



Country Reports on Terrorism 2015 - Tunisia

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Overview: The Tunisian government has expanded its counterterrorism efforts since 2013, and further increased these efforts in 2015 after three high-profile attacks in March, June, and November perpetrated by Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)-inspired attackers. Additionally, al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)-aligned Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade continued small scale attacks against security personnel and, for the first time, against civilian targets. Tunisia reached out to the international community, particularly to the United States as its prime security partner, to seek support in transforming its security apparatus into fully professional and competent counterterrorism forces. U.S. security support to Tunisia grew in 2015, but Tunisia needs more time and international support to complete the overhaul of its military and civilian security forces. The new government was seated in February and brought together four of the leading parliamentary blocs, including broadly secularist Nida Tounes and Islamist Nahda. The government has made counterterrorism a top priority.

The new government officially joined the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL at the UN General Assembly in September and announced that it would serve as a pilot country for the International Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism Capacity-Building Mechanism (ICCM). Tunisia became a U.S. major non-NATO ally in 2015. Parliament passed a new counterterrorism law in July, which modernized the legislative framework for the prosecution and investigation of terrorism and implemented UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2178. Domestically, a National Counterterrorism Strategy was reportedly at its final stages of development in December. The strategy takes a comprehensive approach to the fight against terrorism along four pillars: prevention, protection, follow-up, and response. The military and civilian security forces continued to make counterterrorism their first priority, leading to the dismantlement of several terrorist cells and the disruption of a number of plots.

Terrorism remained a serious challenge for Tunisia that included the potential for terrorist attacks and the influx of arms and violent extremists from neighboring countries. The government grappled to adapt to terrorist threats that morphed in nature during the year, and focused on terrorist groups, such as Ansar al-Shari'a in Tunisia (AAS-T) and AQIM. In 2015, AQIM continued its activities in the western mountainous regions of the country, where it attacked security forces and targeted civilians for the first time.

Continuing instability in Libya led to the expansion of violent extremist groups, including ISIL, requiring the Tunisian government to increase its focus on its border with Libya and to adapt to

terrorist tactics that targeted foreign civilians and urban areas. The disproportionate numbers of Tunisians traveling to fight in Syria and Iraq – and the potential for the return of these fighters – was another cause for concern. The Tunisian Ministry of Interior asserted that 3,200 Tunisians have gone abroad to participate in violent extremist activities. Senior Tunisian government officials have said approximately 700 women have gone abroad to join extremists causes as well.

Tunisia has been active in countering terrorist threats. The government has put considerable efforts into stemming the flow of fighters to Syria and Iraq. Government numbers indicated that 700 returnees from Syria and Iraq are in prison or under house arrest.

2015 Terrorist Incidents: Terrorist organizations, including ISIL, AQIM, and AAS-T, were active in Tunisia throughout the year. The list of incidents below highlights some of the most significant terrorist attacks.

- On February 17, four National Guard service members on patrol died in a terrorist attack in Boulaaba, close to Mount Chaambi. The terrorists fled with service members' weapons. AQIM-affiliated Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade claimed responsibility for the attack.
- On March 18, two terrorists attacked the Bardo museum, killing 21 foreign tourists and a Tunisian security official, and injuring more than 40 civilians. The perpetrators and a member of Tunisia's Antiterrorism Brigade (BAT) died in the response operations. ISIL-inspired attackers claimed responsibility for the attack. The perpetrators had been trained in Libya.
- On June 26, a lone terrorist opened fire on tourists at two resort hotels in Sousse. Thirty-nine tourists, mostly British, died in the attack. Tunisian security forces killed the terrorist, who was trained in Libya. ISIL-inspired individuals claimed responsibility for the attack.
- On November 24, a terrorist killed 12 Presidential Guard members in a suicide attack on their bus in downtown Tunis. ISIL claimed responsibility.

Legislation, Law Enforcement, and Border Security: Parliament passed a new counterterrorism law in July, replacing the 2003 law as the primary legal framework for dealing with terrorism offenses. The law modernizes Tunisia's security legislation and strikes a better balance between the protection of human rights and fighting terrorism, and implements obligations under UNSCRs 2178 and the UN 1267/1989/2253 ISIL (Da'esh) and al-Qa'ida sanctions regime. It also enjoys greater legitimacy compared to the 2003 law, which prosecutors were reluctant to invoke since the 2011 revolution, as many in Tunisian society believed the legislation was an instrument of political repression by the previous regime. Parliament approved the bill 174-0, with 10 abstentions.

The Ministry of Interior (MOI) and the Ministry of Defense (MOD) share responsibility for detecting, deterring, and preventing acts of terrorism in Tunisia. The military's role in counterterrorism has gradually increased. The MOD leads Tunisia's security efforts in "military exclusion zones" in mountainous areas close to the Algerian border, a buffer zone along portions of the border with Libya, and in the southern tip of the country.

The MOI is the lead counterterrorism agency in the rest of the country. In particular, BAT and the National Guard Special Unit – elite units under the Ministry's National Police and National Guard, respectively – take the lead for counterterrorism operations. The National Unit for the Investigation of Terrorist Crimes leads investigations and liaises with the judicial system on prosecutions. With assistance from the Department of State and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Counterterrorism Fusion Center became operational this year, acting as a clearinghouse for information for Tunisia's security services.

Security forces were generally more effective in 2015 compared to the previous year, particularly in their response to de-escalating the threat of urban protests. The government's counterterrorism efforts have intensified, with successes including weapons seizures, arrests, and operations against armed groups throughout the country. At the tactical level, MOI and MOD forces worked together in some locations, coordinating their efforts in Joint Task Forces established in the military exclusion zones. Tunisian security forces expanded their counterterrorism operations throughout the country. The Bardo and Sousse attacks, and especially the suicide attack on a Presidential Guard bus, were followed by hundreds of raids and arrests.

Tunisia has an Automated Fingerprint Identification System (AFIS) and maintains fingerprint records for identification cards, criminal records, and latent prints. Tunisia currently has only one AFIS system, and it is not known if the records can be shared with other government agencies via automated responses. Tunisia also maintains a DNA database and has expressed an interest in becoming a Combined DNA Index System member. Tunisia does not currently share its biometric data with any countries. The Tunisian government has undertaken a sweeping overhaul of its civilian border security arrangements and plans to implement the reforms in phases starting in early 2016.

Continuing instability in Libya increasingly alarmed Tunisian authorities as a growing number of terrorist incidents were linked to violent extremists in Libya. Border security remained a priority in 2015, and Tunisian authorities collaborated with their Algerian counterparts to stem the flow of weapons and insurgents across their common borders and across their borders with Libya. Tunisia repeatedly publicly expressed satisfaction with its cooperation with Algeria. The Ministry of Defense took the lead in constructing a series of berms and trenches along more than 220 kilometers of the border with Libya in order to stem the flow of arms, terrorists, and contraband between the two countries. It has asked for and received support from Germany and the United States to install electronic surveillance equipment to augment the new barrier.

The year saw a significant number of arrests and raids by security forces. Then-Deputy Minister of Interior Rafik Chelly told the media October 27 that during the first 10 months of the year, 1,800 suspects had been brought to court on terrorism charges, 450 of whom were accused of recruiting Tunisian youth to join extremists in Syria and Iraq. The courts handed down a 36-year prison verdict against a Tunisian who had fought in Syria, the first verdict of its kind in Tunisia.

Other significant law enforcement actions and arrests related to counterterrorism included:

- On February 4, the police killed Kamel Gadhaghi, alleged murderer of politician Chokri Belaid, and six other suspected terrorists in a house raid in a suburb of Tunis. Clashes between suspected terrorists and security forces lasted nearly 20 hours and resulted in the death of a National Guard member. The police and army seized weapons, ammunition, explosives, mobile phones, and military uniforms.
- On February 7, security forces arrested 32 violent extremist suspects presumably directly linked to the Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade, some of whom were returning from conflict zones abroad. They were believed to be plotting terrorist attacks against security installations around the country, including on the Ministry of Interior headquarters in the capital.
- On March 28, eight members of Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade, including one of its key leaders, Lokman Abou Sakhr, died in an ambush as National Guard special operations forces attempted to apprehend them. Abou Sakhr was one of the most wanted terrorists in Tunisia.
- In the run up to the July 25 Republic Day celebrations, Ministry of Interior forces thwarted a planned terrorist attack in Bizerte.

- On November 17, authorities arrested a cell of 17 violent Islamist extremists and prevented a planned assault on hotels and security forces in the resort town of Sousse. The Ministry of Interior said some of the terrorists had been trained in Libya and Syria and were awaiting orders to carry out the assault. The authorities seized Kalashnikov rifles, explosives, and a bomb belt.

The Tunis Court of Appeals delivered on February 17 the final verdict in the case of the September 2012 attack on the U.S. Embassy in Tunis. It increased the sentences for 14 of the 20 convicted of complicity in the attack by lower courts and transformed all 20 sentences from suspended to firm sentences. Only six of the convicts, however, were in government custody.

Tunisia continued to participate in the Department of State's Antiterrorism Assistance (ATA) program. Ministry of Interior officials received ATA training in the areas of tactical crisis response, counterterrorism investigations, and command and control. Tactical units were granted specific tactical and enabling equipment. Department of State International Narcotics and Law Enforcement programs supported leadership development, police reform, prison reform, hostage rescue, crowd control management, and other training and support for the Ministries of Interior and Justice. They were also provided vehicles, body armor, computers, and other equipment to enhance internal and border security. Leadership development included travel for police and corrections professionals to the United States to meet U.S. law enforcement counterparts. The Tunisian Armed Forces consider counterterrorism and border security their principal mission and have successfully employed U.S.-funded patrol craft, vehicles, weapons, and training in border security and counterterrorism operations.

Countering the Financing of Terrorism: Tunisia is a member of the Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force, a Financial Action Task Force-style regional body. Its financial intelligence unit, the Tunisian Financial Analysis Committee (CTAF), is a member of the Egmont Group. Tunisia's strict currency controls might have pushed some transnational money movements, such as remittances, to the informal sector, making them difficult to trace. Trade-based money laundering was also a concern. Throughout the region, invoice manipulation and customs fraud were often involved in the process of *hawala* financial reconciliations. The CTAF is headed by the Central Bank Governor and includes representatives from a range of other agencies. It has worked effectively over the last year to gather important regulatory information to improve its efforts to combat money laundering and terrorism financing. The penal code provides for the seizure of assets and property tied to narcotics trafficking and terrorist activities. Tunisia freezes and confiscates assets, but the timeframe for taking action varies depending on the case. For further information on money laundering and financial crimes, see the *2016 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR), Volume II, Money Laundering and Financial Crimes*: <http://www.state.gov/j/inl/rls/nrcrpt/index.htm>.

Countering Violent Extremism: Tunisia made a concerted effort to improve socioeconomic conditions in the country through economic development and education programs to help prevent radicalization. The government also attempted to prevent the radicalization of Tunisians by minimizing their exposure to inflammatory rhetoric in mosques by replacing imams deemed extremist, although local populations in several cases resisted the changes. The National Counterterrorism Strategy reportedly expanded the fight against terrorism to all ministries, including those that focus on culture, education, media, and religious affairs, and assigned each ministry concrete actions to accomplish. The new counterterrorism law established the Counterterrorism Commission under the prime ministry, which includes representatives of all ministries and members of the judiciary. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is the lead ministry for developing a counter extremist messaging capacity. The Ministry of Communications is also involved in developing the plan.

International and Regional Cooperation: Tunisia participates in multinational and regional efforts to counter terrorism, such as those at the UN, the Arab League, the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), and the AU. It is a founding member of the GCTF-inspired International Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law (IIJ) and participated in numerous IIJ trainings and workshops, which were focused on improving criminal justice actors' capacity to prevent and address terrorism-related crimes.

Tunisia is an active member of the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership, a U.S. multi-year interagency regional program aimed at building the capacity of governments in the Maghreb and Sahel to confront the threats posed by violent extremists. Tunisia is also part of the Security Governance Initiative announced by President Obama in 2014. Tunisian authorities intensified their coordination on border security with Algerian counterparts over this past year, although cooperation with Libya was nearly impossible due to the absence of an effective Libyan central government. Algeria's cooperation with Tunisia on counterterrorism is particularly robust: an agreement between the two countries established military-to-military communications and a coordination committee to improve information sharing related to counterterrorism activities.

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