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Country Report on Terrorism 2019 - Chapter 1 - Tunisia

Overview: Although the risk of terrorist activity in Tunisia remained high in 2019, the Tunisian government’s improved counterterrorism capacity and coordination, as well as its prioritization of border security, contributed to a reduction in the number and severity of terrorist attacks. The dual suicide attack on June 27 by ISIS-inspired individuals was the most ambitious of 2019, but the Tunisian government’s response was well orchestrated and quickly restored public calm and resulted in arrests. The increased number of successful CT operations throughout 2019, including the killing of Jund Al Khilafah leader Houssein Thelithi Mokni, reflected greater interagency coordination, improved preemptive planning, and sustained momentum in dismantling terrorist cells.

The government continued to prioritize counterterrorism and border security in light of escalated Libyan instability and political uncertainty in Algeria. U.S security assistance increased in 2019, and Tunisia leveraged cooperation with the United States and the international community to continue to professionalize its security apparatus. Tunisia grew its overall CT capacity, outlined ways to implement a national PVE/CVE strategy, and expanded its freezing of terrorist assets. As fundamental CT goals are being met, Tunisia will need time and continued support to focus on streamlining its CT efforts, to expand strategic planning, and to enhance interagency coordination to sustain gains and ensure mid- to long-term force sustainability.

2019 Terrorist Incidents: Terrorist organizations remained active; however, their ability to carry out effective attacks was degraded by improved coordination and capacity of Tunisian security forces. Lone wolf attacks continued to pose a challenge to security forces. The following list summarizes the most significant terrorist incidents of 2019:

- On April 26, during a Tunisian Armed Forces CT mission in the Chaambi Mountains, a landmine exploded near a military vehicle, killing one soldier and wounding three.
- On June 27, two suicide bomb attacks struck central Tunis, targeting a police vehicle downtown and the office of the Ministry of Interior’s National Police CT Investigative Unit nearby. The former attack led to the death of one municipal policeman and wounding three civilians; the latter injured three security officers and killed one. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attacks.
- On September 23, an individual acting alone stabbed a military officer near a bus stop and proceeded to fatally stab a police officer near a courthouse in Bizerte.

Legislation, Law Enforcement, and Border Security: In 2019, there were two legislative initiatives related to countering terrorism. On January 10, the Parliament ratified amendments to the 2015 Countering Terrorism and Money Laundering Law. With the amendments, the law now legally defines perpetrators of terrorist crimes, integrates juvenile justice into the Judicial Center for Combating Terrorism (POLE), and grants new powers to the National Counter-Terrorism Commission (CNLCT), including the decision to freeze the assets of persons suspected of terrorism-related crimes. On May 17, the Tunisian government issued Decree 419 titled “UN Measures to Prevent Terrorists from Acquiring Weapons of Mass Destruction,” which, in addition to outlining steps to implement UN Security Council measures related to CT and counter-WMDs, extended the CNLCT’s authority to sanction persons or organizations engaged in material support for terrorism.

The government’s CT efforts demonstrated notable increases in proactive CT operations and improved coordination between Ministry of Interior (MOI) and Ministry of Defense security elements in 2019, resulting in significant arrests of terrorists, weapons seizures, and successful operations. Major law enforcement actions and arrests included:

- On January 3, police officers engaged two terrorists belonging to Katibat Al Jihad Wal Tawheed, a recent splinter of Jund Al Khilafah, in Sidi Bouzid governorate. Both individuals died after detonating their explosive belts. Security officials seized a machine gun, remote-controlled IEDs, hunting rifles, ammunition, and a large sum of money.
- On March 19, MOI security forces carried out a pre-emptive security operation against Jund Al Khilafah on Mount Salloum, Kasserine governorate, killing its leader, Houssein Thelithi Mokni, and two other members. The unit seized three firearms, ammunition, several detonators, grenades, and explosive belts.
- On May 1, a joint preemptive operation involving MOI security forces on Chaambi Mountain, Kasserine governorate, resulted in the capture of Raed Touati, a member of AQIM-aligned Uqba Ibn Nafaa.

- During June 27-28, in response to the twin suicide attacks in Tunis, security units conducted 493 raids resulting in the arrest of 25 wanted elements on the suspicion of belonging to a terrorist organization, glorification of terrorism, and terrorist offenses. These arrests helped uncover a plot targeting Carthage Airport.
- On September 2, National Guard units in coordination with the Tunisian military conducted a CT operation west of Kasserine, killing three terrorists and seizing four rifles and three suicide belts. One National Guard officer died. According to the CT Judicial POLE, the three terrorists were Algerian nationals wanted since 2013.
- On October 20, National Guard units in coordination with the Tunisian military conducted a CT operation in Kasserine, killing one terrorist, Algerian national Mourad Ben Hamadi Chayib.
- During November 27-28, Tunisian security forces discovered a cache of more than six thousand rounds of 7.62-calibre ammunition buried in the desert outside the southwestern city of Douz.

Border security remained a top emphasis of the Government of Tunisia in 2019 because of escalation in fighting in Libya and Algeria’s uncertain political transition. The Tunisian Armed Forces consider border security their principal mission along with CT. Along with the MOI’s National Guard, the Armed Forces successfully employed patrol craft, vehicles, weapons, and training in border security and CT operations throughout 2019. On April 11, the southern electronic border surveillance system operation room in Gabes came online. On October 3, a maritime coastal surveillance system operation center in Kelibia was inaugurated. The complete maritime surveillance system will provide coverage across the entire Tunisian coast.

According to the Ministry of Tourism, 8.3 million tourists visited Tunisia from January to November 2019, a 14 percent increase over the same period last year. The most recent terrorist attack against tourists in Tunisia was in 2015. Safeguarding tourist zones remained a Tunisian government priority in 2019. Within the context of the G-7 mechanism for multilateral security assistance coordination, the UK-led Tourist Site Protection working group provided the MOI with vehicles for use near tourist beaches in Monastir, Nabeul, and Sousse, and helped train 81 security agents to work at archeological sites in 2019.

Countering the Financing of Terrorism: Tunisia is a member of MENAFATF. Its FIU, known as the Tunisian Financial Analysis Committee, is a member of the Egmont Group. Tunisia is also a member of the Defeat ISIS Coalition’s CIFG and successfully completed its FATF action plan and the FATF removed Tunisia from its grey-list at the October 2019 plenary meeting in Paris.

On October 25, the CNLCT announced there were 138 Tunisians on the national list of “Individuals, Organizations and Entities Related to Terrorist Crimes.” Of these, 107 Tunisians were residing domestically, 26 lived abroad, and five had fled to neighboring countries. The total value of frozen assets amounts to approximately \$106 million.

Countering Violent Extremism: In 2019, Tunisia continued its concerted effort to prevent what it terms “radicalization” through youth and educational programs coordinated among its ministries and civil society organizations (CSOs). On April 8, the Alternative Narrative Platform, an office within the Prime Ministry, launched its national CVE action plan in partnership with the Tunisian Broadcasting Institute to promote messages of tolerance, diversity, and acceptance across mass media platforms. In October, the Ministry of Justice launched its Tawasol Project with assistance from the European Union, the Netherlands, and the UK. The program will work with 60 prisoners in three prisons as a pilot to classify prisoners, teach communication techniques against “extremism,” and create prison research/vocation centers for inmate education. The MOJ intends to expand the project to all its prisons by 2028.

International and Regional Cooperation: Tunisia will assume a seat during 2020 to 2021 on the UN Security Council representing both Africa and the Middle East, and it has been a participant in UN-led training on detecting and preventing terrorist travel.

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