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Post-election Tunisia: Security Issues as a Threat to Democratisation

Germany Should Help Reform and Strengthen the Security Sector

Christian Mölling and Isabelle Werenfels

Tunisia is the only Arab state currently undergoing a democratic transition. But this process is unfolding under increasingly difficult conditions. The economic crisis and the security challenges posed by armed Islamists are exacerbating one another. If Germany does not wish to see a reversal of the political achievements in which it has invested so much, and in order to uphold Tunisia as a beacon for the region, it will have to considerably expand its cooperation on both economic and security issues. Broad and rapid measures aimed at increasing the efficiency and accountability of the security sector could present a positive counterexample to last-ditch arms deliveries to conflict regions.

Tunisia's development towards democracy is a clear but fragile process. The parliamentary elections in October 2014 – the country's first since adopting a new democratic constitution – were hailed as exemplary. The big winner was the secularist Nidaa Tounes party. Its candidate, Beji Caid Essebsi, also won the first round of presidential elections in November 2014, closely followed by current President, Moncef Marzouki. The latter was backed by many voters of the moderate Islamist Ennahdha party, which emerged from the elections as the second strongest political force.

These election results are partly the outcome of a polarised election campaign that played on secular/Western and Islamic-conservative cleavages in society. But there are strong incentives for both political

camp to stick to the path of consensus and democratisation. These include: the positive experience of having reached a broad consensus on the new constitution in early 2014; ongoing pressure from a strong civil society; and, last but not least, a desire to avoid the kind of chilling developments seen in other “Arab Spring” countries.

The downward spiral

Since 2012, however, the outlook has been clouded by the interrelated problems of the economic crisis and the increasingly tense security situation. Key indicators such as growth, debt level, balance of trade, and foreign investment offer little hope of a quick recovery. In particular, the high youth unemployment of over 40 percent (2012)

and the associated lack of prospects provide fertile ground for religious radicalisation. Moreover, the presence of violent Salafists deters foreign investors and tourists, thus deepening the economic crisis still further. Security concerns were one reason why the credit rating agency Moody's downgraded Tunisia twice in 2013.

The turmoil which followed the overthrow of dictator Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali in 2011 substantially weakened the security apparatus. Criminals and violent Salafists greatly increased their activities within this security vacuum. Since late 2012, Jihadist extremism has become an obvious problem in Tunisia. Armed cells linked with the Algerian al-Qaida in the Maghreb and the Tunisian Ansar ash-Shariah have killed dozens of security personnel in areas near the Algerian border. In other regions too there are regular clashes between security forces and militant cells, as well as (thwarted) attacks on tourist and other targets.

Because there is no effective security along the 459 km border with Libya, the conflicts in that country adversely affect the security situation in Tunisia. Organised crime and (arms) smuggling flourish. Above all, however, Libya is a safe haven and a hub for militant Tunisians travelling to Syria and Iraq. Although Tunisia is a small country, with a population of just under 11 million, the roughly 3,000 Tunisian Jihadists represent one of the largest contingents of foreign fighters in Syria. They are also a risk to domestic security, with some 400 of them already believed to have returned home.

As security problems grow, so too does the threat of renewed repression. The closure of various religious media platforms and arrests of religious NGO members in summer 2014 walked a fine line between decisive action against radicals and the restriction of free speech.

Ultimately, the deeper the socioeconomic crisis and the more insecure people feel in their everyday lives, the less they identify with democratisation: a poll by the Pew Research Center showed a drop from 63 percent in 2012 to 48 percent in 2014 in the propor-

tion of Tunisians who believe that democracy is superior to other forms of government. The continued success of the political transformation therefore very much depends on increasing the efficiency and accountability of the security sector within functioning constitutional, legal and policy parameters.

Capability and governance deficits

The Tunisian security sector has undergone reform in certain areas since 2011: units of the political police have been disbanded and provisions introduced for the protection of human rights; greater legal security for detainees has been enshrined in law; and security sector personnel are now allowed to form trade unions. However, there have yet to be comprehensive structural reforms that could create a new security culture by meeting capability requirements on the one hand, and solving governance problems on the other.

The armed forces are well-regarded by the population at large, thanks to their neutrality during and after the revolution. However, the decades of shabby treatment they endured under former dictator Ben Ali continues to affect them. The very small force of some 35,000 men is short of everything it needs to improve border security: apart from training, it especially lacks equipment, including such basics as vehicles and communication devices. By contrast, the Jihadists have modern equipment and satellite communications. The effectiveness of the armed forces is also undermined by resignations of high-ranking officers and controversial new appointments, as well as breakdowns in coordination and communication within the military intelligence service.

The police and civilian intelligence services, on the other hand, have problems of governance and reputation due to the role they played in the former police state. The structures and organisation of the interior ministry remain insufficiently transparent. Figures available for the personnel strength of this ministry, which is responsible for

domestic security, range from 40,000 to over 80,000. Since 2011, the ministry has been worn down by internal turf wars between actors of the old system and reformers. With the election victory of the Nidaa Tounes party – which includes former elite members of the Ben Ali regime – comes the risk of renewed political support for old regime actors and practices within the ministry. Also, low pay makes the security personnel vulnerable to corruption. Last but not least, the disbandment of the political police in 2011, while necessary, has reduced the security services' capacity to monitor radical actors.

Reviving the security partnership

Since Tunisia cannot remedy these shortcomings on its own, the government is urgently lobbying Western states for rapid support. Alongside the EU, Germany in particular has supported the Tunisian transition with funds, expertise and diplomatic gestures as part of its transformation partnership. By strengthening civil society, it has contributed to the success of the democratisation process so far.

Germany can now support long-term democratisation and economic development by strengthening the security sector as well. Primarily this means enabling the security forces to enforce the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force, based on accountability, the respect for human rights and the rule of law. As a result, the state would also be more effective in countering acts of terrorism.

In 2012 Germany and Tunisia established a security partnership. Expanding this hitherto modest cooperation would be a chance for Germany to “get it right” in Tunisia – especially in light of the debate on accepting greater international responsibility. Firstly, making a commitment now would have a preventive effect. This would be in contrast to other cases, in which external actors have waited until the security situation was so hopeless that ad-hoc arms deliveries seemed to be the only option left (despite dubious effectiveness and obvious risks).

Secondly, conditions in Tunisia are better than in other Arab countries to which Germany exports equipment. Tunisia is not an authoritarian state; it is a small state that is successfully democratising, with functioning institutions. Its society is ethnically and religiously homogeneous, and there is little risk of civil war leading to proliferation of weapons. Therefore, support for Tunisia has good prospects of success. It would also showcase the strengths which German foreign and security policy wishes to be renowned for: delivering training, education and equipment as a comprehensive package, underpinned by political and economic measures to strengthen stability and democracy.

Packaged measures

The EU has identified the deficits in the Tunisian security sector and its border protection, and has made recommendations that could provide remedies. But these have yet to be implemented. The EU member states agree that Tunisia is important. However, in terms of security policy their actions have been mainly symbolic and coordination has been poor. Furthermore, a major driver for arms exports is lacking, namely business interest in doing trade with Tunisia. It would be a shame to miss the opportunity to reform and strengthen the Tunisian security sector because European policy makers did not act quickly enough in the absence of this driver. So as not to waste any more time, Germany should take proactive leadership.

Coordination: Germany is well-placed to coordinate security cooperation at national and international levels – including with non-EU states like the United States and Turkey, which are already actively supporting the Tunisian security sector. By being completely open with its partners about its own involvement, Germany can legitimately demand more transparency from them in order to avoid costly duplication of aid from different countries. Closer coordination with France in particular would be

effective. Initiatives like the joint visit to Tunis by the German and French foreign ministers in April 2014 might also be usefully undertaken by the interior and/or defence ministers.

In Germany, meanwhile, responsibilities and resources of government departments could be coordinated more effectively. The fact that Tunisia is progressing so slowly in making formal requests should be Germany's cue to help the country overcome bureaucratic hurdles. It would make sense to incorporate greater security cooperation with Tunisia into the existing transformation partnership, so as to promote democracy over repression. Clearly, therefore, delivery of equipment should be tied to security sector reform.

Governance of the security sector. What is required in this area is a substantial expansion of current collaborative efforts with a view to: increasing the effectiveness of the respective Ministries, the security forces and the intelligence services by strengthening decision-making and implementation capacities that are effective and transparent; and supporting increased oversight of the security sector by parliament and citizens so as to firmly establish the rule of law and human rights. Support for intelligence reform ought to be contingent upon a strict separation between policing and intelligence functions, so as to contribute to the emergence of democratic intelligence governance. A package such as this would increase the effectiveness of the security apparatus – not least because it would build public trust in it.

Border protection. In order to set up an integrated border regime, Tunisia needs support in the form of equipment, knowledge transfer, training, and additional economic measures to increase local acceptance. Border protection can only work if non-government local authorities (e.g. tribal leaders) are included in the fight against smuggling, and if border regions are offered viable economic substitutes.

To secure its border with Libya, Tunisia requires vehicles for carrying out controls,

equipment for monitoring satellite communications, and reconnaissance sensors (including mobile devices installed in drones or vehicles). This will afford them comprehensive and precise coverage of all border areas.

It would also be worth considering a role for Algeria in cooperation with Tunisia. Since the two states share common and growing security challenges, they are already cooperating closely. Germany could issue additional licences to Algeria so that it can extend its current production of German armoured vehicles to supply some to Tunisia. This would have a doubly positive outcome: aid to Tunisia would be made more effective; and Algeria would be involved in a constructive way without further strengthening the repressive capabilities of this problematic partner.

The German government could accelerate the decommissioning of already identified surplus equipment, especially vehicles, which could then be handed over to Tunisia. Furthermore, since old German equipment delivered to Tunisia a long time ago is no longer usable due to lack of maintenance, German companies can help make this equipment serviceable again. At the same time, Tunisians can be trained to service the equipment themselves in the future.

Outlook

Such a comprehensive commitment in Tunisia would be costly and not without risk; and closer security cooperation should not be a substitute for strengthening economic ties. However, economic development greatly depends on a stable security situation. Progressive destabilisation, resulting in political setbacks in Tunisia, would end up costing Europe even more than the measures suggested here. Failure of the Tunisian transition would impact negatively not only on security, but also on the political development of the entire region. Democratisation would then no longer be a realistic option in the Arab world for years to come.

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