

APRIL 2020

Civil-Military Relations in Arab States

The Evolution of Tunisia's Military and the Role of Foreign Security Sector Assistance

Hijab Shah and Melissa Dalton

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Introduction

The Tunisian defense sector has received a growing volume of foreign military assistance since 2011. This is a novel experience. For decades, Tunisia's military was kept purposely weak to prevent the country from succumbing to the same fate as its coup-ridden neighbors. But now, partnerships with the United States, European nations, and regional partners such as Algeria are playing a significant part in its evolution. Faced with the need to modernize outdated military equipment, reform its defense institutions and doctrine, and combat evolving security threats affiliated with al-Qaeda and the self-proclaimed Islamic State, the Tunisian defense sector is seizing the opportunity to receive foreign military assistance.

However, the Tunisian military's ability to absorb and utilize this assistance is constrained by a mix of political realities and its own institutional legacy. Its general staff has remained remarkably apolitical and committed to accepting civilian oversight, but navigating the uncertain postauthoritarian transition has been difficult. Political polarization and fragmentation have stalled defense policy making and underlined the need to clearly define the military's mission, develop a professional doctrine, and advance broader national interests. The use and roles of the armed forces are additionally complicated by a complex and daunting landscape of threats and challenges including counterterrorism, border security, and upgrading military professionalism and readiness.

Tunisia's defense sector is thus at an important inflection point. By enhancing its capacity, foreign security assistance can help anchor effective civil-military relations and reinforce the postauthoritarian, democratic trend. This security assistance covers a range of activities—including training, advising, equipping, exercises, educational exchanges, and institutional capacity building—used by donor governments to enable foreign partners to effectively, transparently, and accountably govern their own security sectors.¹ Security cooperation, involving military to military training, exercises, exchanges, equipment, and institution building, is a subset of security sector assistance activities.

Assessing the results of these security assistance efforts will be central to their success, based on performance in three priority areas, related to the Tunisian military's role in the country's development: counterterrorism, border security, and upgrading military professionalism and readiness. A framework for improving overall military effectiveness can help identify strengths, weaknesses, and gaps in the Tunisian military's development and define how foreign security sector assistance can achieve the greatest possible impact. This framework includes components of policy and doctrine; education, training, equipment, and exercises; operations; and institutions. Assessing these efforts in this way will help the Tunisian military navigate this critical inflection point and progress on its democratic path.

Priorities and Performance

The priorities and performance of the Tunisian military suggest that it intends to continue its postauthoritarian trajectory. Influenced by donor support and Tunisia's threat environment, Tunisia's military has been consumed by addressing three priorities with varying levels of emphasis: counterterrorism, border security, and professionalization and readiness.

Counterterrorism

Following the revolution, Tunisia's military has been focused primarily on a combination of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency efforts, driven by internal and external factors. Libya's political vacuum and the proliferation of jihadi-Salafi and militant groups on Tunisia's borders after Muammar Qaddafi's fall created a new series of external threats that had previously been regulated. The uncertainty following former president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali's removal from office, the disenchantment with the consequent leaders in Tunis, the decision to grant general amnesty to political prisoners including prominent Salafi jihadist leaders, and significant economic and sociopolitical issues allowed for the rise of radicalization and the growth of violent extremist groups in Tunisia.²

Regional conflicts in Syria and Libya also spurred the growth of foreign fighters. Ansar al-Sharia—an al-Qaeda affiliate—was responsible for some of the most significant attacks in the country, including the September 2012 attack on the U.S. embassy; the February and July 2013 assassinations of politicians Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi; and several attacks on Tunisian security forces between 2013 and 2014.³ Katibat Uqba bin Nafi (KUIN), another al-Qaeda offshoot operating along the Tunisia-Algeria border, has conducted a series of attacks against Tunisian security forces in the mountainous border region since 2013, as well as a 2014 attack on Tunisia's former interior minister.⁴ Although Ansar al-Sharia has been diminished significantly, many of the group's remnants have allegedly joined KUIN in the borderlands.⁵

The Islamic State also has affiliates within Tunisia—the Jund al-Khilafah–Tunisia (JAK–T), for instance—while also comprising the group's largest foreign fighter contingent within Syria and Iraq. Local Islamic State recruits reportedly carried out the 2015 Bardo Museum and Sousse resort attacks, resulting in more than sixty deaths.⁶ The Tunisian government reports that some 3,000 Tunisians left the country to fight for the self-proclaimed caliphate in Syria and Iraq, while several other estimates put the number above 6,000.⁷ The continued rise of local affiliates and lack of a criminal justice, rehabilitation, or deradicalization plan to deal with possible Islamic State returnees are causes for concern in Tunisia.⁸

The Tunisian military has suffered losses in countering these violent extremist groups, particularly in the early years of the counterterrorism effort. Around 120 Tunisian security forces personnel—from the military as well as the Ministry of Interior forces—have been killed in the fight against violent extremist groups in Tunisia, with more than 200 casualties.⁹

Tunisia has achieved significant successes in its counterterrorism efforts, albeit with the help of foreign partners. Since 2015, the military's operations have curtailed and even dismantled militant networks across the country, utilizing intelligence from U.S. and European partners.¹⁰ In March 2016, the military was successfully able to thwart an attempted attack on police and military positions on the border with Libya, in a town named Ben Gardane.¹¹ The Tunisian military killed KUIN's first leader, Khaled al-Shayeb, in a 2015 military operation close to the Algerian border, and have recently reported to have also killed his brother Murad in a similar operation in October 2019.¹² Although these operational successes are encouraging, the Tunisian military will need to scale up its efforts, as groups persist on the borderlands. Additionally, it will need to focus on formulating a strategy in anticipation of possible returning Islamic State foreign fighters.

Border Security

While counterterrorism is the primary priority for Tunisia, it overlaps with a second, high priority area: border security. The military plays a role in protecting the border with Algeria and Libya—sharing those responsibilities with the National Guard, which falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Interior. Tunisian border security has an internal facing function—focusing on preventing violent extremists and smuggled weapons from crossing into the country—and one that is outward facing—preventing irregular immigrants from departing Tunisian soil to reach Europe in the north.¹³ A 2018 Pew poll revealed that 24 percent of the Tunisian population plans to emigrate from the country in the next five years, 68 percent of those wishing to go to Europe.¹⁴ In the immediate months following the fall of Ben Ali, more than 25,000 Tunisians crossed the Mediterranean into Europe, while the concurrent crisis in Libya led to more than 35,000 people fleeing the country into Tunisia around the same time.¹⁵

The Tunisian military has stepped up its border security efforts. With the assistance of foreign partners, Tunisia built a 125-mile fence along the Libyan border to curtail cross-border terrorist movement, as well as illegal immigration and smuggling.¹⁶ Although Tunisian authorities stopped upward of 2.5 billion contraband articles from being smuggled into the country, reports of fence breaches and bribes accepted by border guards allow smuggling to continue.¹⁷ Given the importance of smuggling nonillicit goods to Tunisia's broader economy and the border regions in particular, the

military has attempted to improve dialogue with border communities in order to manage smuggling, rather than eradicate it, which is highly unlikely. The objective is to limit the traffic in drugs, weapons, and people, while not disrupting economic activity of border communities that would be destabilizing. Additionally, coordination between the military and National Guard forces on the border remains tenuous, with some ad-hoc coordination on the tactical level—joint patrols, some lower-level intelligence-sharing—but coordination remains a significant gap at the operational and strategic levels, particularly when it comes to clarity of jurisdiction and delineating areas of responsibility. Nascent efforts within the U.S. government to better track return on investment for security sector assistance through monitoring and evaluation will help illuminate these gaps over time.

Professionalization and Readiness

Ben Ali kept the military purposely weak for decades to avoid the political upheaval seen in Tunisia's historically coup-prone neighborhood. The military was kept out of major strategic decisionmaking and remained under-resourced with a very modest budget in comparison to that of the Ministry of Interior.¹⁸ Additionally, the military had limited experience in combat after Tunisian independence in 1956, most significantly as part of United Nations peacekeeping missions. Indeed, the 2014 Mount Chaambi attack produced the greatest recorded military casualty toll since the 1961 Bizerte crisis, with fourteen soldiers killed at the hands of the al-Qaeda-affiliated KUIN.¹⁹ Following the fall of president Ben Ali, the new government in Tunis sought to upgrade the military, prioritizing their professionalization and readiness given the looming security threats.

Despite economic troubles in the country, Tunisia's military expenditure increased from \$572 million in 2010—before the revolution—to \$824 million in 2018 (peaking at nearly \$1 billion in 2016).²⁰ The increase in the military budget has enabled the acquisition of new weapons systems, but the influx of foreign assistance and training—particularly from the United States and Europe—has contributed to the lion's share of the professionalization and readiness effort.²¹ Progress is, however, understandably slow, given the political dysfunction within Tunisia, uncertainty over the role of the military in the country's political life, and the state of the military after decades of neglect under Ben Ali.

Military Effectiveness and Leveraging Foreign Security Sector Assistance

Four categories characterize Tunisia's developing military effectiveness: policy and doctrine; education, training and equipment, and exercises; operations; and institutions. While Tunisia has made progress in several areas, gaps remain that the military appears eager and committed to addressing to

meet its national priorities. Filling these gaps will constitute the clearest evidence yet that the Tunisian military has put its authoritarian past behind it.

Unclear Policy and Doctrine

Although the Tunisian civilian and military leadership has often discussed emerging security threats to the country—counterterrorism in particular—there has yet to be a cohesive defense strategy or doctrine released to the Tunisian public. The United States—and European partners, to a lesser extent—has been attempting to assist Tunisia in the policy and doctrine domain. From workshops and training at the National Defense University in Washington, DC, to advisory meetings with senior military and civilian officials in Tunis, U.S. officials and experts have been encouraging and working with Tunisia to create a cohesive defense strategy for the country. There have reportedly been draft defense white papers circulated by the Tunisian Ministries of Defense and Interior, but they have yet to manifest as formal, publicly available policy documents.²²

Some who have played an advisory role have indicated that this lack of success in Tunisian strategic planning in the post-Ben Ali era is due to a combination of factors and competing priorities: political and economic flux and short-term threats distract from strategic thinking; a lack of experience in strategic planning and very slow shifts in institutional culture inhibit the reform of strategy and doctrine; and a lack of manpower capacity due to the under-staffing and under-resourcing of the Tunisian military result in strategic planning falling by the wayside.

In 2016, U.S. and other donors anticipated that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs might release a Tunisian counterterrorism policy, but apart from a vague presidential statement that highlighted a four-pronged approach of “prevention, protection, judicial proceedings and retaliation,” a public document or clear and detailed articulation of the strategy never emerged.²³ There have also been extensive reports around the development and circulation of a broader national defense white paper in cooperation with advising from the United States and European partners, but such plans or policy have not been made transparent to the public. Emphasis on the value of strategic planning and public accountability through training, advising, and partnered operations with Tunisia could help foster a generational shift in leadership attitudes toward transparency over time; however, it would also require Tunisia’s civilian political leadership to accept responsibility for such transparency.

Effective Partnerships Through Education, Training and Equipping, and Exercises

Although Tunisia has established its own military training and education systems for its personnel, the United States and European partners bolster these efforts with significant assistance. U.S. education and training assistance to Tunisia has developed through several channels. The United States

provides Tunisia with International Military Education and Training (IMET) funding worth more than \$2 million a year.²⁴ Through the Combating Terrorism Fellowship Program, U.S. assistance totaled about \$2.7 million between 2012 and 2016, before the fellowship's funding was cut for Tunisia under President Donald Trump's administration and likely redistributed to other authorities.²⁵ Tunisia also received \$65 million in FY2019 Foreign Military Financing from the United States, focused on jointly defined priorities, including counterterrorism, border security, intelligence capacity, maturing and building defense institutions, and improving conventional and contingency force capacity. Tunisia has also received significant assistance, formerly under the Section 1206 and Section 2282 and currently under Section 333 U.S. Department of Defense authorities, with train and equip funding exceeding \$160 million since 2011.²⁶

France, a historic postcolonial partner to Tunisia, launched a counterterrorism cooperation program in October 2015, which included a pledge to assist Tunisia with the development and training of a new special operations force, continue training and education programs for Tunisian officers in France, and to establish a Tunisian military academy in Gafsa.²⁷ Through NATO's Individual Partnership and Cooperation Program with Tunisia, the alliance provides military education and training to the Tunisian military, as well as training on counterterrorism capabilities and interoperability with NATO member militaries.²⁸

The Tunisian military has also benefited from a range of tactical and operational training programs from the United States, European partners, and NATO, targeting specific capabilities. The United States has quietly led a train, advise, and assist (TAA) program with the Tunisian military. A hundred and fifty Marines, including a special operations contingent, have worked with the Tunisian military on training for counterterrorism operations.²⁹ The United Kingdom also provides border surveillance and patrol training to the military as well as the National Guard.³⁰ The United States and Germany have cooperatively funded border security sensors for Tunisia's border with Libya.

Tunisia participates in military exercises with U.S., European, and regional militaries. The U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) hosts Tunisia, among other African and NATO partner nations, in several exercises, including the annual counterterrorism-focused Flintlock and African Lion exercises, as well as the maritime law enforcement-focused Phoenix Express exercise.³¹ Tunisia was an observer at the 2015 NATO-led Operation Trident Juncture, the largest NATO military exercise since the Cold War.³² Tunisia has also participated in several smaller scale exercises with the North African and Southern European countries that comprise the 5+5 Defense Initiative focusing on security in the Mediterranean.³³

Growing Counterterrorism and Border Security Operations

Tunisia's military is by and large internally focused and limited to counterterrorism and border security. The United States' TAA force has allegedly been involved in "an array of secret missions" with the Tunisian military, particularly in the border areas where al-Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates have clashed with Tunisian military and National Guard personnel.³⁴ The United States has also set up a drone base in Bizerte, with surveillance operations that both aid U.S. operations against the Islamic State in places like Libya, and provide the Tunisian military intelligence on possible threats from Islamic State and al-Qaeda affiliates.³⁵ Although these missions are currently unarmed, there is speculation about the possibility of armed strikes being conducted from—and even with—Tunisia.

Tunisia routinely—and fairly successfully—conducts joint operations with Algeria to counter smuggling, trafficking, and violent extremist activity along their shared border.³⁶ In 2014, the two militaries launched a significant operation involving about 8,000 Algerian and 6,000 Tunisian military personnel to root out violent extremists operating in the border regions.³⁷ The Joint Intelligence Unit formed by the two countries in 2013 was instrumental in operations that killed KUIN leaders in 2017.³⁸

Institutional Gaps in Protecting Civil Liberties, Transparency, and Strategic Planning

Historically, the balance of power in Tunisia has been tipped in favor of the Ministry of Interior's security forces and away from the military. The military's exclusion for decades from a meaningful role in the country's political life is beginning to be overturned post-Jasmine Revolution, in part due to being fairly untainted by the corruption and abuses of Tunisia's political elite, and in part because of a greater purpose in the form of counterterrorism operations. As the military rises within Tunisia, it faces challenges in finding equilibrium with Ministry of Interior forces, which remain strong and influential. By the zero-sum, competitive framing of the military versus Ministry of Interior forces in political circles, there exists the potential for overcorrection on the part of the Tunisian military. General Rachid Ammar is a cautionary tale in this situation, riding on a wave of popularity after mistakenly being credited with refusing Ben Ali's orders to shoot protesters during the Arab Spring. Ammar swiftly consolidated power in Tunisia in the immediate months after Ben Ali's ouster, making himself chief of staff of the Tunisian army, and appointing several military leaders to crucial national security positions and provincial governorships.³⁹

Although much of this was reversed when Ammar was pressured into resigning, military control of state institutions is an area of potential concern for Tunisia's allies and partners, and an area worthy of closer examination for international monitoring and evaluation efforts. The U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) launched its first program in Tunisia in 2012. Focusing on governance, security and justice reforms, civil society capacity, and defense institution building in Tunisia, DRL's work seeks to enhance Tunisian institutions' capacity in accordance with human rights and civil liberties norms and standards.⁴⁰ This is especially important in the wake of the violent extremist threat in Tunisia and the consequent risk of lowering civil liberty standards—particularly by the police and National Guard, who were notorious for abuses under Ben Ali—in the name of counterterrorism operations. The parliamentary assembly passed a draconian counterterrorism law in 2015 reinstating capital punishment, preventing suspects from accessing legal assistance for fifteen days, and authorizing surveillance of citizens through methods such as phone tapping.⁴¹

Tunisia's old parliamentary committee focusing on defense was split into two in 2014: the Committee on Administrative Organization and the Affairs of the Armed Forces, and the Committee on Security and Defense. The former is ostensibly tasked with administrative reform to the country's security enterprise as a whole (not only the military but also the forces under the Ministry of Interior), while the latter is responsible for monitoring and responding to Tunisia's strategic threats and priorities.⁴² Both committees have made meager progress in reforming the Tunisian defense enterprise, and there remains a significant—and for some partners, a frustrating—lack of clarity and transparency around administrative and strategic planning within the Tunisian military. This ineffectiveness is likely due to the committees' lack of real mandate and oversight, in addition to the challenge of a weak and understaffed parliament.

<A>Conclusion

Although the Tunisian military has made significant strides in the post-Jasmine Revolution era, the Tunisian government must build upon the military's strengths and set clear parameters for the military's goals and institutional role. This will require elevating donor engagement to a strategic level with Tunisia's government to clarify the military's roles and responsibilities and sustaining current levels of security sector assistance. Tunisia's government must also address gaps in effectiveness in order meet the military's prescribed national priorities and increase performance.

Addressing these gaps requires four actions by the Tunisian government. First, it must clearly articulate policy goals for the use of the military and establish guiding doctrine tied to national priorities, including counterterrorism. Second, it must build upon strong partnerships with foreign donors to

continue training and equipping its forces and engaging in educational exchanges and exercises. Third, it should bolster its own counterterrorism and border security capabilities with targeted partnered operations with U.S. and allied forces. Finally, it must seek to strengthen its institutions through protections for civil liberties and enhancing transparency and clarity of strategic planning. Introducing measured monitoring and evaluation at both the policy and programmatic level, in partnership with the Tunisian government and military will help identify and crystallize intermediate objectives. By implementing these steps to improve its effectiveness, Tunisia's military will have an important role to play in safeguarding Tunisia's democratic evolution.

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Notes

- 1 Neither the U.S. government, allied governments, nor broader policy or academic communities share a common definition for security sector assistance or security cooperation. The authors are using the “security sector assistance” definition detailed here, which characterizes these activities as inherently political in nature, as a manipulation of the monopoly of the use of force: Melissa Dalton, Hijab Shah, Shannon N. Green, and Rebecca Hughes, “Oversight and Accountability in U.S. Security Sector Assistance: Seeking Return on Investment,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 12, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/oversight-and-accountability-us-security-sector-assistance>.
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