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FIVE RESPONSES TO THE TERRORIST THREAT IN THE MAGHREB

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It is no accident that Tunisia has been hit by terrorism, nor that the attackers directly targeted tourism and the parliament. This was an attack on democracy and on Tunisia's opening up to the outside world and it is easy to surmise that the terrorists will measure their success not only by the number of victims but by the damaging impact it may have on both the Tunisian transition and the country's fragile economy. Therefore the response to this particular attack and, more generally, to the growing terrorist threat that the countries of the Maghreb are suffering should be articulated not only with the aim of avoiding new attacks, but also to preserve what the terrorists wish to destroy.

It is not the first time Tunisia has suffered an attack of this size. In April 2002, al-Qaeda claimed an attack on a synagogue on the island of Djerba that killed 19 people, mainly German and French tourists. More recently – and especially since 2013 – the terrorist threat in Tunisia has taken four distinct forms: political assassinations against people involved in the constituent process; the establishment of terrorist cells in the Chaambi mountains on the Algerian border; the incorporation of more than 3000 Tunisians into the ranks of the Islamic State organisation who, at the moment, are in Syria and Iraq, but who could return to their home country; and the insecurity caused by the conflict in Libya, especially due to its flooding the whole region's black market with weapons, the effects of which are especially visible in the south of Tunisia.

Ten years ago, after the Djerba attacks, the Ben Ali regime used the terrorist threat to strengthen political repression, legitimise an authoritarian, corrupt regime and to offer itself enemy to the European Union and the United States as a loyal partner in fighting a common enemy. But not all Tunisia's responses to terrorism have been so unfortunate. Although the murders of left-wing personalities in 2013 increased the tension in the country, in the end both politicians and civil society opted for inclusion and consensus as ways to move the transition forward. Likewise, on Libya Tunisia has become one of the voices that, like Algeria and the European Union itself, insists that national reconciliation is the best means of fighting terrorism in its neighbouring state. Of the hits and misses of the past and other experiences in fighting this threat, we can distinguish five responses that should form part of a strategy for dealing with terrorism in the Maghreb.

1. Unity between political and social forces: when a country suffers a terrorist attack, there is always a risk of its being used politically. If this happens, political and social polarisation grows and ends up by producing conditions that are even more conducive to radicalisation processes. Egypt and Libya are clear examples of how counterproductive it can be not to invest in the political consensus when confronting the terrorist threat. In fact, the spiralling violence that Egypt suffered in the second half of 2013 pushed the Tunisian politicians and society to leave aside their differences in order to complete the constituent process with a high level of consensus. It is this unity that Tunisia continues to need today and that other countries in the region should explore to avoid the situation continuing to degenerate.

2. International collaboration: inasmuch as terrorism is a global threat and a transnational phenomenon, the sharing of information and the technical capacity to fight it has become an unavoidable necessity. In fact, cooperation on anti-terrorism between the European police and intelligence services and their Maghrebi counterparts has been in development for years. Nevertheless, one of the obstacles to further progress has been, and in some cases continues to be, the authoritarian and repressive practices of their governments. That is to say, the use of this information and technical cooperation for other ends. But this is not the case for Tunisia as, although remnants of the previous regime remain in some state structures, the country has made notable progress in a particularly adverse setting. This should be translated to a maximum level of cooperation. Further, we should add a new dimension to the anti-terrorist fight in which cooperation between Europeans, Tunisians and the other Maghrebi states is of vital importance. All of them share the goal of slowing (and, ideally, preventing) radicalisation processes and preparing a strategy to deal with the possible return of combatants who are at the moment in Syria and Iraq.

3. Long-term regional vision: just as some of the expressions of terrorism like al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and its offshoots have roots in the civil conflict that Algeria experienced in the nineties, Libya's current crisis situation is feeding terrorism at a regional level and its effects will also be prolonged. If anything has become clear in the past twenty years it is that no country is immune from the instability of its neighbours. It is no coincidence that some of the most recent terrorist attacks, such as In Amenas in 2013 or Chaambi in 2014 have taken place in border areas. Therefore, the response to the terrorist threat in the Maghreb cannot be exclusively national and must be designed with an ample time-frame. The security dynamics in adjacent geopolitical spaces must also be borne in mind. The connections between the Maghreb and the Sahel (e.g. the situation of Mali after the fall of Gaddafi and the transnational organised crime networks) and between the Maghreb and the Middle East (for example, with the sizeable presence of Maghrebi combatants in Syria) are clear.

4. Fight arms trafficking: speaking to Tunisian friends these days it is habitual to hear the phrase: "it has never been so easy and so cheap to buy a Kalashnikov on the black market". A recent report by the [International Crisis Group](#) also noted the links between the sale of arms and the trafficking of drugs, especially on the southern Tunisian border. The conflict in Libya and, above all, the disastrous handling of the fall of Gaddafi have fed a phenomenon that the Tunisian authorities seem unable to respond to. Perhaps they do not know how. At a time of faster and more individual radicalisation processes, the ease with which arms can be acquired is doubly worrying. Preventing new weapons entering the market and removing those already acquired from circulation should form part of any prevention strategy.

5. Resilience: the anti-terrorist fight should not just be a set of actions whose objective is to prevent attacks and dismantle criminal organisations. It should also include measures by which societies suffering from them can overcome the effects of large-scale terrorist acts and maintain a degree of normality despite the risk of permanent insecurity. If countries that have suffered terrorism over long periods know anything, it is the importance of adequately attending to the victims and achieving a return to daily life as soon as possible. Otherwise the terrorists will have partly achieved their goals. Also, because terrorism in the Maghreb is not only a security threat but also a torpedo to a vulnerable economy, the resilience must also be economic. If growth perspectives do not improve and more jobs are not created, the security situation will only worsen. Therefore, the Tunisia attack should mobilise international solidarity that goes beyond nice words.

If the terrorists wanted to attack democracy and tourism in Tunisia, the best response is one that manages to support the process of political opening-up and to avoid the economic collapse of the country. Unity between political and social forces, international collaboration, a vision of the threat that is both regional and long-term, meaningful reduction of the weapons on the black market and measures to strengthen resilience in the face of a risk that sadly will not go away are recommendations that are valid for Tunisia but also for the rest of the Maghreb.