risk on several occasions, the country is far from being a highly fragile state, as Mali and other cases explored in this Special Issue. In Tunisia, multiple providers of SFA did define a common metric for 'success', while a recipient with its own multiple interests accomplished its own goals. This example therefore offers interesting insights for broader research on SFA. First, Tunisia possessed a relatively cohesive and institutionalised security sector at the start of the SFA process. While not all agreed on policy priorities, the institutional strength of these forces prevented outright (armed) opposition. These issues were handled instead within the evolving democratic political system. Tunisia also shows that, despite intra-elite policy differences, there was a consensus that the country needed protection from armed extremism and the destabilising impact of developments in Libya, and to pursue the trajectory toward a more democratic political system.

These features of Tunisia's politics of SFA are not repeated in this issue's other cases, such as in Gambia, Mali, and Lebanon (Dwyer 2021; Marsh and Rolandsen 2021; Tholens 2021). Tunisia is 'atypical' in that sense, but it is still useful for comparative purposes because it highlights conditions in which SFA more-or-less 'works', at least as principals and agents define success. Multiple providers of SFA can work together, but rarely do so. For example, many of the SFA providers to Tunisia operate in Mali as well but do not cooperate in that context, as Marsh and Rolandsen (2021) point out. Tensions between police and army were mitigated in Tunisia, while Tholens (2021) clearly illustrates how SFA exacerbated tensions in Lebanon with its divided political elite. Diverse relationships between SFA providers and a recipient government that the Tunisia case helps us to see in a comparative light, also conform to likely hidden assumptions in the design of successful SFA, i.e. cohesive recipient governments with sufficient political will to implement agreed new security policies. Both features are absent to varying degrees from the other cases in this Special Issue.

In the Tunisian context, the role of external SFA has been instrumental in building capacity across the security forces in terms of improving their information and intelligence-sharing, inter-agency coordination, and overall performance. Meanwhile, the G7plus, the key mechanism for this, will likely undergo some changes. Since January 2020 the United States has held the G7 presidency, picking up the baton from France, and will set its priorities. France had steered the G7plus in pushing Tunisia to become more proactive and strategic rather than behaving as if it was passively at the receiving end. Some European partners express the view

that, given the significantly higher resources at the disposal of the US, this creates imbalances vis-à-vis the Tunisians as they can always go to the richest provider.<sup>18</sup> In view of this, some G7plus members have problematised the format and its future prospects, arguing in favour of adopting more ambitious procedures and resources, starting with a common budget and a leader coordinating joint efforts, thereby creating a truly multilateral initiative rather than the sum of individual bilateral ones.<sup>19</sup>

Lastly, whereas the perceived improved performance of security forces has positively impacted Tunisians' sense of safety and trust towards security institutions, their accountability is far from being taken for granted. In the medium term the lack of functioning oversight mechanisms could still come back and haunt the democratic consolidation of the country.

## Notes

1. Initially, four working groups were set up, each co-led by an international partner and a Tunisian: on borders (under the lead of Germany and the MoD), protection of tourist sites and other sensitive sites (United Kingdom and MoI), protection of ports and airports (France/United Kingdom and the MoI) and counter-terrorism (France/European Union and MoD).
2. Given the sensitive nature of the issues, but also a natural reluctance and even self-censorship of many interviewees, conversations were not recorded. Interviewees asked to remain anonymous.
3. The G7 was a multilateral coordination platform for international donors in the Tunisian security sector. In 2015, it became the G7plus 6 as the original members were joined by the EU, Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).
4. Authors' interviews with EU diplomats, Tunis, April and November 2019.
5. Cimini's interview with a retired military officer, Tunis, November 2019.
6. Ibid.
7. Authors' interviews with civil society activists, Ben Guerdane, November 2019. When asked to link a list of institutional actors to the concepts of 'state' (dawla) and/or 'nation' (watan), all our interviewees agreed upon connecting the army to the latter, implying a far greater emotional attachment.
8. Cimini's interview with a retired military officer, Tunis, November 2019.
9. Hanau Santini's interview with UN official, Tunis, November 2019.
10. Cimini's interview with UN project analyst, Tunis, November 2019.
11. This strategy, signed by the president in December 2017, was presented to the G7plus in April 2018, but there has been no real follow-up so far. Hanau Santini's interview, German Embassy, Tunis, November 2019.
12. Cimini's informal remote conversation, German Diplomat, October 2020.
13. Authors' interviews in Ben Guerdane with civil society activists, November 2019. Cimini's interview, Cultural Centre, Dehiba, 14 November 2019.
14. Cimini's interview, German Diplomat, Tunis, November 2019.
15. Cimini's interview with UN project analyst, Tunis, November 2019.

16. Ibid. This fifth Working Group was co-led by the Netherlands and the EU. On the Tunisian side, the leader was the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), at least before the Groups were consolidated from 5 to 3 with the new US presidency to the G7: (1) Border Integrity and Transport and Security; (2) Counter-Terrorism; and (3) Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism.
17. Cimini's interview with UN project analyst, Tunis, November 2019. 18. Hanau Santini's interview, British Embassy, Tunis, November 2019.
19. Hanau Santini's interview, French Embassy, Tunis, November 2019.

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