

## Tunisia Keeps Calm and Carries On After Latest Terrorist Attack

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Links between this attack and older jihadist networks underscore the complex nature of Tunisian radicalization, even if suspicious government data trends seem to suggest the problem is diminishing.

On June 27, four years and a day after the Sousse Beach attack, Tunisia suffered twin suicide bombings against security services at two different locations in the capital's downtown district. Within hours, however, life returned to normal in the city. The government soon highlighted that tourism was unaffected—a far different outcome than the 2015 Sousse attack, which saw mass cancellations by would-be visitors and spurred President Beji Caid Essebsi to claim that “if similar attacks occur again, the state will collapse.”

The North African republic is now far more mature in dealing with security threats related to jihadism; no longer do officials express existential angst, whether legitimate or fear mongering. Compared to 2015, the state and the people were far better prepared to deal with the aftermath of the latest attacks. Yet the growing lack of transparency regarding terrorism arrests and the apparent links to past jihadist mobilizations should draw concern about Tunisia's broader transition from authoritarian tendencies to democracy and rule of law.

### LINKS TO PAST NETWORKS

On the morning of June 27, an individual detonated a suicide bomb near a police patrol station in central Tunis. One officer died and another was injured, along with three civilians. The unnamed perpetrator was born in 1988, originally hailed from the Bab Jadid district of Tunis, and had previously worked in crafts in the Medina quarter. Following the attack, one accomplice was arrested, and security units raided the perpetrator's house and discovered materials used to manufacture explosives.

Ten minutes after the first bomb went off, a second exploded near the back door of the judiciary police administration office in the city's Gorjani district, injuring four officers. The attacker, who arrived on a bicycle, tried to break into the headquarters of the special antiterrorist unit, triggering the blast when the gate opened and a police vehicle came out. A security source suggested that he was assisted in reaching this locale. Although the unit's spokesperson, Sofien Sliti, told AFP that the perpetrator had been identified, this information was not revealed publicly.

Later in the day, the Islamic State claimed responsibility for both bombings; the claim gained credibility the next day, when Sliti noted that a link had been established between the attacks. Meanwhile, security forces arrested twenty-five people on suspicion of belonging to a terrorist organization, glorifying terrorist operations, or engaging in prohibited activities.

As part of the investigation, police raided al-Ghufran Mosque in the Tunis neighborhood of Hay al-Intilaka, seizing a large amount of explosives. They also hunted down and killed the mastermind of the twin attacks, whom the Interior Ministry identified as twenty-three-year-old Ayman al-Samiri. Security services initially spotted him in the Hay al-Intilaka train station. Upon confronting him, they shot him, at which point he set off a suicide vest; fortunately, there were no other casualties.

Notably, Hay al-Intilaka is the hometown of the Islamic State operative who planned the 2015 Bardo and Sousse attacks, Shams al-Din al-Sandi; he was based in Libya at the time, but his current whereabouts are unknown. It is also one of the neighborhoods where jihadist group Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia was active following the country's revolution, before it was designated as a terrorist organization in 2013. Among other local footholds, AST was known to control al-Ghufran Mosque during those years.

Through various events and activities, some documented on social media, AST propagated its worldview to some of the district's population, effectively socializing its radical ideas. It took the same approach in other areas of Tunisia. Many citizens could still sympathize with the jihadist cause at the time because AST initially appeared to limit itself to *dawa* (outreach) and governance activities. In Hay al-Intilaka, for example, the group passed out literature in markets and cafes, tasked sympathetic clerics with giving religious lectures, organized neighborhood cleanups, provided food to needy families, and held Quranic memorization sessions—all under the slogan “Your Sons Are at Your Service.”

It is difficult to measure the extent to which such activities affected those exposed to them, but one thing is clear:

many AST alumni later became involved with foreign fighter campaigns abroad and insurgent activities at home. According to local media reports, some of these foreign fighter returnees are back home, out of prison, and living freely in Hay al-Intilaka and other parts of Tunisia.

## **MORE ARRESTS, THEN MORE SECRECY?**

From the beginning of 2014 to now, Tunisian law enforcement conducted 1,411 arrests related to jihadism, according to press releases by the Interior Ministry cross-checked with local media reports. Determining exactly how many individuals have been detained is difficult because a number of the arrests involved repeat offenders. Yet there was a clear upward trend in annual arrests related to jihadism: 32 in 2014, 163 in 2015, 262 in 2016, 404 in 2017, and 521 in 2018.

This trend makes the data compiled since late 2018 all the more confounding. The pace of announced arrests has dropped precipitously since November, and only 29 have been recorded in 2019. At that rate, the annual tally would be less than 60, far below the pace seen in the past four years.

This might sound like good news at first—implying that Tunisian law enforcement has become more discriminating and more capable of using intelligence information rather than simply arresting anyone remotely related to a particular incident. Yet it is also possible that the Interior Ministry is no longer disclosing arrests in a fully transparent manner. Given the trend from the previous few years, having the numbers go down so drastically and quickly does not seem realistic. It is conceivable that security services are truly conducting so few arrests, but the sudden decline merits some skepticism.

Interestingly, the data drop-off began after this author's [October 2018 PolicyWatch](#) regarding an Islamic State-inspired terrorist attack by a lone woman in Tunis. That article was partly based on information from Interior Ministry press releases; the fact that such data began to dissipate directly afterward may just be a coincidence, but the pattern is striking.

If the government's arrest data does turn out to be incomplete or otherwise flawed, local and foreign researchers will have much more trouble assessing the scope and direction of jihadist trends in Tunisia. It would also portend a retrenchment to the more authoritarian practices of the pre-2011 regime.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Tunisia's security landscape today is markedly more developed than it was four years ago. The government should be commended for the improvements it has made with help from the United States, the European Union, and Algeria, while the population's resilience illustrates that the intended effect of local terrorism has lost much of its power over time.

Regardless of this progress, however, Tunisian jihadists—whether returnees from abroad, local cells, or current prisoners—will not stop trying to undermine the state. Given the currently fragile context of upcoming elections and Essebsi's health concerns, Washington should continue supporting the government's efforts to bring its security, judiciary, and prison systems more in line with the rule of law in a democratic framework. U.S. officials should also make clear to Tunis that transparency in how its security agencies deal with jihadism offers more upsides than downsides in the long term. Finally, a better understanding of past jihadist networks and locales would provide clues on where terrorist activity might arise in the future, since this type of mobilization does not come out of nowhere.

*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* (Columbia University Press).*