

MARCH 2020

Civil-Military Relations in Arab States

# Tunisia's Wake-Up Call: How Security Challenges From Libya Are Shaping Defense Reforms

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## Introduction

In the pre-dawn hours of January 27, 1980, dozens of armed fighters stormed through the mining town of Gafsa in southern Tunisia, firing on police and military installations and attempting to rally the town's disgruntled inhabitants to revolt against the Tunisian government. Fighting continued for days, resulting in the deaths of dozens of security forces and the uprising's ultimate failure. In subsequent weeks, the Tunisian government accused Muammar Gaddafi's regime in Libya of orchestrating, training, and funding the incursion. The Gafsa Incident, as it came to be called, underscored the severity of the threats emanating from Tunisia's unpredictable eastern neighbor. It was also a jolt to Tunisia's defense establishment, exposing gaps in critical capabilities. As they scrambled to respond, the Tunisian armed forces suffered from serious shortfalls in mobility and logistics and were forced to rely on the rapid injection of Moroccan and French support.<sup>1</sup>

In the aftermath of the battle, the Tunisian Ministry of Defense (MOD) sought to remedy these military deficiencies.<sup>2</sup> "Gafsa was the start of our modernization," noted one retired Tunisian general in an October 2019 interview.<sup>3</sup> In tandem, Tunisia's Western backers, worried about a continued threat from Libya's mercurial and aggressive regime, also responded. A year after the attack, the administration of then president Ronald Reagan announced it was bolstering its security assistance to Tunisia. But Pentagon officials at the time were divided about the direction of that assistance—whether it should prepare the Tunisian military to address conventional threats, from tanks and aircraft, for example, or less conventional ones, like insurgents and terrorists. They received little helpful input from the Tunisian military, which, because of the Tunisian regime's policy of neglecting the armed forces, lacked even a rudimentary capacity for planning and forecasting requirements.<sup>4</sup> Tunisian officials presented the U.S. military with what amounted to a wish list of expensive, high-end equipment.<sup>5</sup>

More than three decades later, Tunisia faced another cross-border attack emanating from Libya, which, like the Gafsa Incident, involved an effort to seize an entire Tunisian town by exploiting its economic marginalization. In the morning darkness of March 7, 2016, more than fifty militants of the self-proclaimed Islamic State—some of whom had been trained at a camp near the Libyan town of Sabratha—streamed across the Libyan-Tunisian border into the town of Ben Gardane and proclaimed an "emirate."<sup>6</sup> Tunisian police and army forces fought running gun battles with the insurgents for several days, eventually defeating them with some civilian help and at the cost of many lives.<sup>7</sup> As in the case of Gafsa, the Ben Gardane assault was a shock to the Tunisian defense establishment, laying bare deficiencies in military capabilities and preparedness. And, just as the Gafsa battle had done, the aftermath of Ben Gardane, along with earlier Islamic State attacks, spurred a rush of Western security assistance.<sup>8</sup> Here again, however, the Tunisian armed forces' requests for outside assistance were not rooted in a Tunisian-led strategy or planning process.<sup>9</sup>

However, in the years since, the Tunisian armed forces *have* made impressive progress in multiple areas. This is especially evident when compared to their decades-long marginalization before the 2011 revolution against then president Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali. During this seminal event, they emerged with newfound popularity among many sectors of Tunisian society, especially when compared to Ministry of Interior (MOI) forces, who had sided with the regime.<sup>10</sup> In the immediate postrevolution period, the Tunisian military assumed a large number of roles, ranging from law enforcement to the guarding of critical infrastructure to disaster relief and even the protection of Tunisia's national exam facilities. With the rise of terrorism on Tunisian soil in 2013 and, especially, by mid-2014—much of it originating in or linked to Libya—the Tunisian military started focusing more on asymmetric threats and handing some enforcement and infrastructural protection missions back to the MOI.<sup>11</sup>

While not without its problems, the Tunisian military's transformation has been steady and significant, according to many foreign and Tunisian accounts. The Tunisian armed forces are moving from an outmoded, neglected, Cold War–style conventional force into a leaner, more agile, and more responsive military capable of executing a diverse set of missions. U.S. officials who have trained the Tunisians over the years are quick to emphasize this dynamism and they caution against judging Tunisia's shortcomings—especially in areas such as joint (in other words, intermilitary service) operations, information sharing, and civil-military relations—against the standard of wealthy industrial states such as the United States. When compared to other partner nations of the United States on the African continent, one U.S. military officer noted, the Tunisians' progress is remarkable. “They are working on differential equations,” this officer observed, “while other African partners are doing arithmetic.”<sup>12</sup>

Still, the legacy of decades of official neglect of the Tunisian military and entrenched bureaucratic rivalries weigh heavily on the present—as does the unpredictable future of Tunisia's larger neighbors. Current and future threats from the most consequential of these neighbors, Libya, have exposed deficiencies at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of Tunisia's defense capabilities. A number of steps are needed to remedy these gaps. The country's defense leadership needs to engage in a more deliberate planning effort to organize and equip their military to account for Libya's potential trajectories over the next ten to twenty years. And most importantly, this process needs to be organic and delinked from the priorities of Tunisia's foreign patrons, especially the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), which has thus far exerted a disproportionate influence on steering the Tunisian military toward combatting terrorists.

Moving toward these reforms does not mean that Tunisia's military should be the first or only policy tool in dealing with challenges from Libya—far from it. As research by Carnegie and other scholars

has argued, and as the Tunisian military itself recognizes, addressing the issue of Tunisian-Libyan border instability demands, first and foremost, a holistic policy of socioeconomic reform and inclusive governance.<sup>13</sup>

## Why Are Challenges From Libya So Confounding?

Libya is a vital national security concern for Tunisia because of its outsized effects on the country's economic development and political stability. The World Bank attributes at least 24 percent of Tunisia's overall drop in the growth of gross domestic product from 2011 to 2015 to Libya's turmoil.<sup>14</sup> The fall in remittance income from Tunisia's expatriate workers in Libya who have returned to Tunisia because of the violence has been sharp, dropping by roughly 32 percent from 2010 to 2014.<sup>15</sup> The remaining Tunisian workers in Libya are exposed to increased dangers and sometimes threats of expulsion from Libyan authorities as retaliation for the Tunisian government's arrests of Libyans.<sup>16</sup> On top of this, there have been other effects on Tunisia.<sup>17</sup> The first several years after the fall of Qadhafi saw an influx of Libyan refugees into Tunisia, straining parts of the economy, especially by raising rent prices.<sup>18</sup> And while those numbers have diminished as some Libyans returned home, the Tunisian government is preparing for another spike if Libya's conflict worsens.<sup>19</sup> Spillover jihadist violence, epitomized by the Ben Gardane assault as well as other Islamic State attacks originating in Libya,<sup>20</sup> has deterred foreign investment and tourism, though there are recent and encouraging signs of a recovery.<sup>21</sup> Smuggling and trafficking from Libya, over land and maritime borders, remain a continuing concern.

The endemic turnover of officials and governments in Tripoli has compounded the aforementioned challenges, leaving Tunisia without a viable diplomatic or security partner. "You don't know who your neighbor is," said one Tunisian army officer. "Today it is John, tomorrow it is Tom."<sup>22</sup> This uncertainty contrasts sharply with the Algerian border which, despite being the site of a low-grade insurgency, at least presents Tunisia with strong state partner on the other side.<sup>23</sup> In Libya, however, there is an utter lack of formal and centrally controlled border security units with whom the Tunisian military can engage. Instead, a dizzying array of fractious Libyan armed groups and tribes (many with kin across the border) hold sway, along with smugglers. Navigating this landscape is tricky for Tunisia's armed forces, both in terms of acquiring accurate and actionable intelligence but also in terms of doctrine and legality. "We are obliged to talk to the militias—to 'work' with them," said one Tunisian army officer; "we can't ignore them."<sup>24</sup>

This landscape became suddenly more complex for Tunisia on April 4, 2019, when militia forces allied with eastern-based strongman General Khalifa Haftar attacked Tripoli with the intention of toppling the internationally backed Government of National Accord (GNA). Ostensibly undertaken

to clear the capital of militias, the move is more accurately seen as a grab for power by Haftar—what the United Nations special representative for Libya has correctly called a “coup.”<sup>25</sup> Now in its tenth month, the largely stalemated war has introduced a worrying array of high-end weaponry to western Libya, with serious implications for Tunisia’s security: Javelin and Kornet antitank missiles, heavy-caliber mortars, shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles, and perhaps most significantly, armed drones piloted by the United Arab Emirates (backing Haftar) and Turkey (backing the GNA), whose operational radius extends into Tunisian territory.<sup>26</sup> In early September 2019, the situation escalated even further with the arrival to the Tripoli front of over 100 Russian mercenaries from the so-called Wagner Group in support of Haftar, bringing with them tactical expertise that aided his advance.<sup>27</sup> This was followed by the deployment in late December 2019 of thousands of Turkish-backed Syrian militia fighters to bolster the GNA’s front lines.<sup>28</sup>

Tunisia’s response to this endemic chaos has been, for the most part, centered on disciplined noninterference, choosing diplomacy over active military meddling—or at least not meddling to the extent of other Middle Eastern actors (principally, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, and Qatar) who have provided funding, logistics, weapons, fighters, and advisors, and even conducted airstrikes in Libyan territory.<sup>29</sup> Instead of picking sides, Tunisia has tried to stay “equidistant” from all factions, according to one Tunisian officer.<sup>30</sup> Officially, the Tunisian government engages with the GNA and maintains a small consulate in the Libyan capital. Even so, Tunisian military officers acknowledge GNA Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj’s tenuous to nonexistent control over the armed groups that claim nominal affiliation to his government, and they recognize the value of maintaining channels to Haftar. This is even the case with Tunisian officials expressing concerns about his behavior, especially if he takes power in Tripoli.<sup>31</sup> “We are not sure how Haftar will behave toward us; he’s not happy with democracy,” noted one Tunisian military intelligence officer.<sup>32</sup> But they are adamant about maintaining the perception of neutrality. The Tunisian-Libyan border remains mostly open—though it is subject to intermittent closures by the Tunisian government—and Libyans from both factional camps are free to travel to Tunisia for meetings and dialogues. Wounded Libyan fighters from both Haftar’s forces and the GNA receive medical care in Tunis, albeit in separate hospitals and clinics.<sup>33</sup>

## Border Containment and Its Impact on Tunisia’s Military’s Transformation

In tandem with this diplomatic engagement, Tunisia’s defense strategy against current and future threats from Libya has been largely reactive and geared toward containment. This is epitomized by the construction of a massive border barrier and the militarization of Tunisia’s border regions, which has thrust the Tunisian military into new and uncomfortable roles. Spanning 220 kilometers of the Tunisian-Libyan border, the complex border structure is comprised of berms, trenches, and wa-

ter-filled moats, along with sophisticated electronic systems, including motion detectors, cameras, ground surveillance radars, and tethered balloons (aerostats) equipped with optical and infrared sensors.<sup>34</sup> The project has been accomplished through funding, donations, and training by the United States Defense Threat Reduction Agency and the German Bundeswehr (armed forces) and has been controversial. Critics have framed it as part of a slide toward increased surveillance in Tunis and the erosion of civil liberties, and some German lawmakers, in particular, have decried the application of a counterterrorism narrative to stop legitimate migrants and asylum seekers.<sup>35</sup>

Beyond these physical and technical measures, the frontier is controlled through a defense-in-depth strategy. In the northern, populated stretches of the border, MOI forces—Customs and National Guard personnel—are the first line of defense, with the Tunisian army providing on-call backup. The southern sections of the frontier, from Ras Jadir to Burj Qadra, constitute a military exclusion or buffer zone, with the MOD having primacy for patrolling, interdiction, and arrests. One goal of this hardening and layering strategy, according to a Tunisian army officer, is to “push the [cross-border] terrorists to the south,” out of Tunisia’s population centers to the desert where the army can deal with them.<sup>36</sup>

But the militarization of the southern border regions and the Tunisian army’s increased role has highlighted concerns about capabilities and the operating doctrine that have not been addressed in a systematic way. At the broadest level, the Tunisian army has become “the face of the Tunisian government”<sup>37</sup> in the south and is interacting with Tunisians in border communities in ways that make some Tunisian military officers uneasy. Principally, these officers fear that the popularity of the Tunisian army, stemming from their supportive role in the country’s 2011 revolution, could be tarnished as they assume the mantle of enforcement that was once the exclusive purview of the MOI forces. Relatedly, there is unease that the army’s newfound law enforcement function has not been formalized in terms of the chain of custody for captured contraband.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, as MOD forces come into close contact with smuggling networks and has taken on border enforcement missions, they are susceptible to corruption, especially among the poorly paid rank-and-file. This is a problem that previously mostly afflicted the MOI forces.<sup>39</sup>

The Tunisian army’s growing posture in the south and the interactions with local populations that accompany this posture highlight its limited capacity in the areas of public affairs and civil affairs. The first capability includes the dissemination of accurate information to Tunisian citizens about the military’s roles and missions and the second, civil affairs, includes augmenting or enhancing the government’s provision of basic services—in part to win public support.<sup>40</sup> Some Tunisian officers observed that individual Tunisian commanders have gained practical experiences in such population-centric operations from their deployments in support of United Nations peacekeeping missions in Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Rwanda, and Cambodia.<sup>41</sup> But according to both

Tunisian and U.S. officers, these functions remain nascent and ill-developed—and if they are implemented today, they are not formalized into doctrine and training. “They don’t organize for civil affairs,” noted one former U.S. defense attaché, “they just do it.”<sup>42</sup>

Such interactions, according to serving Tunisian military officers, include providing medical care to isolated southern populations. “If a pregnant woman shows up at our base, we take her to a military hospital,” noted a Tunisian army commander.<sup>43</sup> But these positive exchanges are often overshadowed by more negative ones. For example, in instances where the Tunisian army has killed a smuggler in a shoot-out, the families of the deceased have sometimes protested in front of army bases. Yet the Tunisian army lacks the ability to handle such demonstrations and, perhaps more importantly, convey information to locals. “The army needs communication and local relations,” a European defense attaché noted. “It’s being overtaken.”<sup>44</sup> Cultural disparities compound these problems. For Tunisian officers who often hail from the coast, serving in the south along Libya’s border “is like a foreign deployment,” but their training does not address these cultural issues.<sup>45</sup> Another key gap is gender inclusion: women serve in the Tunisian military but not on frontline border positions. Rectifying this would facilitate interactions with local populations on sensitive issues like personal searches.<sup>46</sup>

While recognizing these capability gaps, senior Tunisian military officers acknowledge that fixing them is only half the story; the military should not and cannot be the only tool to address the border. Nor can Tunisia expect to fully seal the border, especially given the importance of cross-border networks of kin and trade. What is needed, Tunisian defense officials concede, is a whole-of-government approach.<sup>47</sup> But doing that is proving challenging for a host of bureaucratic and structural reasons—including the lack of interagency cooperation.

### Tunisian Military Intelligence Is Increasingly Focused on Libya

Aside from border hardening and forcing new roles on the Tunisian armed forces, another way that Libya is shaping Tunisia’s defense transformation is by spurring advances in intelligence collection and analysis. According to Tunisian military intelligence officers, some of these improvements sprung from the 2016 Ben Gardane assault by the Islamic State—the severity of which caught Tunisia off-guard. “It was a wake-up call,” a military intelligence officer admitted. “A military success, but an intelligence failure.”<sup>48</sup> In response, the Tunisian armed forces intelligence arm, the Agence des Renseignements et de la Sécurité pour la Défense (ARSD) has shifted to a policy of “saturation” of intelligence collection roughly 100 kilometers deep into Libya (to the capital Tripoli). In conversations with analysts, it was evident that ARSD personnel are indeed well-informed about Libyan militia dynamics along Libya’s western seaboard.<sup>49</sup> The ARSD presumably cultivates and runs its own human intelligence sources, though the extent of this is probably limited. It also participates in

bilateral intelligence exchanges, especially with the United States. A senior ARSD officer also attends a working group on Libya chaired by the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL).<sup>50</sup> Lastly, the ARSD reportedly maintains a cadre of open-source analysts who scour Libyan social media for insights into armed groups and political factions.<sup>51</sup>

Taken in sum, all of this points to the ARSD's continued transformation into a more professional organization focused on external adversarial threats, moving away from its past mission of what one U.S. official termed "coup-proofing" (in other words, keeping tabs on internal dissent). Much of this progress has been accomplished with U.S. training assistance. That said, ARSD and other Tunisian officers are candid about their lack of insights into Libya's eastern region and the structure and dynamics of Haftar's armed forces. Moreover, they bemoan their informational shortcomings relative to other Middle Eastern players in Libya who, while not sharing an immediate border with Libya, seem to understand the country better.<sup>52</sup>

### But Intelligence Sharing Remains a Problem

But perhaps more important than deficiencies in collection and analysis are Tunisia's endemic problems of information sharing, which are themselves rooted in a long-standing culture of competition among security institutions. Much of this stems from previous regimes' efforts at coup-proofing and cronyism and patronage within various ministries and agencies. The negative implications of this extend well beyond intelligence sharing to encompass strategy and planning (discussed below).

At the center of international efforts to overcome this disjointedness is an "intelligence fusion center," a sort of nerve center for the MOD intended to collate, process, and quickly disseminate various intelligence streams, especially to operational ground commanders. Demonstrating once again the continued fragmentation of Tunisia's intelligence enterprises, this MOD fusion center was established separately from an MOI fusion center focused on terrorism and organized crime that has been operational since 2015.<sup>53</sup> But recent security incidents, especially the Ben Gardane terrorist attack originating in Libya, prompted a move toward greater information sharing among these centers. "We needed to concentrate our intelligence resources – we were wasting precious time; this was the big lesson of Ben Gardane," noted one retired Tunisian general who played a key role in establishing the MOD center.<sup>54</sup> But the MOD project and MOD-MOI intelligence sharing in general—epitomized by the MOD's abortive efforts to plug into the MOI fusion center—are handicapped by bureaucratic rivalries and habits of information hoarding. According to outside observers and MOD personnel, the latter dynamic is especially evident in the reluctance of the MOI to share intelligence.<sup>55</sup> And as in other initiatives, the United States is playing an outsized role as a coach and trainer for Tunisian military intelligence but also a mediator for competing agencies. "[Fusion] is a new concept for them," a former U.S. defense attaché noted. "Without our interest, it would fail," he added.<sup>56</sup>

Other obstacles to information and intelligence sharing arise from the Tunisians' inability to integrate concepts of operations (CONOPS) into standard operating procedures and the training of competent personnel. "Those who play with the buttons for imagery don't know how to get this intelligence to the operational commander," noted a European defense official. Outmoded technical issues are further inhibitions for both intelligence sharing and operational coordination. One U.S. military trainer who works closely with Tunisian counterterrorism forces noted that "while they have the CONOPS of air support to the ground-based Quick Reaction Forces, they don't have the architecture to do real-time data sharing," he lamented. "This is a military that still communicates via fax and a closed, land-line network." He noted that where Tunisian special operations forces' positions are three kilometers apart, their operations officers could not talk to one another without MOD permission.<sup>57</sup>

Underpinning these communication problems, the trainer observed, is an endemic aversion to realistic training, rehearsal, and the hard-won mastery of unit- and individual-level skills—with important implications for information sharing. Referring to a well-known U.S. special operations' credo, "Brilliance in the Basics," he noted individual Tunisian soldiers' inability to master basic combat tasks, often dealing with informational processing efforts like syncing their night vision goggles to their M4 carbines and deploying their ScanEagle reconnaissance drones in such a way to maximize loiter time. In some cases, these issues were rooted in outmoded hierarchies that fostered distrust among the ranks and slowed communication. For example, Tunisian military pilots (usually officers) resented receiving ground-to-air instructions from a forward air controller (usually an enlisted soldier).<sup>58</sup> In other instances, the problems stemmed from an ingrained overreliance on technological solutions, which, by themselves, would likely be defeated by adversary countermeasures unless there was an accompanying shift in habits, processes, and tactics.<sup>59</sup> For example, terrorists' improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in Tunisia increasingly rely on no more than a cigarette lighter as their only metal component in an otherwise plastic assembly. Such practices render technical detection all but impossible and necessitate countermeasures based on changes in behavior and processes—like staying off certain trails and collecting better intelligence on the geographic patterns of IED attacks.<sup>60</sup>

Yet, in some instances, the barriers to better intelligence collection are legislative and judicial—which are actually healthy signs of a nascent democracy. For example, in combatting terrorists, U.S. officials have urged Tunisia to capture more biometric data.<sup>61</sup> But the collection of biometric data remains controversial among Tunisian activists and watchdog groups who fear it would reduce privacy and civil liberties—and the Tunisian parliament recently voted down a draft law that would expand the government's collection of such sensitive information.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, adherence to judicial procedures often clashes with intelligence-collection demands—another positive indicator of a burgeoning democracy, though these two channels eventually need to be reconciled. For example,

Tunisia has reportedly requested U.S. assistance with IED jammers but, according to a U.S. trainer, is reluctant to share the frequencies of captured IEDs because this information is used for criminal prosecution.<sup>63</sup>

That said, there are pockets of intelligence-sharing success and, comparatively, the Tunisian military is making steps toward breaking down institutional barriers. This is especially evident in the field.<sup>64</sup> The farther one gets from Tunis, one U.S. official noted, the better the cooperation between tactical units from the MOI and MOD.<sup>65</sup> For example, a U.S. trainer of Tunisia's MOD counterterrorism forces cited a textbook case of real-time information collaboration: The Tunisian army ambushed insurgents in central Tunisia, yielding a trove of actionable intelligence from captured cell phones. The data were then quickly passed to Tunisian National Guard units, who were in the vicinity of Ben Gardane and used it to seize an arms cache.<sup>66</sup>

## Tunisia's Overdependence on Foreign and Especially American Planning Support

A common refrain among observers and critics of Tunisia's defense establishment is that its foreign backers are setting the country's defense priorities, steering it toward the containment of two spill-over threats: stopping sub-Saharan migrants from crossing the Mediterranean (a concern for Europe) and countering terrorism (a priority for the United States but also Europe).<sup>67</sup> While this dynamic should not be overstated, it does carry some truth. "To get our attention, they use the T-word and the M-word," observed a U.S. defense official, referring to terrorists and migrants.<sup>68</sup> Echoing this, a European defense official in Tunis noted, "The individual lenses of (donor) countries—counterterrorism and border control—drives their growth."<sup>69</sup>

As a result, the Tunisian military is increasingly dealing with unconventional and low-intensity challenges, many of them stemming from Libya. But several retired officers questioned whether this might be swinging too far in one direction and ignoring potential conventional threats, especially from Libya, which cannot be ruled out and have not been assessed through any systematic planning. "We shouldn't have an army only focused on asymmetric threats," noted one retired general. "Terrorism is just one threat—it is wrong to transform the army only this way."<sup>70</sup> He went on to applaud Tunisia's diplomacy as the first line of the country's security, noting that it had kept it out of major wars—so far. Still, the uncertain trajectory of Tunisia's neighbors necessitates accounting for a range of conventional challenges over the mid and long term. This is especially the case in Libya, where foreign-piloted drones and fixed-wing aircraft are bombing the capital and the western region, close to Tunisia, with impunity.

Air defense is, therefore, a growing Tunisian concern: since 2011, there have been several instances of aerial intrusion from Libya, often by pilots who are lost or experience mechanical problems.<sup>71</sup> Generally, the cases are resolved quietly, though more provocative acts are met with diplomatic condemnation and demarches. Tunisian military officers maintain that their response was quick—the Tunisian air force recently scrambled fighter jets to intercept an airspace violator from Libya (but it landed before they could), according to the press. Tunisian politicians have also publicly threatened to shoot down trespassing aircraft.<sup>72</sup>

Yet, privately, retired officers and U.S. defense officials cast doubt on Tunisia's ability to detect and respond effectively. According to one retired air force officer, Tunisian military doctrine forbids the shooting down of aerial intrusions—though a U.S. official quipped that “it's convenient to make your doctrine prohibit things you can't actually do.”<sup>73</sup> Tunisian officers are candid that investments in air defense, whether radar, missile, or fighter upgrades, are too expensive and have been subordinated to the priority of fortifying the land border with Libya. In the meantime, Tunisian intelligence is intently focused on monitoring the disposition and factional control of Watiya airbase in Libya's western region, given its proximity to Tunisia.<sup>74</sup>

At any rate, planning for conventional and nonconventional contingencies from Libya and elsewhere has not been carried out in any systematic or coordinated manner. Various planning efforts have been undertaken but remain stymied by competition, opacity, and the lack of staffing. According to the constitution, the President of Tunisia is supposed to have oversight of the determination and coordination of national security planning, under the auspices of the national security advisor.<sup>75</sup> But several current and retired officers noted that this is not happening, principally because of a lack of staffing. “We don't see how the president can be a real player,” one retired general officer cautioned. “He doesn't have the staff.”<sup>76</sup> Personnel shortages similarly impede MOD coordination: Tunisia has no equivalent to the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, so each of the four services has its own planning department. “But nobody synchronizes,” noted one U.S. defense attaché. The MOD has a coordination staff—roughly 30–40 people, according to a U.S. official, “but this is not enough to manage the services.”<sup>77</sup>

In some cases, whatever plans that emerge from this dysfunctional system simply “sit on the shelves,” according to one retired Tunisian officer, or are not disseminated widely within the government, let alone the public.<sup>78</sup> In November 2016, for example, the Tunisian national security council oversaw the drafting of a National Strategy Against Terrorism and Violent Extremism, but it was never published.<sup>79</sup> Underpinning all of these problems is the lack of an overarching national security strategy into which the services' planning can be “nested,” according to one U.S. defense official. The Tunisian military's principal think-tank/higher education institute, the National Defense Institute

(NDI), with assistance from the U.S. National Defense University (NDU), tried to rectify this deficiency in 2017, but the output, a white paper, was never published and, according to U.S. and European defense advisors, was unsatisfactory.<sup>80</sup>

Without a coordinated and effective planning process, Tunisia's defense needs are defaulting to the requirements set by its major security patron, the United States. The foundational blueprint in the U.S.-Tunisian defense partnership is a document called the Bilateral Country Action Plan (BCAP), which was signed in 2017 after deliberations between the U.S. Office of Security Cooperation and Tunisia's different service branches. The BCAP, one U.S. defense noted, resulted from a series of "forcing conversations" that U.S. officers conducted with their Tunisian counterparts (in other words, the United States largely drove the process).<sup>81</sup> The BCAP thus serves as a sort of connective tissue among the Tunisian military branches who have been unable to formalize or coordinate their own planning process. According to one U.S. official, it is possible to "intuit" Tunisia's overall national security priorities from the BCAP—though the extent of actual Tunisian input is unclear.<sup>82</sup>

The BCAP's four priorities are the following:

- Development of a Joint Operations Center (JOC) that would focus on air-ground integration, with an eye toward the insurgent threat in the western Chaambi mountains. The JOC would also address spillover threats from Libya, including from extremists and aerial infiltration, especially from drones. The JOC has established facilities and manning but is still working out its standard operating procedures. One U.S. defense official working on Tunisia admitted that the JOC remains "theatrical."<sup>83</sup>
- Bolstering of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), including by procuring a fleet of U.S. Cessna 208 Caravan reconnaissance aircraft that would feed intelligence data to the JOC.
- Development and maturation of a Tunisian military intelligence cadre through U.S. assistance to a military intelligence training center. This cadre would serve to better prepare Tunisia's armed forces to analyze and forecast foreign adversarial threats.
- Improvement of the capability and interoperability of Tunisia's special operations forces.

Beyond these four priorities, the blueprint includes a focus on border security (both land and maritime), crisis response capabilities (including medical services), and defense institution building (in other words, the reforming and rationalizing of Tunisia's defense bureaucracy).<sup>84</sup>

In addition to the BCAP, Washington's outsized influence over Tunisia's defense planning is further evident in a recent and aborted strategic planning exercise conducted by the Tunisian MOD. In June 2019, the Centre de Recherche Militaire (CRM)—a military research center under the MOD that is usually focused on scientific research rather than strategic studies—commissioned a one-year study

of Tunisia's defense requirements up to 2030.<sup>85</sup> Led by seven retired generals and admirals, the project was supposed to project future threat scenarios, with a focus on Algeria and Libya, and from these, assess the needed Tunisian capabilities and budget, according to one participant.<sup>86</sup> It was also meant to rectify the failure of the aforementioned, NDI-led white paper exercise.

Although the U.S. Institute for Defense Analysis and the U.S. military's Defense Institution Building (DIB) program supported the CRM project, informality and a lack of official Tunisian support impeded the effort from the beginning.<sup>87</sup> The project never received its own budget, and its staff did not have access to any official Tunisian documents, especially classified assessments from Tunisia's military intelligence arm, the ARSD (though whether the ARSD actually produces long-range forecasts that would support such planning is unclear).<sup>88</sup> Moreover, the CRM team did not receive the BCAP document from the Tunisian MOD. Ironically, visiting U.S. defense officials who met with the CRM team in June 2019 had to request that the Tunisian foreign liaison office within the MOD provide the BCAP document to the CRM.<sup>89</sup> This remarkable episode underscores the disjointed nature of Tunisia's information sharing. Put simply, an MOD-sponsored planning effort did not have access to Tunisia's most important foreign security assistance document, and it was the United States that ultimately played the role of information-broker—*within* the Tunisian MOD.

By the late summer of 2019, the CRM effort collapsed altogether: the Tunisian minister of defense became a candidate in the country's presidential elections and, according to one participant in the CRM project, was traveling on the campaign trail and unable to shepherd the project or receive updates.<sup>90</sup> This highlights yet another issue: the absence of a professional civil service cadre within the MOD that could provide continuity in the midst of a turnover in senior-level, political appointees.

## Conclusion: Toward a More Organic, Adaptive Defense Response to Libya

In assessing the Tunisian military's evolution, it is important to take the long view—and to appreciate the significant strides the armed forces have made since the 2011 revolution. Among Arab militaries, the Tunisian armed forces stand out for its respect for elected institutions and civilian authorities, even if relations are at times strained and hobbled by cultural, political, and bureaucratic obstacles. For a force that was woefully neglected and largely confined to the barracks pre-2011, it is steadily proving to be a competent, combat-tested organization. It has capably responded to a number of security threats, particularly by terrorists and insurgents. According to observers inside Tunisia and to foreign advisors, it is slowly adopting reforms that will turn it into one of the more professional military organizations in the Maghreb and certainly on the African continent—all while

playing a supportive role in Tunisia's democratic transition. Yet questions remain regarding the long-term trajectory of its transformation. In particular, there is uncertainty around whether it is fully prepared to meet a spectrum of challenges, especially those emanating from Libya, the most unpredictable and militarized of its neighbors.

The aforementioned capacity shortfalls, bureaucratic impediments, and planning deficiencies are impeding this transformation, specifically regarding Libya. Foreign allies of the Tunisian military should, and are, assisting in mitigating these deficits. Yet they should be mindful of Tunisia's overdependence and realize that the country will have to own its defense reform, at its own pace. The U.S. military can be an exemplary mentor and trainer—and perhaps more hands-on involvement by embedded U.S. advisors is necessary in the Tunisian defense ministry and services' staffs—but the United States and other foreign partners should neither take center stage in coordination and information-sharing efforts, nor act as arbiters between competing Tunisian agencies.

With this in mind, an immediate concern in responding to the Libya challenge is the need to better adapt the Tunisian military to its border enforcement mission in the south. This should include developing and formalizing more population-focused military capabilities, such as civil affairs, public affairs, and medical services. Such an approach should also clarify the army's legal mandate for arrests and contraband seizure, improve army coordination with the MOI forces, and preemptively address corruption in the army's ranks through mechanisms like better pay and benefits, audits, and inspectors general. Beyond dealing with low-tech spillover challenges like smuggling and terrorists, the Tunisian military needs to better prepare for future conventional and asymmetric threats from Libya, including from drones, surface-to-air missiles, fixed wing incursions, and even ground forces. These are all currently present on the Tripoli battlefield, less than 100 kilometers from Tunisian territory. Finally, as emphasized above, the military should not be the sole or primary policy tool for dealing with the Tunisian-Libyan border. A comprehensive package of socioeconomic reforms and better political integration is needed for the south—a solution that Tunisian civilian officials and military officers have stated that they recognize, but that may still take years to implement.

Additionally, the dynamism of the Libyan conflict landscape has underscored the need for better predictive intelligence by the Tunisian military at the operational and strategic levels. But such assessments are only good if they are shared and disseminated. Here again, the Tunisian defense establishment is plagued by stove-piping, outmoded technical architecture, and unit-level training deficiencies. Ideally, strategic intelligence should feed into military planning for future capabilities, acquisition, and force structure, but this process has been hindered by insufficient staffing, civilian turnover, and bureaucratic distrust. As a result, the armed forces' strategic priorities are being heavily

influenced or managed by foreign partners, especially the United States. This is problematic for Tunisia, not only because it creates dependency but also because Tunisians know their local context best: the country's small geographic size, modest resources, and unique strategic environment require a homegrown capacity for planning instead of one influenced by a foreign superpower. Without alleviating these problems and making planning more organic, Tunisia's military could not only be saddled with expensive equipment that is ill-suited to actual missions but could, again, be caught off guard by some unforeseen variant of the Gafsa or Ben Gardane attacks.

## About the Author

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## Acknowledgments

The author is grateful to the numerous Tunisian and U.S. military officials (retired and active duty), as well as European diplomats and military officers, who shared their candid insights in the course of this research. In addition, he wishes to thank Sharan Grewel, Matthew Herbert, Haim Malka, and Sarah Yerkes for their generous help with contacts, guidance, and feedback; and Carnegie's Gaither Fellow Sandy Alkoutami for her research assistance. This research was conducted under the auspices of the Carnegie Endowment's Civil Military Relations in Arab States (CMRAS) project led by Yezid Sayigh.

## Notes

- 1 For background on the Gafsa attack and its resulting effect on U.S.-Tunisia defense relations, see Ronald Koven, “Libya-Backed Raid Speeds Policy Shifts in N. African States,” *Washington Post*, February 12, 1980. France stationed three warships in the Gulf of Gabes and sent two transport planes and several helicopters into Tunisia, and the United States “accelerated its military assistance” by providing armored personnel carriers and military helicopters to help the Tunisian armed forces at the Libyan-Tunisian border. Ronald Bruce St John, *Libya and the United States, Two Centuries of Strife* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 87.
- 2 According to the U.S. State Department, increased Libyan threats, including the Gafsa attack, “have caused President Bourguiba to decide that Tunisia must modernize its long underfunded defense capability.” See U.S. Department of State, *American Foreign Policy, Current Documents* (Washington: U.S. Department of State, 1983), 679.
- 3 Author interview with a retired Tunisian military officer, Tunis, October 16, 2019.
- 4 For background on the neglect of the Tunisian armed forces, see Hicham Bou Nassif, “A Military Besieged: The Armed Forces, the Police and the Party in Bin Ali’s Tunisia, 1987–2011,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47 (2015): 65–87.
- 5 For background on the Reagan administration’s deliberations, see Claudia Wright, “Tunisia: Next Friend to Fall?” *Foreign Policy* 46 (Spring, 1982): 120–137.
- 6 The author drove across the Tunisian-Libyan border and through Ben Gardane five hours before the attack. Libyan militias in Sabratha warned that the Islamic State would plan retaliation for the U.S. bombing of an Islamic State training camp and possibly accelerate preexisting attack plans. Author’s observations in western Libya and Tunisia, March 2016.
- 7 For more information on the Ben Gardane attack and its aftermath, see Farah Samti and Declan Walsh, “Tunisian Clash Spreads Fear That Libyan War Is Spilling Over,” *New York Times*, March 8, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/08/world/africa/attack-tunisia-libya-border.html>. For an account of the battle against the Islamic State on the Libyan side prior to and after the Ben Gardane attack, especially within the town of Sabratha, see Frederic Wehrey, “Struggling to Fight the Islamic State in a Fractured Libya,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 12, 2016. Of particular note is the fact that Tunisian workers within Sabratha and other Libyan towns came under increased scrutiny by local Libyan militias.
- 8 These incidents include the attack on the Bardo Museum in Tunis on March 18, 2015, and a beach resort at Sousse on June 26, 2015. For an overview of the injection of Western military assistance, see Congressional Research Service, “Tunisia: In Brief,” July 5, 2018, 8–10, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RS/RS21666/62>. Also see Sam Kimball, “Tunisia’s Getting More Guns Than Democracy,” *Foreign Policy*, April 21, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/21/tunisias-getting-more-guns-than-democracy/>.
- 9 Author’s interview with a U.S. military officer, Tunis, August 7, 2019.
- 10 For a good overview, see, Sharan Grewel, “A Quiet Revolution: The Tunisian Military After Ben Ali,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 24, 2016, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/02/24/quiet-revolution-tunisian-military-after-ben-ali-pub-62780>.
- 11 Author interview with a Tunisian military officer, location undisclosed, August 14, 2019. The MOD leads Tunisian security and counterterrorism efforts in “military exclusion zones” near the Algerian and Libyan borders and in the southern portion of Tunisia. The MOI has primacy in urban areas.
- 12 Author interview with a U.S. military officer, Tunis, August 7, 2019.
- 13 For Carnegie research on the border, see Frederic Wehrey and Katherine Pollock, “The Tunisian-Libyan Border: Security Aspirations and Socioeconomic Realities,” *Carnegie Endowment for International*

- Peace, August 21, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/08/21/tunisian-libyan-border-security-aspirations-and-socioeconomic-realities-pub-77087>; and Anouar Boukhars, “The Potential Jihadi Windfall From the Militarization of Tunisia’s Border,” *Combating Terrorism Center, United States Military Academy (West Point)*, January 26, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/01/26/potential-jihadi-windfall-from-militarization-of-tunisia-s-border-region-with-libya-pub-75365>. For recommendations on decentralization, see Sarah Yerkes and Marwan Muasher, “Decentralization in Tunisia: Empowering Towns, Engaging People,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 17, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/05/17/decentralization-in-tunisia-empowering-towns-engaging-people-pub-76376>. See also, Olfa Lamloum, “Marginalisation, insecurity and uncertainty on the Tunisian–Libyan border: Ben Guerdane and Dhehiba from the perspective of their inhabitants,” *International Alert*, December 2016; [https://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/TunisiaLibya\\_MarginalisationInsecurityUncertaintyBorder\\_EN\\_2016.pdf](https://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/TunisiaLibya_MarginalisationInsecurityUncertaintyBorder_EN_2016.pdf).
- 14 World Bank, “Republic of Tunisia: Impact of the Libya Crisis on the Tunisian Economy,” February 2017, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/517981490766125612/Tunisia-Impact-of-the-Libya-crisis-on-the-Tunisian-economy>.
  - 15 Ibid.
  - 16 Author observations and conversations in Zawiya, Sabratha, and Sirte in Libya, March 2016 and June 2016. Also, author interviews with Tunisian military intelligence personnel, Tunis, October 17, 2019.
  - 17 For more information on the impact of the 2019 war on southern Tunisia, see Ulf Laessing, “Shutting Up Shop: Libyan Conflict Squeezes Southern Tunisia,” *Reuters*, June 10, 2019.
  - 18 That said, there have been some beneficial effects, according to a 2015 Brookings study: “Tunisian hotels, restaurants, private hospitals, and schools as well as retailers, supplying firms, and their workers have profited. One estimate suggests this has resulted in an annual injection of 1 billion euros into the Tunisian economy.” Omar Karasapan, “The impact of Libyan middle-class refugees in Tunisia,” *Brookings Institution*, March 17, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2015/03/17/the-impact-of-libyan-middle-class-refugees-in-tunisia/>
  - 19 These measures include a planned refugee camp at Bir Fatnassia, roughly 70 kilometers northwest from the Dhehiba-Wazin border crossing, which can accommodate 20,000 people. For a critique of the Bir Fatnassia camp, see Mourad Tayeb, “Fatnassia refugee camp will anger both Tunisians and Europeans,” *Euractiv*, February 18, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/opinion/fatnassia-refugee-camp-will-anger-both-tunisians-and-europeans/>. In a report from November 28, 2019, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees stated “While a major influx from Libya cannot be ruled out, the refugee population in Tunisia is anticipated to increase from some 2,490 (as of August 2019) to 5,000 by the end of 2020, given the political instability and mixed population movements facing the region.” *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Tunisia: Planning Summary*, November 28, 2011. <http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/pdfsummaries/GA2020-Tunisia-eng.pdf>. In a more recent updated, the UNHCR noted the anticipated spike of land-based, cross-border refugee crossings has not materialized to the extent anticipated. *UNHCR Operational Update*, January 31, 2020. <https://reliefweb.int/report/tunisia/unhcr-tunisia-operational-update-31-january-2020>.
  - 20 For the role of Libya in Tunisia’s threat perception, see Robbie Gramer and Humza Jilani, “Libya an Obstacle on Tunisia’s Path to Stability,” *Foreign Policy*, August 6, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/06/libya-an-obstacle-on-tunisias-path-to-stability/>.”

- 21 This recovery, however, was slightly set back by the September 2019 collapse of British tourist company Thomas Cook, which deprived the Tunisian tourist sector of about 50,000 expected tourists and forced the Tunisian government to cover the expenses of the stranded tourists' repatriation. See "Thomas Cook Owes Tunisian Hotels 60 Million Euros: Minister," Reuters, September 23, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thomas-cook-grp-investment-tunisia-ho/thomas-cook-owes-tunisian-hotels-60-million-euros-minister-idUSKBN1W810R>.
- 22 Author interview with a Tunisian military officer, location undisclosed, August 14, 2019.
- 23 That said, Tunisian defense analysts and military officers acknowledged concern about the underlying socio-economic and political factors fueling Algeria's protest movement and emphasized that the country's stability should not be taken for granted. For analysis of these dynamics see, Amel Boubekeur, "Demonstration Effects: How the Hirak Protest Movement is Reshaping Algerian Politics," European Council on Foreign Relations, February 2020, [https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/demonstration\\_effects\\_how\\_hirak\\_movement\\_is\\_reshaping\\_algerian\\_politics.pdf](https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/demonstration_effects_how_hirak_movement_is_reshaping_algerian_politics.pdf). For a good discussion of the insurgency in western Tunisia, see Matt Herbert, "The Insurgency in Tunisia's Western Borderlands," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 28, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/06/28/insurgency-in-tunisia-s-western-borderlands-pub-76712>.
- 24 Author interview with a Tunisian military officer, location undisclosed, August 14, 2019.
- 25 Ahmed Elumami and Ulf Laessing, "U.N. Libya Envoy Says Haftar Made Coup Attempt With Advance on Tripoli," Reuters, April 15, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security/un-libya-envoy-says-haftar-made-coup-attempt-with-advance-on-tripoli-idUSKCN1RR1NI>.
- 26 Author observations on the GNA Tripoli frontlines, June and November 2019. See also Matthew Herbert, "Libya's War Becomes a Tech Battleground," Institute for Security Studies, October 8, 2019, <https://issafrika.org/iss-today/libyas-war-becomes-a-tech-battleground>. For more information on the operational radius of foreign-operated drones in the Tripoli battle, see the United Nations Panel of Experts Report on Libya, December 9, 2019, 914, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N19/345/94/PDF/N1934594.pdf?OpenElement>.
- 27 Author interview with GNA militia commanders on the Salahaddin front, Tripoli, late November 2019; and interviews with United Nations personnel in Tunis, late November 2019. For more information on the Russian fighters, see Frederic Wehrey, "With the Help of Russian Fighters, Libya's Haftar Could Take Tripoli," Foreign Policy, December 5, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/12/05/libya-khalifa-haftar-take-tripoli-russian-fighters-help/>.
- 28 Author interviews with Syrian militia fighters on the Salahaddin front, Tripoli, late January 2020. See also Frederic Wehrey, "Among the Syrian Militiamen of Turkey's Libya Intervention," The New York Review of Books, "The New York Review of Books," January 23, 2020, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2020/01/23/among-the-syrian-militiamen-of-turkeys-intervention-in-libya/>.
- 29 That said, United Nations Panel of Experts reports on Libya have reported some Tunisian facilitation of materiel and arms into Libya. According to 2017 Panel of Experts report, the Panel reported that it had "collected over eight accounts of a delivery by sea, paid for by Qatar, of about 40 tons of military equipment to Zarzis, allegedly escorted by the Tunisian armed forces to the Dhehiba-Wazin border post with Libya. The Panel found that one maritime delivery had been made to the port of Zarzis by the end of April 2011. Furthermore, in an interview with the television channel Al-Arabiya, the former Prime Minister of the transitional Government of Tunisia, Beji Caïd Essebsi, confirmed that Qatar had received permission to transfer military equipment to Libya through Tunisia using the Remada military airbase around 52 km from the Dhehiba-Wazin border post." United Nations Security Council, "Final report of the Panel of Experts on Libya established pursuant to resolution 1973 (2011)," June 1, 2017; available at <https://www.undocs.org/S/2017/466>

- 30 Author interview with Tunisian military intelligence personnel, Tunis, October 17, 2019, and a Tunisian military officer, location undisclosed, August 14, 2019. In late December 2019, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Turkish military and intelligence officials visited Tunis to meet with Tunisian president Kais Saied. Officially, the leaders discussed cooperation on a ceasefire in Libya, but other reports suggested the Turkish delegation had asked for permission to use Tunisian maritime territory and airspace to funnel military supplies to Libya's GNA, with the Tunisian government refusing. The Tunisia president's office denied such a request had been made. The visit represented the strongest challenge yet to Tunisia's declared policy of neutrality. In this case, Tunisia's relations with France and the United Arab Emirates, key foreign supporters of Haftar, further militated against any overt alignment with Turkey. Xinhua, "Tunisia denies reports of Turkey requesting to use airspace, waters to intervene in Libya," January 8, 2020.
- 31 Author interviews with Tunisian military intelligence personnel, Tunis, October 17, 2019. According to a former Tunisian Air Force general, "Haftar is similar to Qadhafi—you can't rely on him. There's no definitive scenario." This officer went on to describe traveling to Tripoli in 1970 when bilateral relations between Tunisia and Libya were cordial, only to watch them quickly plummet, culminating in the Gafsa attack. Author interview with a retired Tunisian air force general, Tunis, October 18, 2019.
- 32 Author interview with a Tunisian military intelligence officer, Tunis, October 17, 2019.
- 33 Author interviews with Libyan militia fighters and GNA officials, Tripoli, June 2019, and Tunisian military intelligence personnel, Tunis, October 17, 2019. Some of these Tunisian clinics are reportedly not being paid by the Libyan government, Elizia Volkmann, "Will Tunisia have a seat in future Libyan dialogues?" Al-Monitor, February 5, 2020; <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/02/tunisia-reject-berlin-conference-libya-talks-algeria.html#ixzz6FYcQDF8B><https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/02/tunisia-reject-berlin-conference-libya-talks-algeria.html#ixzz6FYXi1oZG>
- 34 Author interviews with Tunisian and U.S. military personnel, Tunis, August and October 2019. U.S. Department of State, "Country Reports on Terrorism 2016—Tunisia," July 19, 2017, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5981e40d13.html>.
- 35 For a roundup of these criticisms, see Edna Bonhomme, "Tunisia's Surveillance State," Africa is a Country, November 2019, <https://africasacountry.com/2019/11/tunisia-surveillance-state>.
- 36 Author interview with a Tunisian military officer, location undisclosed, August 14, 2019. A U.S. military officer noted that the hardening of land borders has also created concerns that smugglers and militants will simply shift to a maritime route—"like squeezing playdough," he noted—spurring a concurrent Tunisian and international effort to bolster maritime security through improvements in the Tunisian coast guard and navy. Author interview with a U.S. military officer, Tunis, August 7, 2019.
- 37 Author telephone interview with a former U.S. defense attaché, Tunis, August 16, 2019.
- 38 Author interview with a Tunisian nongovernmental organization (NGO) official, Tunis, February 17, 2019.
- 39 Author interview with a Tunisian NGO official, Tunis, February 17, 2019.
- 40 According to one former European defense attaché in Tunis: "The Tunisian army thinks they represent the [Tunisian] people, compared to the ministry of interior, but beyond that, they don't understand 'hearts and minds'." Author telephone interview with a Tunis-based European defense official, February 13, 2019.
- 41 Author interview with a Tunisian military officer, location undisclosed, August 14, 2019.
- 42 Author telephone interview with a former U.S. defense attaché, Tunis, August 16, 2019.
- 43 Author interview with a Tunisian military officer, location undisclosed, August 14, 2019.
- 44 Author telephone interview with a Tunis-based European defense official, February 13, 2019.

- 45 Author interview with a retired Tunisian general, Tunis, August 5, 2019. According to a former U.S. defense attaché in Tunisia, Tunisian officers and noncommissioned officers hail from the coast, south, and interior, while junior enlisted personnel mostly hail from the interior. Author telephone with a former U.S. defense attaché, Tunis, August 16, 2019. One Tunisian scholar argued that having officers with familial roots in the south serve at military posts near border communities was crucial for good relations and intelligence collection. But a retired Tunisian general argued this would invariably lead to corruption, especially in high-smuggling areas. He therefore recommended a strategy of “diagonal deployments” for customs, military, and police personnel (in other words, send them to a geographic area at the opposite end of the region of their birth). Author interview with a retired Tunisian general, Tunis, October 16, 2019. One positive effort to address cultural sensitivity about the south is the rotation of Tunisian military doctors to southern clinics. Author interview with a retired Tunisian general, Tunis, August 5, 2019.
- 46 Author telephone interview with a Tunis-based European defense official, February 13, 2019.
- 47 As evidence of the Tunisian defense establishment’s recognition that the border cannot be dealt with through an enforcement or military framework, the NDI produced a Border Area Development Strategy in cooperation with the U.S. National Defense University. Among other things, it recommended greater economic stimuli to border regions, including shifts in tax and investment laws; the bolstering of entrepreneurial, tourist, and small business projects; the promotion of inclusive governance, civil society, and the rule-of-law; and support to education enterprises, such as research parks. Author interview with a U.S. defense official, Washington, DC, August 28, 2019.
- 48 Author interview with a Tunisian military intelligence officer, Tunis, October 17, 2019.
- 49 Author interviews with Tunisian military intelligence personnel, Tunis, October 17, 2019.
- 50 Author interview with UNSMIL personnel, Tripoli, Libya, February 18, 2019.
- 51 Author telephone interview with a Tunis-based European defense official, February 13, 2019.
- 52 Author interview with Tunisian military intelligence personnel, Tunis, October 17, 2019.
- 53 U.S. Department of State, “Country Reports on Terrorism 2016—Tunisia,” July 19, 2017, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5981e40d13.html>. For more information on the NATO-led effort, see “NATO to Establish Tunisian Intelligence ‘Fusion Center,’” Security Assistance Monitor, <https://securityassistance.org/content/nato-establish-tunisian-intelligence-%E2%80%98fusion-center%E2%80%99>.
- 54 Author interview with a retired Tunisian air force general, Tunis, October 18, 2019.
- 55 Author interviews with U.S. defense officials and Tunisian military officers, Tunis, October 2019.
- 56 Author telephone interview with a former U.S. defense attaché, Tunis, August 16, 2019.
- 57 Author interview with a U.S. military trainer, Tunis, August 8, 2019.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 As one example of the Tunisian military’s alleged infatuation with technological solutions, this U.S. military trainer noted its recent purchase of a small number of expensive, high-end Blackhawk helicopters—Mi model—with resulting limitations on the actual number that could be deployed for combat operations (assault and transport); some aircraft would be offline at any given moment for maintenance, training, and the Tunisians’ use of these platforms for transporting VIPs. An alternative would have been to have purchased a larger number of the Blackhawk A model helicopters, with a cheaper “re-kit” option, which would have addressed Tunisia’s defense needs with greater operational coverage. “What they needed was a Chevrolet Malibu, but they got a Ferrari,” this trainer said, lamenting that the U.S. military allowed this unwise purchase to happen. Author interview with a U.S. military trainer, Tunis, August 8, 2019.
- 60 Author interview with a U.S. military trainer, Tunis, August 8, 2019.

- 61 A U.S. military advisor, for example, argued that all Tunisian citizens entering the western Chaambi mountains (a military exclusion zone and the site of a simmering insurgency) should be biometrically enrolled. Author interview with a U.S. military trainer, Tunis, August 8, 2019. Another U.S. defense official called for “radical information sharing,” proposing that Tunisian police officers carry a cellphone application that links to a centrally managed database of personal biometric information. Author interview with a U.S. defense official, Washington, DC, August 28, 2019.
- 62 Ahmed Medien, “Experts Cast Doubt on Tunisia’s Biometric Identification Bill,” *Global Voices*, November 30, 2016, <https://globalvoices.org/2016/11/30/experts-cast-doubt-on-tunisia-biometric-identification-bill/>.
- 63 Author interview with U.S. military trainer, Tunis, August 8, 2019.
- 64 A 2017 U.S. Department of State report notes, “At the tactical level, MOI and MOD forces worked together in some locations, coordinating their efforts in Joint Task Forces established in the military exclusion zones.” See U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism, “Country Reports on Terrorism 2015: Tunisia,” <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2015/257517.htm>.
- 65 Author interview with a U.S. military officer, Tunis, August 8, 2019.
- 66 *Ibid.*
- 67 Ruth Santini and Giulia Cimini argue that terrorist attacks in particular affected processes of defense reform, enabling the power of key domestic actors—namely, the office of the president—and steered Tunisia’s defense establishment toward a dependence on foreign security patronage. They write: “The exogenous shock was capitalized on both by key European states as well as by key Tunisian policy entrepreneurs (the [former] President of the Republic Beji Caid Essebsi and his Security Advisor, Kamel Akrouf) who used the crisis as a catalyst to promote new security initiatives premised on the centralization of power in the hands of the executive. One additional result was that “Security Assistance replaced Security Sector Reform (SSR).” See Ruth Hanau Santini and Giulia Cimini, “The Politics of Security Reform in Post-2011 Tunisia: Assessing the Role of Exogenous Shocks, Domestic Policy Entrepreneurs and External Actors,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 55, no. 2 (2019): 226.
- 68 Author interview with U.S. defense official, Washington, DC, August 28, 2019.
- 69 Author telephone interview with a Tunis-based European defense official, February 13, 2019.
- 70 Author interview with a retired Tunisian general, Tunis, October 16, 2019.
- 71 A retired Tunisian air force general noted that instances of Tunisian and Libyan aircraft inadvertently crossing the border were common, even before the 2011 revolution. Author interview with a retired Tunisian air force general, Tunis, October 18, 2019.
- 72 After a Libyan aerial incursion, the Tunisian State Secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Touhami Abdouli said on local television Elyes Zammit, “Shifting relations Between Tunisia, Libya,” *Al-Monitor*, May 29, 2015, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2015/05/tunisia-libya-relations-change-consulate-islamist-hamdi.html#ixzz67SGURRsEhttps://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2015/05/tunisia-libya-relations-change-consulate-islamist-hamdi.html#ixzz64WiI9W8I>.
- 73 Author interview with a retired Tunisian air force general, Tunis, October 18, 2019, and telephone interview with a U.S. defense official working on Tunisia, October 31, 2019.
- 74 Author interviews with Tunisian military intelligence personnel, Tunis, October 17, 2019.
- 75 Santini and Cimini, 230.
- 76 Author interview with a retired Tunisian air force general, Tunis, October 18, 2019; and Santini and Cimini, 230.
- 77 Author interview with a U.S. military officer, Tunis, August 7, 2019.

- 78 Author interview with a retired Tunisian air force general, Tunis, October 18, 2019.
- 79 Ruth Hanau Santini and Giulia Cimini, “Intended and Unintended Consequences of Security Assistance in Post-2011 Tunisia,” *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 12, no. 1 (2019): 97–98.
- 80 According to one U.S. participant, the White Paper was “just a shopping list.” Author interview with a U.S. defense official, Washington, DC, August 28, 2019.
- 81 Author telephone interview with a U.S. defense official working on Tunisia, October 31, 2019.
- 82 The BCAP has a five-year time horizon, which is linked to AFRICOM’s own planning and funding cycle and, according to one official, has become a “model” that AFRICOM seeks to replicate with its other security partners across the African continent. Author telephone interview with a U.S. defense official working on Tunisia, October 31, 2019.
- 83 Author telephone interview with a U.S. defense official working on Tunisia, October 31, 2019.
- 84 Ibid.
- 85 Author interview with a retired Tunisian air force general, Tunis, October 18, 2019.
- 86 Ibid.
- 87 Author interview with a U.S. military officer, Tunis, August 7, 2019, and with a U.S. defense official, Washington, DC, August 28, 2019.
- 88 Author interview with a retired Tunisian air force general, Tunis, October 18, 2019.
- 89 Author telephone interview with a U.S. defense official working on Tunisia, October 31, 2019.
- 90 Author interview with a retired Tunisian air force general, Tunis, October 18, 2019.



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