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# Tunisia Turns a Corner Against the Jihadist Movement

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

## Fewer attacks and more prosecutions suggest the country's integrated approach could eventually become a model for the region.

**F**or the first time since its 2011 revolution, Tunisia is not on the defensive in its battle with the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. Data from 2019, paired with a more holistic approach to combating jihadists, bears out this claim. Specifically, Tunis is expanding its toolkit beyond a purely military or law enforcement approach. Because of these advances, which have developed over the past few years, Tunis and Washington will have widened opportunities to engage on more complex aspects of reform that could make Tunisia a regional and global model. Both internal and external challenges remain, such as from foreign fighters dwelling abroad, an overcrowded prison system, and the threat of resurgent jihadism next door in Libya, but these need not diminish the accomplishments. Moreover, Tunisia can now build on its achievements, continuing the process of reform after decades of authoritarian rule.

## SUCCESSSES

**A**t the beginning of 2019, according to the United Nations, only eighty jihadist insurgents remained in the mountainous region along the Tunisian border with Algeria—fifty from Katibat Uqba ibn Nafi, al-Qaeda's Tunisian branch, and thirty from the Islamic State. Over the remainder of 2019, Tunisia's military further degraded both groups by killing a number of their leaders:

- **From the Islamic State:** Izz al-Din Alawi, Hatim Basduri, Muhammad Basduri, Mundhir Gharsali, Muntasar Ghuzlani,

Muhammad Amin Mahkuka, Muhammad Nasir Mubarki, Lakhzar Nasiri, Hossam Thalithi, Ghali Umri

- **From Katibat Uqba ibn Nafi:** al-Bay al-Akruf, Tahar Hijili, Salah al-Din Qasimi, Usama Salmi, Murad al-Shayeb

The year 2019 also saw a decline in attacks, even though the overall numbers appear to show them on par with 2018. Before an improvised explosive device strike in January 2020, no attack had occurred since late October, the lengthiest lull since 2012–2013 (see table below). The arrest figures, which have also fallen, reflect smarter, intelligence-led policing that the Tunisian government began to implement more directly in October 2018. The previous “roundup” style was a holdover from the pre-revolution era.

Even more significant has been the past year’s sharp increase in terrorism prosecutions, as opposed to charged individuals remaining in prison without being brought to court. This suggests more efficient coordination between law enforcement and the judiciary, thus potentially granting the broader system greater legitimacy through a more transparent process.

Year	Attacks	Arrests	Prosecutions
2014	21	32	2
2015	36	162	2
2016	40	260	4
2017	47	403	1
2018	30	520	3
2019	29	132	18

## BEYOND A MILITARY AND LAW ENFORCEMENT APPROACH

In October 2019, the intergovernmental Financial Action Task Force removed Tunisia from its so-called gray list for strategic deficiencies in anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing. This decision was based in part on Tunisia’s establishment of a domestic counterterrorism sanctions list beginning in November 2018 that exceeded international technical requirements. As of early 2020, 108 individuals and entities are on Tunisia’s sanctions list.

The Tunisian government and local NGOs have contributed to progress by implementing policies and projects, as well as widening their capabilities, in a bid to effectively complement military and law enforcement tools against jihadists. Starting with the most recent efforts, these include:

- **December 2019:** The School of Internal Security Forces held a lessons-learned workshop that convened the Ministry of the Interior and National Guard and covered the “Tunisian Experience in Combating Extremism and Terrorism.”
- **November 2019:** The General Directorate of Prisons and Rehabilitation inaugurated a workshop to support efforts for disengagement, rehabilitation, reintegration, and education for those imprisoned for jihadist-related cases. This builds on efforts by Tunisia’s Action Against Exclusion and Marginalisation Association in cooperation with the Ministries of Health, Higher Education, and Youth, which in October 2018 launched a project aimed at rehabilitating and integrating youth prisoners into society and professional life.
- **October 2019:** The Applied Social Science Forum and the Tunisian Center for Global Security Studies launched the E-Monitoring and Digital Resilience program for countering violent extremism and online/offline hate speech. The project seeks to better educate state actors, psychologists, community influencers, preachers, and youth on how

extremists exploit the Internet and target vulnerable individuals, while offering ways to combat such activity.

- **August 2019:** The NGO Aswat Nissa announced the launch of its project Ambassadors for the Prevention of Violent Extremism, which aims to develop the expertise of forty-five women politicians on preventing violent extremism through an approach focused on women and girls.
- **July 2019:** Tunisia's National Counterterrorism Commission (NCC) awarded five contracts worth a total of \$10 million to civil society associations to implement local projects to prevent violent extremism. These contracts and their associated projects include a monitoring and evaluation process.
- **April 2019:** The Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) created a national competition for the best studies in the field of combating terrorism. The NCC and MoHE also signed a memorandum of understanding to support enlistment of research capabilities, resources, and competencies toward countering terrorism and countering violent extremism.
- **February 2019:** The NCC began organizing a series of workshops with civil society activists in all Tunisian provinces to raise awareness and coordinate efforts toward preventing violent extremism at the local level.
- **January 2019:** The Tunisian government created a special joint security force uniting the leadership of the Interior Ministry's police forces and the National Guard.

## REMAINING CHALLENGES

**A**lthough Tunisia's threat environment has improved dramatically in the past five years, certain issues lurk unresolved. One involves [Tunisian foreign fighters](#) who remain abroad. Although some men and women in this cohort have become disillusioned, and the children of course had no agency in their parents' decision to go abroad, a hardcore, ultra-extreme trend persists. To alleviate the worst possible outcomes, the United States should continue pushing Tunisia to repatriate children now living in camps in Syria and Libya. Within Tunisia, the appetite to bring home the men and women is quite low, rooted in much hostility, and thus the matter is unlikely to be resolved in the near term. In the middle and long term, however, this situation, if still unresolved, could create problems, especially if the Islamic State breaks these individuals out of prisons and camps in Syria.

If Tunisia does, despite popular opposition, decide to bring home these men and women, it must be careful in housing this population within an already extremely overcrowded prison system. Reports as early as March 2016 indicated that jihadists held complete control within Tunisian prisons, much as gangs do elsewhere, and that they beat up anyone who challenged their authority. In April 2018, according to Al Araby, a former inmate named Hisham, imprisoned for theft, explained that "the [jihadist] recruiters are everywhere; in the corridors, the walkways, the cells. They approached me dozens of times. They said if I wanted an easy time of it, it would be best for me to follow the path they were going to show me." As this account suggests, channeling veterans of the Syrian jihad into Tunisian prisons without a reformed system and smarter way of imprisoning individuals could further instigate problems and hinder projects aimed at rehabilitation and reintegration.

Additional jihadist activism could spill over from the civil war in neighboring Libya. One should recall, on this count, that the killers of two secular Tunisian politicians in 2013 trained in Libya, and that the mass-casualty attacks at the Bardo National Museum and Sousse Beach in 2015 were planned there; likewise, the attempted takeover of Ben Gardane in March 2016 was crafted in Libya—where changing dynamics could free more space for the Islamic State in Libya (ISL). In particular, Gen. Khalifa Haftar's current campaign to take Tripoli could spur local recruitment and also provide another avenue for Tunisian foreign fighting.

## FUTURE STEPS

**F**or all the reasons laid out here, Washington should continue to engage Tunisia in addressing the range of jihadist challenges it faces. In particular, the U.S. Department of Justice and FBI could do much good by building on

existing efforts to streamline cooperation between Tunisian law enforcement and the judiciary. An end goal in this area would be publishing indictments and other legal judgments online, all toward achieving enhanced legitimacy through transparency. Another necessity is reforming the prison system to reduce overcrowding, thereby providing greater space for rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives to function properly, without individuals being peer-pressured by inmate jihadist networks. Joined by the earlier-noted NCC efforts to engage local stakeholders, such reforms could serve as a backbone for reintegrating individuals into communities and guarding against their relapse. To thwart the reemergence of ISL, meanwhile, the United States should continue to coordinate airstrikes and share intelligence with its partners in Libya. This will help break up ISL camps and prevent an Iraq- or Syria-style resurgence, which could cut into Tunisia's existing progress. Setting aside these challenges, the United States should publicly recognize and applaud Tunisia's successes, thereby encouraging regional stability and stronger relations in areas of mutual interest.

*Aaron Zelin is the Richard Borow Fellow at The Washington Institute and author of the forthcoming book [Your Sons Are at Your Service: Tunisia's Missionaries of Jihad](#).* ❖



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