

Position Papers

Tunisia's Security Crisis: The Challenge Of Restoring Control

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New security measures post-Tunisia violence could result in human rights violations [Reuters]

Abstract

Although Tunisia's model of democratic transition has been touted as the most successful and peaceful among Arab Spring nations thus far, recent armed attacks have affected this image, with analysts now left questioning the country's security. However, it seems that many observers had actually overlooked a brewing socio-economic crisis and the state's scarce resources to cope with unemployment and the imposed war on armed groups within the state. The population is fearful of more deadly attacks given the state security apparatus' weaknesses and helplessness in the face of ever more sophisticated armed groups increasingly targeting the country's economic structures. The coming months will be difficult for Tunisia, particularly because the government doesn't have solutions or resources to address the escalating crisis. Despite talk of changing the government before the end of the year, a significant breakthrough is unlikely.

Introduction

On Friday, 26 June 2015, Tunisia witnessed the deadliest armed attack in its history, one that left thirty-eight dead and thirty-nine others injured. Most of the victims were British tourists vacationing in Sousse. This attack came just over three months after the Bardo National Museum attack, in which many foreign tourists were also killed. The attack in Sousse raised glaring questions about the nature and efficacy of measures taken by security forces to prevent further attacks after the Bardo attack, with the obvious answer that not enough had been done.

The Sousse attack also reinforces the new direction being taken by armed groups, which is targeting the country's most vital economic sector, one that provides direct and

indirect employment for some half a million people: tourism.⁽¹⁾ There is already a severe political crisis in the country due to the inability of the coalition government to resolve other issues sweeping through the country. Regardless of the government's next steps, these latest attacks mean the country's political and social crisis will unquestionably increase in the foreseeable future.

Security failure: Seeking to regain the initiative

Tunisia is experiencing a crushing socio-economic crisis in the context of a difficult democratic transition. The security factor is exacerbating the situation even further. Since the assassinations of two anti-Troika leaders, Chokri Belaid in late 2013 and Mohammed Brahmi the following summer, security has become a prominent issue in the Tunisian crisis. To a certain extent, the Bardo attack ensured security was painted as the blanket challenge facing the country, with the other issues reduced to and presented as mere manifestations of the security challenge.

The security crisis in Tunisia has deep-seated causes. Most of these causes can be attributed to the fact that the functions of the security apparatus have changed radically since the revolution and the beginning of the democratic transition process. These changes shook the very core of the security establishment's doctrine, both as a result of the instability that came with the rapid change of governments, as well as the multiple power centres established by the January 2014 constitution. The core doctrine of the security apparatus, which had taken shape during the Habib Bourguiba and Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali presidencies, was one of extremely centralised decision-making and suppression of dissent through brute-force. Security training, procedures and techniques during their respective reigns were all geared towards fulfilling this doctrine.

However, the high-profile assassinations of Belaid and Brahimi in 2013 and successive armed attacks that followed were a completely new experience for the security establishment, which clearly lacked the acumen to respond adequately, despite its success in thwarting many attacks and arresting insurgent cells in recent months, particularly the Gafsa operation on 10 July 2015.⁽²⁾ The armed groups seemed to be one step ahead of the security forces, outmanoeuvring and outrunning them with ease, and able to cause as much damage as possible. Furthermore, the insurgents had the luxury of picking and choosing their targets, which ranged from military and security personnel targeted by small, mountain-dwelling armed groups in the country's west, to major government and economic centres targeted by groups in cities.

There is a notion within the government that the proximity of the conflict in neighbouring Libya is a major cause of the growing insurgency in Tunisia, a view that is somewhat plausible. However, this notion fails to recognise the evolution of the phenomenon of armed violence on Tunisian soil, which has created a uniquely Tunisian product being exported to Libya and other neighbouring countries. What this means is that the phenomenon's fundamental causes are actually purely local and lie in poor economic policies and inherited social crises. This is manifested in a disconnect between the state and a portion of the Tunisian people who are willing to accommodate violence as a culture.

A survey conducted in the country's north-west two months ago, just after the Bardo attack, indicated that five per cent of young Tunisians are open supporters of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and more than half of them are willing to join ISIS if given the chance.⁽³⁾ Incidentally, the north-west is Tunisia's poorest region, and most of its residents had voted for the Nidaa Tounes (literally: Call of Tunisia) in the parliamentary elections and for President Beji Caid Essebsi in the presidential elections. Another study, carried out by the Observatoire National de la Jeunesse (National Observatory for Youth), a state institution, which announced its results on 14 July 2015, found that a third of young Tunisians sympathise with the Salafist movement's "advocacy and charitable aspects". Taking into consideration that youth account for more than half of Tunisia's population, these revelations are even more alarming.

Despite widespread international sympathy for Tunisia after the Bardo and Sousse attacks, actual international cooperation with the country in the face of violence remains weak. Available data shows that the US intensified its intelligence cooperation with Tunisia to track down armed groups by increasing the use of drones, which roam the Tunisian skies occasionally.⁽⁴⁾ However, a controversial agreement signed by the two countries in Washington, DC on 20 May was far less helpful than hoped for. The Tunisian government suddenly found itself caught in a brutal war against armed groups, in addition to facing a crisis with its western neighbour Algeria, which reduced its security cooperation with Tunisia as a response to its Washington agreement.

The measures put in place by the government after the Sousse attack produced a great deal of doubt as to its ability to cope with future attacks. The government announced the closure of some eighty mosques they described as "out of control", along with a plan to protect hotel facilities and keep track of parties and associations that violate the constitution and laws. The military called in reservists to support the security effort, intensifying raids "to keep track of suspicious elements". Days after, however, it turned

out that the plan had done nothing to allay any fears: on 9 July 2015, the United Kingdom called upon its nationals to leave Tunisia as soon as possible, citing poor security, and a day later Denmark followed suit. Domestically, there are concerns that the campaign against armed groups may be used as a cover for systematic human rights violations.

These measures taken by the government, especially closing mosques and institutions and targeting Quran schools (which the current government has described as “breeding grounds for terrorism”) have raised fears of a return to Ben Ali’s brute-force policy, with the only difference being that Ennahda party, which had previously been the target of that very same policy, is now part of the coalition government that is recycling this policy. It is well-known that this exact policy, nurtured by Ben Ali himself, produced thousands of young extremists who later joined the fighting in many hotspots around the world, starting with Iraq, then Syria and Libya. In this new context, any return to such a policy would give armed groups further impetus to accuse the government of targeting not only the manifestations of Islam, but also the Islamic religion itself, especially given the declining influence of more moderate groups, such as Ennahda, which is now part of the very coalition government authorising the policy. One way this policy would inevitably backfire is that it could push extremist groups underground, giving them an opportunity to better reconfigure themselves and reduce the time it takes for them to plan and launch new attacks.

Over the past few days, there have been rumours that bearded men and veiled women were being watched, and that security officers were abusing their authority. These rumours give credence to the concerns of activists for freedom and adherence to the constitution. In a press conference on Tuesday, 7 July 2015, Prime Minister Habib Essid announced that a decision had been made to build a wall along the Tunisian–Libyan border “to stop the flow of weapons and insurgents”. However, many within the corridors of power know that smuggling rings bring a considerable amount of weapons into Tunisia through the official border crossings, with large caches stored in some parts of the country. Hence, there are serious doubts that a wall can achieve a tangible breakthrough in the overall security situation. However, the economic impact of the wall is bound to be great. The government knows full well that illegitimate, clandestine business – namely, smuggling – is the main economic activity in the country’s south. Since the government has neither the economic capacity nor the vision to replace this informal economy with a structured, legitimate one, the decision to build a wall is bound to worsen the already dire economic crisis in the south in particular, and throughout the country in general.

This means that the government will be hard-pressed to find compensatory solutions in a short time.

Social conditions fuel the security crisis

The severity of the security crisis in Tunisia shows that the opposition's accusations against the Troika were little more than political propaganda. Although Nidaa Tounes built an important part of its electoral platform on security and promised to bring an expedient end to the violence, there has been a general lack of progress in this regard, with violent attacks increasing in frequency and ruthlessness. Thus, many Tunisians remain pessimistic about achieving a quick solution to the crisis.

On the economic front, the government lacks the financial means to accomplish a rapid victory over the insurgents, who are now based in major cities. Despite promises of funding made by regional and global forces before the election, very little came of them, leaving the government unable to cope with rampant unemployment. Social unrest, especially in Gafsa's mining areas, exacerbated the situation, depriving the government for months of the much-needed cash generated by the phosphate industry.

The government has a limited understanding of armed groups and is not aware of their developments over recent months. Further, it has failed to understand the social, political and economic context in which these groups gain new supporters on a daily basis. Instead, the government has adopted an ineffective, deficient doctrine based on security and security alone. A considerable part of the political elite is out of touch with the frustrations of young Tunisians, who are growing more and more disillusioned by the whole democratic process, with their hopes of social justice and equal opportunity wearing thin. This is likely to worsen the phenomenon of armed groups.

Perhaps most importantly, the armed groups are seeking to further weaken the government's ability to fight them by hitting the economy's most valuable commodity: tourism. This move will only worsen the social crisis going forward, as more people grow desperate, becoming easier targets for recruitment by armed groups.

The lack of resources, coupled with ever-rising expenditures, leave the government unable to find solutions to the crisis. Moreover, the current coalition government is incapable of making any significant changes to the country's economic structure even if it wanted to, and these changes would be unpopular given society's already-liberal nature. On the other hand, international institutions are increasing pressure on Tunisia

to liberalise its economy further, which may cause a social explosion, should the government accept such measures. Several indicators show that the current government structure cannot possibly last beyond the coming winter. This is backed by frequent complaints about its performance, especially that of the majority party Nidaa Tounes.

Winter seems to be the bane of Tunisia's existence: every social uprising has happened during the winter, including the revolution. Economic observers predict that the current government won't be able to achieve more than a one per cent growth rate by the end of the year, and that, in and of itself, is an indicator of just how bad things are.

But the government, with support from the presidency, is fighting for survival, as indicated by the recent decision to impose a national state of emergency. Observers know that this decision, all the constitutional and legal violations surrounding it notwithstanding, will have little, if any, impact on winning the fight against violence. At a minimum, it may do little more than leave Tunisians shaken up, and at most, it may be grounds for dismantling strikes and sit-ins that disrupt the economy, so the government can restore some of its lost financial resources.

The government tends to find itself doing "too little, too late", as a result of its lack of vision and resources. Although the parties in the coalition have a very comfortable majority in parliament, they have few tools to deal with the current crisis. Still, talk about changing the current government is growing. Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes, the two majority parties, are poised to form a new government before the next winter, in what could possibly be a show of "Islamist-secular solidarity" that may break the polarisation between the two currents – a trend that already began with the Troika. None of the two parties' leaders, however, actually believes that a change of government can achieve desired outcomes. There is a general concession that a stalemate is on its way, especially now that the Tunisian General Labour Union, the country's national trade union with more than half a million members, declared that it has no intention of putting an end to demands for wage increases in response to requests for a national truce.

At the regional level, the current government is fraught with numerous diplomatic failures on some key issues, such as Tunisia's declining influence in Libya and its worsening relationship with Algeria, in addition to its failure in making any progress on international cooperation, leading to a significant decline in foreign investment. There is a general consensus that businesspeople and the Tunisian Union for Industry, Commerce and Trades (UTICA) are not doing enough to absorb unemployment, citing social unrest

and frequent strikes across the country. On 10 July, the UTICA even went so far as to demand a freeze on Article 36 of the constitution, which recognises the right to strike.

Conclusion

Violence hit Tunisia amid a crushing social and economic crisis that resulted from a long, cumulative history of poor policies that marginalised a significant number of Tunisians. Exacerbating the situation is that those in power lack an understanding of the phenomenon of violence by those in power, making their actions in that regard ineffective. All of this is happening in the presence of a security apparatus that is far from ready to deal with the situation and a political structure that is in widespread disarray, rendering the government unable to win this war. Though there might be a new government in place by the end of the year, it will not be able to resolve the complex security, economic and social development problems.

Observers anticipate that Tunisia may be exposed to new terror strikes targeting major businesses or government institutions. This will make the crisis, affecting the current government along with its coalition partners, even more untenable, prompting it to commit even more violations of the law and to compromise human rights even further. The current government lacks solutions to break the vicious circle in which the country is caught, as a result of a shortage of resources and its lack of vision. This means that any attempt to change the government would be little more than a political act to ease the pressure ever so slightly.

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