

# Country Report on Terrorism 2023 - Chapter 1 - Tunisia

**Overview:** Counterterrorism and border security continued as top priorities for Tunisia in 2023. The risk of terrorist activity remained elevated, exacerbated by Libyan political uncertainty and fragmented governance and regional events such as the ongoing instability in the Sahel and the Israel-Hamas conflict. There was one notable terrorist incident during 2023: a member of the National Guard opened fire near a synagogue during an annual Jewish pilgrimage in Djerba. Tunisia continued to professionalize its security apparatus in partnership with the United States and degraded terrorist capacity within the country, although the radicalization of individual actors remained a concern. Tunisia demonstrated consistent security force readiness and executed counterterrorism (CT) operations throughout the year. It continued implementing a national countering violent extremism (CVE) strategy and freezing terrorist assets, and improved its crisis response, coordination, and investigation systems. Concerns remained about the possible misuse of terrorism-related charges to arrest and prosecute individuals for expression and peaceful activism. High-profile investigations into former government officials, members of Parliament, media figures, and businesspersons on corruption, conspiracy, and terrorism charges also lacked transparency. The country has been under a continuous state of emergency since a string of terrorist attacks in 2015, and human rights organizations expressed concern the government used its powers under a 1978 decree law on the state of emergency to place citizens under house arrest without providing these individuals access to the court orders that led to their arrest.

**2023 Terrorist Incidents:** On May 9, National Guard member Wissam Khazri opened fire near the El-Ghriba synagogue during the annual Jewish pilgrimage in Djerba, killing two civilians and three security officers and wounding eight other persons. The Ministry of Interior (MOI) reacted immediately, killing Khazri seconds after he had opened fire. On May 10, President Saïed described the incident as a “criminal attack” to “sow the seeds of discord, hurt the tourist season, and destabilize the Tunisian state.” On May 11, the MOI announced the launch of a full government investigation into the attack. Tunisian authorities have not provided a suspected motivation for Khari’s act.

**Legislation, Law Enforcement, and Border Security:** There were no major changes to counterterrorism legislation in 2023.

The Government of Tunisia (GOT) continued to demonstrate advances in successful CT operations and improved coordination between the MOI and the Ministry of Defense. The GOT cooperated with the United States on investigations, prosecutions, and prevention of terrorist activity targeting U.S. interests in Tunisia and beyond.

The Tunisian National Counterterrorism Commission (CNLCT) presented the National CT Strategy to the presidency in late 2022, but at the end of 2023 the president’s approval of the proposed strategy was still pending.

The GOT had capabilities to prevent and respond to terrorist attacks against soft targets, such as hotels, stadia, tourist resorts, and cultural sites, in line with UNSC resolution 2341 on protecting critical infrastructure from terrorist attacks. Border security remained a top priority because of political fragmentation in Libya and instability in the Sahel. Tunisian forces successfully employed U.S.-funded patrol craft, vehicles, and weapons in joint operations. The U.S.-provided maritime coastal surveillance system supplied the Tunisian Navy with coverage along the Tunisian coastline.

Tunisia repatriated nine nationals from foreign conflict zones during 2023. Tunisia’s ability to reintegrate such individuals remained limited, owing to insubstantial prosecutorial, prison-, and social services-related capacity.

Significant CT-related law enforcement actions against terrorists and terrorist groups reported publicly included the following:

- The MOI announced that it identified and dismantled dozens of terrorist cells and made 203 arrests.
- In November, security forces recaptured five convicted terrorists who had escaped from the Mornaguia prison on October 31. The recapture underscored cooperation between the Ministries of Defense and Interior.
- In March the Coast Guard captured a wanted terrorist among 27 rescued irregular migrants on a capsized migrant boat near the coast of Kelibia. A court had previously convicted and sentenced him to 10 years' imprisonment for affiliation with a terrorist organization.

Tunisia has been under a state of emergency since 2015. Human rights organizations have criticized the repeated extensions for giving the executive extraordinary powers that limit judicial transparency and due process. They also have objected to the CT law for its vague definition of terrorism and the way it can be misused to prosecute individuals for exercising their freedom of expression.

The National Police, the National Guard, and military benefited from U.S.-provided capacity building assistance including investigative skills, interagency cooperation, and tactical skills; embedded mentors in distinct antiterrorism units; and train-the-trainer courses. Law enforcement and civil society were trained in community policing techniques. In February the MOI adopted a new police accountability code of conduct developed as part of a U.S.-funded program to strengthen the capacity of MOI inspectors general to conduct oversight and address police misconduct.

The GOT continued to cooperate with U.S. law enforcement to prevent acts of terrorism against U.S. citizens or interests in the country; however, owing to internal government dynamics, broader cooperation at times remained challenging and inefficient.

**Countering the Financing of Terrorism:** Tunisia is a member of the Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force (or MENAFATF), and its Financial Intelligence Unit, the Tunisian Financial Analysis Committee, is a member of the Egmont Group.

In 2023 the CNLCT monitored individuals, organizations, and entities with ties to terrorist organizations and, as of December, had frozen the funds/assets of 146 individuals and entities. There were no significant changes in 2023.

**Countering Violent Extremism:** Tunisia remained committed to preventing radicalization to violence through youth and educational programs coordinated among its ministries and civil society organizations. USAID continued implementing its MA3AN program – a seven-year, \$60 million youth resilience and community empowerment program. The complementary Solutions to Violent Extremism program worked with local governorates to analyze the drivers and dynamics of violent extremism and to develop methodologies for combating violent extremism.

**International and Regional Cooperation:** Tunisia is a board member for the International Institute of Justice and Rule of Law and a member of Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS events. It is a recipient country for CVE assistance from GCERF. The MOI seconded a representative to a multinational platform focused on battlefield evidence for use in prosecution of foreign terrorist fighters.