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Tunisia's Security Syndrome

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On May 19, the Tunisian government banned Ansar al-Sharia (Supporters of Sharia), a Salafist group, claiming to be jihadist, from holding its third annual rally in Kairouan – a city located 114 miles south-central of Tunis and which houses the mosque of the general Uqba Ibn Nafa'a, the "conqueror of Africa" around 670 AD. The "battle of Kairouan", heavily publicized by the Tunisian media did not occur, despite several clashes between the police and citizens of the same city who protested against the overwhelming police presence as well as the intrusion of the FEMEN movement activist Amina. Her sudden appearance in the city allegedly sought to disrupt Ansar al-Sharia's congress, ended provoking the sensitivity of the locals while she wrote "FEMEN" on the wall of the graveyard next to the Uqba mosque. Instead, violent urban unrest broke out as the police tried to prevent Ansar al-Sharia from organizing their meeting the same day in other locations, mainly in Ettadhamen, a western suburb of Tunis. The neighborhood is considered a slum, populated with disenfranchised, marginalized, and impoverished people, in which the hardline Islamist Salafist group was able to mobilize its own social base. As a result, one demonstrator was killed and several protestors as well as members of anti-riots police were injured. Notwithstanding this atmosphere of urban warfare, another critical confrontation opposing the government

to armed militants is taking place in a remote area of the country.

In the densely forested Jabal Chaambi national park above the city of Kasserine located 150 miles southwest of Tunis, the ongoing security operatives have been hunting the alleged Islamist militants hiding in this topographically inaccessible mountain since April 29. This operation follows one that took place in December 2012 in the same area during which a non-commissioned officer from the Tunisian National Guard – a paramilitary force – was killed and four guardsmen wounded in an ambush that occurred around the town of Bou Chebka, 1.2 miles from the Algerian border. Commenting on the latter, the current interim Prime Minister Ali Larayedh, the Interior Minister at that time, affirmed that the attack was directed by members of Katibat Uqba Ibn Nafa'a, an affiliation of al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Larayedh pointed out that 16 members were apprehended and that the charges against them included weapons storage with the intention to create an Islamic emirate in Tunisia. Moreover, Larayedh assured the Tunisian public that the whole organization was dismantled and that Tunisians were out of harm's way.

The recent injuries suffered by roughly 17 army and security personnel included amputated extremities and blindness caused by the shrapnel from improvised



explosive device (IED) blast waves. These casualties bluntly refuted the official tale of the Uqba Ibn Nafa'a's group decapitation and raised legitimate questions about the steadily growing insecurity context since the fall of the dictatorship in January 2011. These dramatic casualties inflicted upon the army and security forces revealed that Uqba Ibn Nafa'a's group succeeded in building a sophisticated clandestine infrastructure in Chaambi upland. This infrastructure was comprised of training camps, food and medical supplies, handmade bombs, detonators, SMS phone chips, maps, religious literature, uniforms and combat instruction manuals. The equipment left behind in their campground displayed a fairly high level of readiness in planning, and, eventually, carrying out qualitative lethal operations.

Seemingly, the increasing pressure from the French military offensive in northern Mali, as well as, the aggressive Algerian counterinsurgency campaign, likely forced AQIM away from the intertwining Saharan spaces and pushed it further towards the northern hinterland. AQIM is now likely seeking to explore new bases of retreat along the Algerian borders with Tunisia and Libya. Such areas could be used as safe havens for criminal activities and to seek support for AQIM's northern national command in the surrounding areas of Kabilya and Algiers. It goes without saying that this operational repositioning in the thinly populated areas of the borderland, geographically advantageous, facilitated all kinds of lucrative cross-border trafficking activities, and compensated for any financial losses. It is commonly known that AQIM's financial support was generated by hostage ransoms and illicit trading activities, including tobacco aka "cheap whites", vehicles, drugs, arms, counterfeit merchandise, and smuggled oil. Consequently, the killing of AQIM's major commander, Abdel Hamid Abu Zeid, by the French and Chadian troops in February 2013, as well as the alleged neutralization of Zeid's main rival Mokhtar Belmokhtar, AQIM's senior commander in the "Emirate of the Desert", and later founder of the notorious "Signed-in-Blood Battalion", led to the disrupting of AQIM's Saharan-Sahel financial networks. Yet, the AQIM could likely use the borderland as an active operational area for planning and executing major attacks in Algeria akin to the assault on Algeria's natural gas plant at Ain Amenas, executed by Belmokhtar's battalion in January 2013. The hostage-takers in this attack, who snuck across the Libyan border, were made up of eight nationalities, including 11 Tunisians. More significantly, the post-Qaddafi instability in Libya facilitated AQIM's access to sophisticated weapons, ammunitions and explosives from uncontrolled stockpiles as well as the black market. In addition, AQIM may attempt to adopt a twofold strategy for pursuing and reconfiguring its regional influence in Tunisia. On the one hand, the

group will likely take advantage of the country's political fluidity and fragile security in the post-authoritarian era by building sleeper cells and social and criminal networks. On the other hand, it will try gauging Tunisia's military and security capabilities through the implementation of the "hit and run" *modus operandi* based on the dual surprise and subversion to retain the initiative. AQIM's use of cheap, reliable and rudimentary IEDs made of plastic and ammonium nitrate – a chemical compound already used by the group in an attack on a bus carrying employees from Halliburton's BRC subcontractor that occurred in Algiers' western suburb in December 2006 –, which are undetectable by the landmine detectors used by the Tunisian Army's engineering corps. The employment of IEDs prevents access to AQIM's operational hubs and restricts the army's mobility by inflicting them with indiscriminate casualties and exposing their powerlessness. The AQIM's ultimate objective is to negatively impact the troops' psychology by killing or disabling them in order to undermine the army's cohesion and motivation and create security disarray across the country.

Salafi movements within the Tunisian political realm challenged the government's version of the events carried out at Chaambi and spurred various political reactions. On May 9, the president of the political bureau, Salaheddine Bouazizi of the Salafist party, *Jabhat al-Islah* (Front of Reform), released a statement in which he pointed out that "the absence of a claim of responsibility from AQIM on Chaambi's events is indisputable evidence that the organization was not involved in such attacks". Bouazizi emphasized that "terrorism is an international political game used by some to intimidate the people", adding that terrorism "is not confined to religious groups and militants hiding in the mountains. Rather there are smugglers who operate along the borders with the neighboring countries, which negatively impact our country's economic development". One day later, *Hizb al-Tahrir* (Islamic Liberation Party), an ultra conservative component of Salafiyya networks in Tunisia, released a critical statement, in which the party openly accused Algeria and its intelligence agencies of instigating the deterioration of security in the borderland. It pointed out that Algiers "until the last minute supported the tyrant Qaddafi, and mocked and conspired against Tunisian revolution... and [now] is seeking to ruin it". One should admit that these grave accusations against neighboring Algeria could consolidate the sentiment among Algerian leadership that it is besieged by unfriendly neighbors during a time of uncertainty, especially as the country undergoes a transition of power due to President Bouteflika's illness. Though security and intelligence cooperation between Algiers and Tunis have been keenly proactive before and in the aftermath of the fall of the autocratic regime, these



assertions will not help dissipate Algeria's anxieties which are driven by increasing instability in Tunisia and mayhem in Libya. Both are viewed as threats that could spill over into Algeria. Furthermore, the statement portrayed the Tunisian government led by al-Nahda as "powerless, complicit, and incapable of disclosing these mysterious events ... which makes them beneath the expectations of their people, and worthless of the revolution".

This criticism against the government shows that the divide is not a simple Islamist versus secular-liberal trend. Rather, it is a schism within the mainstream Islamist movements and is increasingly challenging the cohesiveness within al-Nahda. The rift was caused because some viewed the party as an Islamist-liberal wing. This minority is believed to be committed to the modern notions of democracy, freedom, social justice, and gender equality. Whereas, the traditionalist-conservative oriented wing, is more inclined to the religious narrative defended by the Salafiyya nebula, which is far from being monolithic. In this regard, Tunisia's Salafi jihadist strain may challenge al-Nahda from its right wing. The Salafi jihadists did not comment immediately on Chaambi's events, though the media and secularists suspected that they had facilitated the recruitment of Tunisian youths to fight in Syria with Jabhat al-Nusra and its franchises, were the mastermind of the assault on the U.S. Embassy last fall, and are trying to impose a regressive way of life on Tunisians. On May 13, Saif Allah bin Hussein alias Abu lyadh al-Tunisi, head of Ansar al-Sharia – has been at large since September 2012 after having been charged of the attack on the U.S. Embassy in Tunis –, posted a statement on the movement's Facebook page focusing on another issue. One day before the release of this statement, the Tunisian Ministry of Interior banned the installation of the so-called *Khyiam al-Da'wa* "Call Tents" built by Ansar al-Sharia followers across the country. Indeed, the Ministry of Interior subordinated such activity to an administrative authorization that must be delivered by the department. These measures resulted in violent clashes with the police. Ansar al-Sharia activists argued that they did not need any authorization as they already have "divine permission"! Abu lyadh endorsed his followers and ferociously denounced "the tyrants who improperly claimed the credentials of Islam", adding that, "Islam is innocent from them". He warned al-Nahda without calling it by its name that "you are committing stupidities which imply that you are precipitating a battle [with us]". Abu lyadh recalled that "our youths who fought bravely in defending Islam in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iraq, Somalia and Syria will not hesitate to sacrifice themselves for their religion in the land of Kairouan", adding that "America, the West, Algeria, Turkey, and Qatar from which you are seeking support, will not

save you when swords clang deadly ...I swear that our lives are cheap if our religion is fought and our call restricted". Though this is the most threatening tone ever adopted by the head of Ansar al-Sharia since the emergence of the group within the Tunisian political sphere in March 2011, the use of word "*tawagheet*", or tyrants, in Abu lyadh's communiqué proves that the discourse of the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (GIA), AQIM's predecessor, is likely appealing to Ansar al-Sharia. This discourse depicted the Algerian regime as a disbeliever entity protected by an apostate army that has to be fought. It should be pointed out that GIA's image of Algeria was thus transformed into a land of armed jihad, where the state was identified with the devil, the national army was considered equivalent to the French colonial army, and society was divided into believers and renegades. This metamorphosis of Algeria into infidel territory prepared GIA fighters, intellectually and psychologically, to view Algerians who resisted them as "enemies of Islam" who should be annihilated.

Interestingly, the reference to specific countries is significant in more ways than one. The United States is seen as the spearhead of the "Global War on Terror", launched by the Bush administration and reshaped by the Obama administration responsible for killing Bin Laden, who Abu lyadh had praised as "our leader" at the time of his death. This implies that the United States is still seen in the jihadi sphere as a major foe threatening the Islamic *Umma*. Reference to the West, mainly France, suggests that the former colonial power is seen as meddling in Tunisia's affairs and siding with secularists long before even the French Interior Minister Manuel Valls depicted the country as "Islamic fascist dictatorship" in the aftermath of the leftist militant Chokri Belaid's assassination in February 2013. Moreover, the willingness of Michèle Alliot-Marie, former Foreign Minister in Sarkozy's government, to provide security assistance to the fallen dictator seeking to suppress the popular uprising is often used as an excuse by the Salafiyya to discredit the leftist-secularists rivals who continue to believe that the unfriendly pattern of French secularism towards religion is still relevant to the Tunisian context. Algeria is seen as a counterrevolutionary hub that waged a ruthless wave of repression against its Islamists during the "bloody decade". Furthermore, Algeria has been a pivotal regional ally in the pentagonized war led by Washington against AQIM in the Sahara-Sahel region. Algeria is also seen within the Salafiyya milieu as a serious threat since they argue that the powerful Algerian Department of Intelligence and Security as well as the military establishment have enough means to abort Tunisia's political transition. In referring to Turkey, Abu lyadh wanted to send a clear message to al-Nahda party that the Turkish Islamist model embraced by its leader



Rashid Ghannoushi, and described as a similar to the European Christian-Democracies is utterly rejected by the Salafiyya as inapplicable and inappropriate to the Islamic context. As for the reference to Qatar, the leader of Ansar al-Sharia sought to denounce the Qatari role in the countries of the Arab uprisings by supporting the Muslim Brotherhoods in Egypt, Libya, Syria and mainly al-Nahda in Tunisia. From Ansar al-Sharia's perspective, it is difficult to trust a country that has a special relationship with the "far enemy", the United States, and that maintains open communication channels with the "eternal enemy" Israel. The Qatari role is also denounced by the secularist-liberals who saw the Emirate as an undemocratic city-state ironically seeking to promote democracy by providing al-Nahda prominent figures with financial logistical support and preferential treatment.

Given the hyper-polarization of the political arena in Tunisia and the deep mistrust between secular-liberals and Islamists tendencies, the debate over the country's national security priorities shifted into an emotional, useless, biased and polemical dispute. National media as well as political leaders involved in controversial debates have displayed an obvious level of amateurism, irresponsibility, mediocrity, ignorance and populism that illustrated their poor understanding of how to deal with security challenges. Rather raising public awareness of violence implications for the population and the country, media outlets orchestrated and waged a psychological campaign that sapped the morale of the majority of Tunisians. Operating under questionable professional standards, media campaigns misrepresented and exaggerated the threats that the country is facing by drawing irrelevant comparison with the situation in neighboring Algeria that led to civil war in the early 1990s. The quality of articles, analyses, and documentaries on Chaambi's events rely more on fictitious stories and distorted facts than professional investigative journalism. Controlled, suppressed, muted, co-opted, manipulated and censored under the fallen regime, most of the media are struggling to emerge as an effective actor in this sensitive transitional period, often at the cost of provoking discord within the society, which is exasperating the new ambiance of free expression.

More than a week after the beginning of the security operation, interim President Moncef Marzouki, in a field trip to the military and security forces in Jabal Chaambi, inquired solemnly about the suitability of the equipment and material put at their disposal. Providing adequate military tools to accomplish the ends should not be an object to debate while a tactical operation is underway. For lack of anything better, military and security forces have to be encouraged to make do and use what they have to achieve their ends. Like his predecessors, Marzouki failed to understand the nature,

and complexity of the civil-military relations, especially in a time of crisis. A transition to a democratic political system requires – among other things – a commander-in-chief able to comprehend that national security strategy has to be based on a fair sacrosanct balance between ends (what do we want to achieve?), means (with what?), and ways (how?) rather than demagoguery. Given the immaturity of emerging Tunisian "democracy", we still tend to observe radical transformations in national security depending on who is in the office. Divided authority and competing visions entail that there is no consensus between the political players as to what elements should be used to preserve, protect, promote and pursue the national security interests. It is likely that these dismal actors are more concerned by political calculations. Since the quest of short-term electoral interests is the driving force of Tunisia's political landscape, there is little inclination to commit to the country's strategic long-range security vision.

Furthermore, the lack of professionalism and low-skilled security forces under the control of the Ministry of Interior cannot help with ensuring domestic security and fighting transnational threats. Despite minor signs of security reform, the perception remains that the department lacks transparency as well as accountability in implementing the law, and is extremely politicized. The concept of "republican police", overused by the security forces, police unions as well as political actors, is irrelevant in the Tunisian context as the goal pursued is more of an over-securitization in reaction to risks and threats rather than a professionalization seeking to align with international standards. The most professional police force in the world is Scotland Yard, which is no less "republican" than its French counterpart. This concept, blindly adopted from France, failed to embrace the Tunisian political context as civil servants within the bureaucracy are still acting in patronage based networks seeking to serve their political protectors rather than the interests of the Tunisian people. Professionalism applied to the security sector implies – among other things – a proper balance between intelligence, effectiveness and transparency, and a leadership who is able to stand for what is right, defend the state and its population, be subject to the democratic control, and protect public safety and human rights obligations. Unfortunately, in Tunisia, like in other countries across the Middle East and Africa it is difficult to require that security forces comply with the aforementioned obligations while politicians lack professionalism in terms of drafting security legislation or oversight for intelligence agencies. Their conception of responsibility is based more on control over performance than on accountability (obligation to respond legally to their actions) over authority. Thus, in this context it is not surprising to hear Tunisian citizens



portraying a professional politician as a professional liar. Politicians in Tunisia suffer security illiteracy and are incapable of connecting the dots when it comes to state security within a democratic context, and are more part of the problem than part of the solution. Any meaningful dialogue about the security of the country involves remedying the absence of professionalism. Also, professionalism in which rights of citizens are not clearly protected and guaranteed against abuses under a security pretext will no longer be acceptable. Though a nascent hybrid “democracy”, Tunisians find it difficult to justify a purely repressive response to their country’s security syndrome.

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