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## Country Report on Terrorism 2016 - Chapter 2 - Tunisia

**Overview:** The Tunisian government's counterterrorism efforts intensified in 2016, with successes including weapons seizures, arrests, and operations against armed groups throughout the country.

The al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)-aligned Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade continued small scale attacks against Tunisian security personnel, while an ISIS-affiliate conducted a large-scale attack on the Tunisian-Libyan border town of Ben Guerdan in March, during which 49 terrorists, seven civilians, and 11 members of the security forces were killed. While terrorist attacks took place along the Libyan border and the western Tunisian mountains, there were no reported attacks in urban or tourist centers.

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 assistance to Tunisia grew in 2016, but Tunisia needs more time and international support to complete the overhaul of its military and civilian security forces. The government, which boasts a broader political base after the September change in government, is led by largely secularist Nida Tounes and Islamist-oriented Nahda, which have made counterterrorism a top priority.

Tunisia adopted a National Counterterrorism Strategy in November. The strategy, which is intended to take a comprehensive approach to the fight against terrorism, was drafted by the Ministry of Interior (MOI). The military and civilian security forces continued to make counterterrorism their first priority, leading to the dismantling of several terrorist cells and the disruption of a number of attack plots.

Terrorism remained a serious challenge for Tunisia, which 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, focusing on groups such as Ansar al-Shari'a in Tunisia (AAS-T) and AQIM, which continued its activities in the western mountainous regions of the country where it attacked security forces and targeted civilians.

Instability in Libya has allowed violent extremist groups, including ISIS, to continue operations, 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 who have travelled to fight in Syria and Iraq remained another cause for concern. The return of foreign terrorist fighters is a challenge the Tunisians worked to address in 2016.

**2016 Terrorist Incidents:** Terrorist organizations, including ISIS, AQIM, and AAS-T, were active in Tunisia throughout the year. The incidents below highlight some of the more significant terrorist attacks.

- On March 7, Tunisia's security forces successfully repulsed a large-scale attack by ISIS-affiliated terrorists on the Tunisian border town of Ben Guerdan. The MOI reported that 49 suspected terrorists were killed and nine detained during the attack and subsequent operations by security services. Thirteen security forces members and seven civilians were killed in the course of events. The attackers were Tunisian nationals who had trained in Libya.
- On May 11, four National Guardsmen were killed while conducting a raid on a terrorist hideout in the Smar region of the Tataouine Governorate, when a terrorist detonated a suicide vest.
- On August 29, a Tunisian military convoy in Kasserine ran over a mine and was then ambushed in a rocket-propelled grenade attack; three security service members died. On August 31, two terrorists were killed during a subsequent raid by security forces and the army on a house where terrorists connected to the initial attack were hiding. In the course of this operation, one civilian was killed and a security officer was injured.
- On November 7, an Army corporal was killed when 20 terrorists stormed his home in Kasserine. Additional forces were immediately deployed to the area and search operations were conducted. On November 9, Tunisian Army forces located and killed Talal Saidi, the leader of Jund al-Khilafah, the group responsible for the attack.

**Legislation, Law Enforcement, and Border Security:** Parliament passed a counterterrorism law in 2015 that modernized Tunisia's security legislation, striking a better balance between the protection of human rights and fighting terrorism, and implemented obligations under UN Security Council resolution (UNSCR) 2178 and the UN Security Council (UNSC) ISIL (Da'esh) and al-Qa'ida sanctions regime. Human rights organizations objected to the law for its vague definition of terrorism and the broad leeway it gives to judges to admit testimony by anonymous witnesses. Tunisia also worked to strengthen criminal justice institutions and promote the rule of law to address the threat posed by radicalization and terrorism. On June 1, 2016, a new criminal procedure code intended to decrease pre-trial detentions and prison overcrowding entered into force. Tunisia also worked with the Department of State to develop a national court management system to facilitate collaboration between judges, court administrators, and other justice sector stakeholders, including civil society. The Directorate General of Prisons and Rehabilitation (DGPR) also worked with the Department of State to integrate community corrections principles such as probation, parole, and the establishment of community reintegration centers to better prepare newly released inmates and mitigate recidivism and radicalization.

The MOI and the Ministry of Defense (MOD) share responsibility for detecting, deterring, and preventing acts of terrorism in Tunisia. 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, particularly for urban areas. The Anti-Terrorism Brigade (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 U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Security Pole for Countering Terrorism and Organized Crime (also known as the Tunisian Fusion Center) is becoming an all-source analytical center which disseminates actionable intelligence and responds to requests for information from Tunisia's security services. The MOD also has its own nascent intelligence fusion center which requires further development. The MOD recently established linkages to the MOI's Tunisian Fusion Center. 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.

For protecting tourism zones, Tunisia worked with international partners to provide first responder and security training for hotel staff and promote cooperation between security forces and private security. The Ministry of Tourism also worked with Germany in developing a handbook on policies and procedures for security personnel working at soft targets such as tourist sites.

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. Tunisia also maintains a DNA database and has expressed an interest in becoming a Combined DNA Index System member.

Border security remained a priority, 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. The MOD took the lead in constructing a series of barriers and trenches in 2015 along more than 220 kilometers of the border with Libya to stem the flow of arms, terrorists, and contraband between the two countries. Tunisia 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 continued arrests and raids by security forces as well as regular seizures of weapons near the Tunisia-Libya border. Significant law enforcement actions and arrests included:

- On January 8, National Guard units detained 11 Tunisian men and women near Ben Guerdan who were attempting to enter Libya to join terrorist groups.
- On October 16, counterterrorism forces from the Tunisian National Guard foiled a plot to assassinate a major political figure. Press reports stated that the terrorists' target was Interior Minister Hedi Majdoub. Approximately 40 people were taken into custody with 20 still at-large following the arrests.
- In November, Tunisian police arrested four individuals suspected of planning attacks in the capital. According to a spokesman for the MOI, the group was planning attacks against a commercial center and a National Guard post.

Tunisia continued to participate in the Department of State's Antiterrorism Assistance (ATA) program. MOI personnel received ATA training in the areas of tactical crisis response, counterterrorism investigations, protection of soft targets, and command and control. Tactical units were granted tactical and enabling equipment. Department of State programs also supported improved quality of and access to, the justice system, training for and implementation of new criminal codes, improved prison functionality, and other training and support for the Ministry of Justice. In close collaboration with the MOI, the Department of State designed a US \$12 million new police academy modernization project, which includes curriculum development. The Ministries of Interior and Justice were also provided armored vehicles, ambulances, surveillance cameras, and other equipment to enhance internal and border security. 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 (MENAFATF), a Financial Action Task Force-style regional body, and also of the Counter-ISIS Finance Working Group. Tunisia underwent a MENAFATF mutual evaluation in 2016. Its financial intelligence unit, the Tunisian Financial Analysis Committee, is a member of the Egmont Group of Financial Intelligence Units.

Over the past three years, Tunisia has endeavored to implement and promote anti-money laundering/counterterrorist finance efforts with its institutional partners. As a result, banks regularly report suspicious transactions and have done so increasingly since the 2011 revolution. Other designated nonfinancial businesses and professions, including real estate agents, lawyers, accountants, and notaries, have lagged behind in reporting suspicious transactions primarily due to a lack of awareness of anti-money laundering/countering the financing of terrorism (AML/CFT) laws and regulations.

Tunisia's 2015 law on combating terrorism and money laundering created a unit of judges specialized in terrorism cases and sends investigations to the Criminal Investigation Department of Tunis, rather than to units at the governorate level. The penal code provides for the seizure of assets and property tied to narcotics trafficking and terrorist activities. Tunisia has a mechanism to implement the UNSC ISIL (Da'esh) and al-Qa'ida sanctions regime, including requiring entities subject to AML/CFT provisions to consult lists on the Ministry of Finance website and to freeze listed individual and group assets; however, the financial sector and regulators are not consistently consulting and implementing the UNSC 1267 list. 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 *2017 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 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 Ministry of Governmental Organizations and Human Rights is the lead ministry for developing a countering violent extremism counter-messaging capacity. The Ministry of Communications is also involved in messaging.

**International and Regional Cooperation:** Tunisia participates in multinational and regional efforts to counter terrorism, such as those at the United Nations, the Arab League, the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), and the

African Union. It is a founding member of the GCTF-inspired International Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law (IJ) and participated in numerous IJ trainings and workshops, which were focused on improving criminal justice actors' capacity to prevent and address terrorism-related crimes. Tunisia also served as one of the pilot countries under the GCTF-endorsed International Counterterrorism and CVE Capacity-Building Clearinghouse Mechanism, which is being developed as a means to help countries and donors optimize civilian counterterrorism and CVE capacity-building programs.

Tunisia is an active member of the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership, a multi-year U.S. interagency regional program aimed at building the capacity of governments in the Maghreb and Sahel to confront threats posed by violent extremists. Tunisia is also part of the Security Governance Initiative between the United States and six African partners that offers a comprehensive approach to improving security sector governance and capacity to address threats, first announced in 2014. Tunisian authorities continued their coordination on border security with Algerian counterparts, although cooperation with Libya was nearly impossible due to the absence of an effective Libyan central government.

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