

The Reality of the Terrorist Phenomenon in Tunisia's Nascent Democracy

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Months after the attack on Ben Gardane, Tunisians and the regional public are still overwhelmed by mixed feelings of pride in the power of Tunisian security forces and the people and fear of the Islamic State's bold move of attempting to establish an "emirate" in Tunisian territory. ISIS leaders had hoped to embarrass the Tunisian government by turning terrorist violence into a protest movement in the city of Ben Gardane. Like many border towns, Ben Gardane is known for its smuggling and black market activities, and for smuggling weapons and gangs who facilitate the travel of jihadi terrorists into Libya. However, the "invasion" of Ben Gardane on the morning of March 6 immediately became a battle. The local people and the government alike joined hands in Tunisia's war on terrorism. Nevertheless, the attack reveals an important dimension of ISIS's motives in North Africa. It also presents a window into Tunisia's anti-terrorism strategy as it has developed after consecutive terrorist attacks, especially after the attack on the Bardo National Museum on March 18, 2015 and then-president Beji Caid Essebsi's subsequent declaration of war on terrorism.

ISIS's Interest in a Tunisian Emirate

The Ben Gardane attack reflects the new ambitions of ISIS to establish an "emirate." Terrorist groups are no longer limiting themselves to fighting those they deem "tyrants," such as their slaughter of soldiers in Jebel Chambi during Ramadan 2013 and the 2015 bombing of Presidential Security Guard bus. Nor is it enough any longer to attack Tunisia's tourism and economy industries, such as in the 2015 Sousse and Bardo Museum attacks. They have even moved beyond attacking the democratic process and political stability of the country by assassinating Chokri Belaid and MP Brahmi in 2013. The group now seeks to destabilize the security of Tunisian society by separating south Tunisia from the rest of the country. This intervention in south Tunisia shows how serious the terrorist threat has become, not only to Tunisia but to the entire Maghreb.

ISIS's leaders may have chosen Ben Gardane to attack because they wagered on the support of the town's people. This belief would have been based not on the town's stereotypical representation as an incubator of terrorism nor because of its social conservatism, but due to the smuggling and black market trading that is prevalent in the area. In fact, a World Bank report estimated that 3,800 people from Ben Gardane are involved in smuggling activities. ISIS apparently believed that terrorist violence would be accepted there as a form of popular response against the

dominance of Tunisian security forces, which have a history of acting in recurring protest movements and participating in the usual confrontations and chases between smugglers and the security forces of this border town. Strategically, the border town can provide a source of cash for ISIS due to the trade, smuggling and travel activities occurring on the Libyan-Tunisian border.

Importance of Ben Gardane attack to ISIS

Ben Gardane was not randomly chosen for the Caliphate's attempted expansion plan into Tunisia. Therefore, it is important to understand what seizure of the city would have symbolized for ISIS leaders. In particular, facts or resources based on which ISIS has rationally assessed the Ben Gardane attack as a strategic option in the war to establish a presence in North Africa. The interrelated factors that somehow encouraged the group to conduct the terrorist attack less than one week after the failed infiltration of three ISIS SUVs across the Libyan border should be closely scrutinized.

Terrorists have been trying to mobilize the escalating tensions and protests in the Tunisian interior and the increased level of violence in Tunisian society to mobilize against state institutions. The ISIS militants attempted to gain the sympathy and support of Ben Gardane's residents by broadcasting messages of reassurance through loudspeakers. They stressed that they wanted to "liberate Ben Gardane" of the control of the Customs Department and security services to legitimize violence as a protest movement. They thought this message especially appealing since most residents of the city and the surrounding regions rely on smuggling and black market trading for a living due to the lack of national development and investment strategies.

ISIS intended to take advantage of the Salafist Jihadist affiliation of some Ben Gardane residents, renowned for their fierceness in Iraq after the 2003 U.S. invasion and their participation in various armed groups fighting in Syria after 2011. One can sense the hybrid interaction operating in some circles of Ben Gardane between a conservative social upbringing and the need to achieve bloody victories to serve certain principles -- identity, revolution, Islam, hatred of the West, and so on. The internalization of "martyrdom" culture in tribal circles is also visible, where teenagers who have become accustomed to the risks smuggling business due to the rough economic and geographic circumstances have caused many of them to consider terrorism just another "adventure."

The attack, despite its failure, was also designed to display the power of the terrorist group to its supporters and international public, especially by following on the heels of the strike on Sabratha. The attack highlighted that ISIS will respond to any international attack on its forces in Libya by shifting the war to Tunisia and perhaps the remaining Maghreb countries. Accordingly, the group sought to embarrass the Tunisian security services and reveal their weakness. But the terrorist group's leaders failed to recognize the high readiness of the Tunisian army and remaining security forces and the inhabitants' aversion to the group's barbaric practices and violent ideology.

The attack was also intended to instill fear in Tunisian society and demonstrate that the terrorism of ISIS was a real challenge to Tunisia's economy, tourism, and politics. On ISIS also hoped to present its ideology as a prospective alternative. Most terrorist leaders view Tunisia as a modern society seeking to build a democratic experiment, which makes it urgent for them to infiltrate the experiment and demonstrate the power of their ideological appeal to the Arab and international public. A successful conquest would also allow put the group in a better position to bargain and negotiate with all regional actors, especially Algeria.

Similarly, the attack was designed to create fear among the Tunisian people in their daily life and provoke doubts and suspicions about the "others" of Tunisian society. They attempted to reinforce the idea that the group has sleepers in Tunisian society and that the terrorist threat comes from within, regardless of any proactive strikes conducted by Western powers to protect Tunisia against terrorist violence. This goal was made clear by the systematic violence, such as the assassination of Abdel-Ati Abdul Kabir – head of the anti-terrorism force in Ben

Gardane, and the random terrorist violence that killed a schoolgirl called Sarah al-Muwathaq.

Certainly this event—and the intentions of ISIS that it may reveal—calls for a discussion regarding the religious extremism of a portion of Tunisian society and the government’s efficiency and effectiveness in dealing with members of terrorist groups or takfiris.

The problem of terrorism in Tunisia is not merely a phenomenon of violence. It is instead a crisis of youths being brainwashed by extremist thoughts and hostility in the name of religion. Security alone is not enough to deter and eliminate this terrorist threat from society. All actors—authorities, civil society, and beyond—must join forces to adopt a comprehensive national strategy that aims to resolve the source of increased terrorist recruits: the social and economic challenges of the most needy and marginalized neighborhoods and regions. The “battle of Ben Gardane,” where the national will of Tunisians triumphed, now has a symbolic role in the reality of the war on terrorism. It marks a historical landmark in Tunisian identity where bloody violence as a means to express protest and desire for change is rejected. Popular aversion and total rejection of any presence of terrorist ideology on Tunisian ground has also increased. Unfortunately, the developing democratic Tunisia is now facing an increasingly direct conflict with terrorism, run by groups that have created a pragmatic strategy with clear political goals, such as the Caliphate, and material interests, including oil and smuggling. In the future Tunisia will have to examine itself in order to fight ISIS as it positions itself as a major player among international forces.

Sihem Drissi is a Tunisian writer. This article was originally published on [the Fikra website](http://fikraforum.org/?p=9522#.V2bqPLsrLIU) (<http://fikraforum.org/?p=9522#.V2bqPLsrLIU>). ❖

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