

## ***Tunisia: Extremism & Counter-Extremism***

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### **Overview**

After the 2011 Tunisian Revolution, the country experienced a surge in extremist violence at the hands of al-Qaeda and ISIS-affiliated groups. With the help of international and regional partners, Tunisia has taken strides to re-structure its security apparatus and has launched a number of programs designed to prevent violent extremism. Despite these measures, Islamist groups continue to operate and to threaten Tunisia's stability as it transitions to democracy. (Sources: [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#) [1], [U.S. Department of State](#) [2])

Increased civil liberties have enabled Islamist groups within the country to recruit more freely and poor socio-economic conditions have left many Tunisians receptive to radical ideas. Thousands of Tunisians have filled the ranks of terrorist groups across the Middle East and North Africa. On July 10, 2015, U.N. experts estimated that approximately 5,500 Tunisians had traveled to Syria to fight, primarily alongside ISIS, in that country's civil war. By December 2015, this figure is estimated to have climbed to 6,000. The Tunisian government recently indicated that there are as many as 1,500 Tunisian fighters in Libya. The number of jihadists in Libya and Tunisia is likely to increase as ISIS loses ground in Iraq and Syria and foreign fighters return to the region. (Sources: [Business Insider](#) [3], [Middle East Institute](#) [4], [UN Human Rights](#) [5], [Jordan Times](#) [6], [New York Times](#) [7], [Wilson Center](#) [8], [Washington Institute](#) [9], [Council of Europe](#) [10])

A study conducted by the Tunisian Center for Research and Studies on Terrorism found that 69 percent of Tunisia's jihadists had traveled to Libya for military training. Tunisia's porous border with Libya has allowed for the free flow of weapons and fighters between the two countries. The Tunisian government has recognized the importance of bolstering border security in combatting terrorism and has closed its border with Libya on multiple occasions. Most recently, until September 1, 2018, the border was closed for over six weeks. (Sources: [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#) [11], [U.N. Human Rights](#) [12], [Wilson Center](#) [8], [News24](#) [13])

Tunisians actively condemn Islamic extremism. Terrorist attacks within the country are often followed by massive counter protests of people marching against violence and in solidarity with the victims. Following an attack on the Tunis Bardo Museum that claimed the lives of 21 tourists and one Tunisian national on March 18, 2015, thousands of Tunisians gathered outside the Museum chanting "Tunisia is free! Terrorism out." (Sources: [Al Jazeera](#) [14], [BBC News](#) [15])

### **Radicalization and Foreign Fighters**

After the 2011 Tunisian Revolution, Seifallah Ben Hassine—who in 2000 founded the Tunisian Combat Group (TCG), a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization linked with al-Qaeda—was released from prison and formed [Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia](#) [16] (AST). By 2012, Tunisian authorities had identified two other al-Qaeda-linked groups that were carrying out violent attacks in the country's northwest: Katiba Uqba ibn Nafi (KUIN) and the Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade. The relationship between these groups is unclear. According to a report published by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, it is possible that the KUIN and AST are, in fact, different branches of a single entity, with KUIN responsible for military activities and AST responsible for public outreach and proselytizing. Other reports have indicated that the Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade served as the military wing of AST after the groups merged on January 14, 2014. It is unclear whether or to what extent KUIN is distinct from the Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade. (Sources: [DNI](#) [17], [UN Security Council](#) [18], [U.S. Department of State](#) [19], [Combating Terrorism Center at West Point](#) [20], [Center for Strategic & International Studies](#) [21], [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#) [1], [Reuters](#) [22], [AARMS](#) [23], [Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium](#) [24], [Federation of American Scientists](#) [25])

Many Tunisians, who were formerly aligned with al-Qaeda, have shifted their allegiance to ISIS. In December 2014, a KUIN and/or Okba ibn Nafaa Brigade splinter group called Jund al-Khilafah-Tunisia (JAK-T) announced its allegiance to ISIS. After al-Qaeda formally disassociated from ISIS in February 2014, now-deceased AST deputy leader Kamel Zarrouk reportedly traveled to Syria to join ISIS. The Long War Journal reported that, "Zarrouk [was] known in his [Tunisian] neighborhood as someone who encouraged young people to go for jihad in Syria, which he consider[ed] to be the springboard for establishing an Islamic state from the Gulf to the ocean." In July 2014, a number of other AST leaders including spokesman Seifeddine Rais followed suit and declared loyalty to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. (Sources: [Combating Terrorism Center at West Point](#) [20], [Center for Strategic & International Studies](#) [21], [Center for Strategic & International Studies](#) [26], [Long War Journal](#) [27], [AllAfrica](#) [28], [Al-Monitor](#) [29])

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### *Recruitment*

According to Tunisian Prime Minister Habib Essid, Tunisians are primarily drawn to jihadist groups for ideological and economic reasons. He went on to explain: “They didn’t have jobs... They couldn’t have a normal life....and there’s a lot of lobbying out of this extremism that are looking after those people, and offering them money and activity.” The Salafi jihadist group Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST) claims to have recruited as many as 70,000 Tunisians since its formation in February 2011, according to a January 2014 *Economist* report. AST has successfully attracted new members through *dawa* (Islamic missionary work). As one student supporter of AST said: “They welcome people, they perform charitable works that the state doesn’t do: caravans bringing food aid, assistance, clothes, in every corner of the country in the poor neighborhoods.” (Sources: [Council on Foreign Relations](#) [30], [Economist](#) [31], [International Centre for Counter-Terrorism](#) [32], [Al-Monitor](#) [33])

Following the 2011 Tunisian Revolution, increased civil liberties enabled extremist groups to preach and recruit freely. AST held its first “annual” conference in April 2011 to spread its message and to discuss the future of the group. Little is known about the first conference aside from the fact that it was attended by a few hundred Islamists. The second conference was held in the western city of Kairouan and was reportedly attended by more than 10,000 Islamists. During that conference, AST leaders reportedly called on attendees to boycott the media, which they accused of slandering the Salafist movement. In addition, AST leader Seifallah Ben Hassine advocated for the creation of an Islamic workers collective to challenge the secular Tunisian General Labor Union. The third conference, scheduled to take place in May 2013 and estimated to attract more than 40,000 attendees, was blocked by Tunisian security forces in a massive show of force. The ensuing clashes drew 40,000 rioters, and security forces shot and killed one bystander in Tunis. AST has not publicly held an annual conference since. (Sources: [New York Times](#) [34], [Washington Institute For Near East Policy](#) [35], [Eurasia Review](#) [36], [Al-Monitor](#) [37])

Many Salafist groups in Tunisia, including AST, have expanded their membership by recruiting at mosques. In 2013, Salafists reportedly “controlled” between 100 and 500 of the country’s 5,000 mosques. Salafists have also proselytized students through “preaching tents” set up outside of school grounds. A Reuters investigation into the Bardo Museum attack revealed that the two perpetrators had been radicalized in Salafist mosques and that the younger of the two, 21-year-old Jabeur Khachnaoui, was initially exposed to radical content via a preaching tent outside his school. Although it is unclear in the report, it seems that in the wake of the Bardo attack authorities closed the Salafist tent near the school and that the imam at the local mosque was “pressured into changing his rhetoric.” (Sources: [Combating Terrorism Center](#) [38], [U.S. Bureau of International Labor Affairs](#) [39], [Business Insider](#) [40])

ISIS reportedly openly recruits at mosques in Kasserine, which is located near the Algerian border. According to a CNN report, “post-revolution chaos, bitter poverty and unemployment have made Kasserine a fertile recruiting ground.” ISIS has also successfully attracted new recruits online. Tunisians have been featured heavily in ISIS propaganda, and ISIS has regularly eulogized Tunisian fighters and suicide bombers. In early 2016, news agencies began reporting on a major push by ISIS to recruit Tunisian women for suicide bombings. (Sources: [CNN](#) [41], [Al Jazeera](#) [42], [Guardian](#) [43])

### *Foreign Fighters*

According to Aaron Zelin at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, after the Tunisian government designated AST as a terrorist organization in August 2013, “a majority of the Tunisians that remained involved in jihadism joined up with ISIS in Syria and later in Libya.” Even prior to that designation, the flow of Tunisians out of the country was so great that AST’s Seifallah Ben Hassine lamented that the wars in Syria and Mali have “emptied Tunisia of its young.” By July 2015, approximately 5,500 Tunisians had reportedly traveled to Syria to fight, primarily with ISIS, against Bashar al-Assad’s government. That same month, Tunisian Interior Minister Lofti Ben Jeddou reported that Tunisian security forces had prevented an additional 8,000 Tunisians from traveling to Syria to fight. As of late 2015, an estimated 6,000 Tunisians had reportedly joined jihadist groups in Iraq and Syria. (Sources: [Middle East Institute](#) [4], [Middle East Online](#) [44], [Business Standard](#) [45], [USA Today](#) [46], [New York Times](#) [47])

Tunisian militants—including the perpetrators of the 2015 Bardo Museum attack and 2015 Sousse attacks—have traveled to Libya to receive training at ISIS camps and many have subsequently gone on to fight in Syria. A study conducted by the Tunisian Center for Research and Studies on Terrorism found that 69 percent of Tunisia’s jihadists had traveled to Libya for military training. Ben Gardane, which is located in south eastern Tunisia near the Libyan border, is known to have

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exported the largest number of Tunisia’s foreign fighters, despite the town’s population being less than 80,000 people. Within Ben Gardane, there are believed to be dozens of ISIS sleeper cells, and an illegal market of weapons and ammunition is known to have historically flowed through the city to neighboring Libya. (Sources: [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#) [11], [Soufan Group](#) [48], [Daily Maverick](#) [49], [Vice](#) [50])

In a March 2015 ISIS video, a Tunisian jihadist named Abu Yahya al-Tounessi urged Tunisians to join ISIS in Libya and threatened the Tunisian government: “We are coming to conquer back Tunisia. I swear you will not be at ease now with the Islamic State a few kilometers from you just across the border.” Similarly, in April 2015, an ISIS-affiliated group called the “Tripoli Province” released a video in which a masked gunman promised to carry out attacks to avenge Islamists imprisoned in Tunisia, stating: “The Islamic State is only a few kilometers from you [Tunisia], we are coming.” The video also called on Tunisians to come to Libya to fight with ISIS: “Brothers, come to Libya. Don’t be humiliated by the [Tunisian] dictators. Muslims have their own state now.” The Tunisian government has indicated that there are as many as 1,500 Tunisian fighters in Libya, an estimated 300 of which are women. As noted by Zelin, it is likely that the number of Tunisian jihadists in Libya will continue to rise “amid the 2017 collapse of the Islamic State centers in Iraq and Syria.” (Sources: [Reuters](#) [51], [Vocativ](#) [52], [Wilson Center](#) [8], [Washington Institute](#) [53], [Washington Institute](#) [9])

Tunisian nationals have also planned and executed a number of significant attacks in Europe. A Tunis-born truck driver named Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel carried out the truck-ramming attack in Nice, France that killed 86 people and injured more than 400 others on Bastille Day 2016. On February 1, 2017, German police arrested an asylum seeker from Tunisia suspected of plotting an ISIS attack in Germany and who was also wanted in connection to a 2015 attack in Tunisia that killed 20 people. In December 2016, another Tunisian man, Anis Amri, plowed a truck into a German Christmas market, killing 12 people. Asharq Al-Awsat reported in August 2018 that Tunisian authorities had arrested four Tunisians involved in “an international network that smuggles terrorists from Iraq and Turkey towards Europe using forged foreign passports.” That month, Tunisian authorities reportedly arrested nine Europe-bound terror suspects as they were attempting to leave the country on boat. (Sources: [Washington Post](#) [54], [Washington Post](#) [55], [News Corp Australia Network](#) [56], [Asharq Al-awsat](#) [57], [Independent](#) [58])

Tunisian authorities have sought to better investigate terror cells that allegedly direct Tunisian nationals to carry out attacks abroad. Following the deadly October 2020 attack in Nice, France, on October 30, the counterterrorism division of Tunisia’s public prosecutor’s office opened an investigation into the group Al Mahdi in Southern Tunisia. The investigation was prompted after a video on social media, that allegedly featured Tunisian national Ibrahim Issaoui, claimed that Al Mahdi was responsible for the attack. However, a spokesperson for the Tunis court has claimed as of yet, there is no evidence of the group’s existence in Tunisia. (Sources: [Reuters](#) [59], [South China Morning Post](#) [60], [RT](#) [61])

### **Major Extremist and Terrorist Incidents**

#### *Islamist Riots and Protests*

Throughout 2011 and 2012, AST launched a series of riots and protests in Tunisia in response to events deemed blasphemous or insulting to Islam. In October 2011, AST organized a “Day of Rage” after a Tunisian TV station aired *Persepolis*, a film that depicts God in human form. Similarly, in June 2012, after an art exhibit in Tunis showcased a piece featuring an insect configuration of the word *Allah*, thousands of Salafi protesters took to the streets attacking police stations, courthouses, and secular party offices. In September 2012, following the release of the controversial *Innocence of Muslims* film, AST organized a demonstration at the U.S. embassy in Tunis. The protest quickly escalated and the crowd ransacked the embassy and a local American school. (Sources: [Washington Institute For Near East Policy](#) [35], [BBC News](#) [62], [Eurasia Review](#) [36], [Reuters](#) [63], [War on the Rocks](#) [64])

#### *Political Assassinations*

In August 2013, Tunisian security forces seized a list allegedly compiled by AST that included the names of politicians, anti-Islamist media figures, and academics to be assassinated. The list was discovered after AST had assassinated Chokri Belaïd, a prominent member of the leftist coalition Popular Front, in February 2013, and secular Tunisian politician Mohamed Brahmi in July 2013. In October 2014, Tunisian security forces uncovered a plot to assassinate Ahmed Nejib

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Chebbi, a vocal leader of the country's secular Republican Party. The attack was allegedly set to occur just days before the country's parliamentary elections. (Sources: [Al Jazeera](#) [65], [Al Jazeera](#) [66], [Al-Monitor](#) [67], [Reuters](#) [68], [AllAfrica](#) [69])

### ***Attacks in the Kasserine Province***

The Kasserine province, located in northwest Tunisia along the Algerian border, has become what one analyst called "an informal headquarters" for jihadist groups. The permeable border with Algeria and the region's dire economy create fertile ground for extremist recruitment. The Tunisian army has been fighting with groups including the Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade, KUIN, and JAK-T in the region and, according to a 2018 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace report, over the last seven years 127 Islamic militants and 118 Tunisian security personnel have been killed in combat. In July 2014, during one of the largest terror attacks in the region in recent years, approximately 60 Okba Ibn Nafaa militants armed with rifles and rocket-propelled grenades attacked Tunisian military checkpoints near Jebel Chaambi, the highest mountain in the country. The attack killed 14 Tunisian soldiers. (Sources: [Newsweek](#) [70], [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#) [1], [Reuters](#) [71])

### ***Attacks on Tunisia's Tourism Industry***

Tourism is a major industry in Tunisia. In the first nine months of 2013 alone, revenue from tourism within the country exceeded \$1.42 billion. Simultaneously, it is also the industry most vulnerable to terrorism. In April 2002, a natural gas tanker laden with explosives was detonated on the Tunisian island of Djerba inside El Ghriba synagogue. Fourteen German tourists, two French tourists and three Tunisian nationals were killed, and more than 30 others were wounded. Al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for the attack. In October 2013, a suicide bomber attacked the Riadh Palms hotel in Sousse with no reported casualties. Around the same time, security forces foiled an attack targeting the mausoleum of former Tunisian president Habib Bourguiba. At the time, no group claimed responsibility for the attacks, but suspects arrested after the incident were reportedly AST members. (Sources: [Reuters](#) [72], [BBC News](#) [73], [Guardian](#) [74], [Newsweek](#) [75], [Reuters](#) [76])

In 2015, Tunisia suffered two major attacks. At 12:30 p.m. on March 18, 2015, militants opened fire on tourists unloading from buses in front of the Bardo National Museum. Many of the tourists were from two cruise ships, the MSC Splendida and the Costa Fascinosa, which were at port outside of Tunis. The attackers had originally planned to attack the Tunisian parliament, but opted to attack the museum because of its lighter security. Unbeknownst to the attackers, the guards at the museum were on a coffee break. The attackers followed fleeing tourists into the museum and took them hostage, precipitating a four-hour siege of the museum by security forces. In the end, 21 foreign tourists were killed from France, Spain, Colombia, Italy, Japan, Australia, Belgium, Poland, Britain, and Russia along with a Tunisian policeman. Two of the attackers were killed, but one managed to escape. ISIS immediately claimed responsibility for the attack, threatening more in the future. The Tunisian government reportedly pinned the blame on Okba Ibn Nafaa. (Sources: [New York Times](#) [77], [Straits Times](#) [78], [New York Times](#) [79], [Huffington Post](#) [80], [Reuters](#) [81])

The second major attack took place on June 26, 2015 when a gunman killed 38 tourists at the Hotel Rui Imperial Marhaba, located north of Sousse in Port El Kantaoui. The gunman reportedly fled the scene but was shot dead by local police within the hour. The attacker was later identified as Tunisian national Seifeddine Rezgui, who reportedly had links to AST. ISIS later claimed responsibility for the attack. (Sources: [BBC News](#) [82], [International Business Times](#) [83])

In 2015, tourist arrivals fell to 5.5 million, the lowest level in decades. That year, 70 hotels in Tunisia were forced to close due to decreased demand and annual revenue from tourism dropped 35 percent. In the first two months of 2016, tourism revenue was down 54 percent compared to the same period in 2015. In April 2016 Tunisia's Tourism Minister, Salma Elloumi Rekik, urged European nations to lift travel warnings against Tunisia. The U.S. Department of State issued a Travel Warning on September 29, 2016, which was later replaced by another Travel Warning on May 2017. In March 2017, a Tunisian government representative said Tunisia was expecting a 30 percent increase in tourist arrivals that year. (Sources: [CNBC](#) [84], [Reuters](#) [85], [U.S. Department of State](#) [86], [Reuters](#) [87])

- **March 6, 2020:** Two suicide bombers detonate an explosive at a security post near the U.S. embassy in Tunis. The explosion kills one policeman and injures six others. No Americans are killed in the attack. According to police, the assailants used homemade explosives. No group has claims responsibility, but the country has struggled since the Arab Spring to prevent nationals from joining ISIS and al-Qaeda. Sources: [CNN](#) [88], [New York Times](#) [89], [Al Jazeera](#) [90]

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- **September 24, 2019:**A suspected terrorist stabs a police officer near the Bizerte Court of Appeal. The police officer dies in the attack. The assailant is apprehended and searched, during which security forces uncover improvised explosive devices in his backpack. According to the interior ministry, the attacker is suspected of attempting to carry out attacks against the court. Source: [North Africa Post](#) [91]
- **September 2, 2019:**Police along with the National Guard and military army units carry out a search operation in Hydra, Tunisia. A shootout ensues, killing the chief of the National Guard. Three extremists are killed, two of the extremists were Algerians from the Okba Ibn Nafaa brigade, which is linked to al-Qaida's North Africa arm. Source: [Associated Press](#) [92]
- **August 2, 2019:**According to Tunisian Interior Minister, Hichem Fourati, security forces prevent a terrorist plot targeting the Carthage International Airport in Tunis. Source: [Xinhua](#) [93]
- **July 3, 2019:**Aymen Smiri, the mastermind of the two June 27 bombings blows himself up during a police manhunt in the suburb of Intilaka, outside of Tunisia. According to interior ministry spokesman, Sofiene Zaag, Smiri was also suspected of plotting a new operation targeting security personnel. Source: [Defense Post](#) [94]
- **June 27, 2019:**Two suicide bombers attack police positions in Tunis, killing two and wounding seven others. ISIS claims responsibility through its Amaq News Agency. The attack's alleged mastermind, Aymen Smiri, is killed in Tunis on July 2 when he sets off explosives he was carrying after being surrounded by police. There are no other casualties from that explosion. A week after the attack, Tunisia bans the niqab, the Islamic full-face veil, in public places out of concern that it could be used to conceal weapons or explosives. The move draws accusations of religious discrimination from human rights groups. On July 5, Tunisia extends its state of emergency—in place since June 2015—for another month. Sources: [Reuters](#) [95], [Associated Press](#), [Bloomberg](#) [96], [Washington Post](#) [97], [Morocco World News](#) [98]
- **October 29, 2018:**Five civilians and 15 police officers are injured during a suicide bombing in Tunis. The perpetrator is later identified as a 30-year-old woman. Source: [The Arab Weekly](#) [99]
- **July 8, 2018:**Militants throw a grenade at a Tunisia security vehicle and then open fire, killing at least six police officers along Tunisia's border with Algeria. Sources: [The National](#) [100], [Reuters](#) [101]
- **March 31, 2018:**Two tourists are injured in a knife attack in El Kef, a town in northwest Tunisia. Source: [Daily Mirror](#) [102]
- **November 1, 2017:**Two policemen are stabbed in Tunis by a young man suspected to be an Islamic militant. The perpetrator, who refers to the police as "tyrants," is later arrested. Source: [Reuters](#) [103]
- **April 30, 2017:**An assailant detonates explosives and another is shot dead during a raid by Tunisian security forces. The men are believed to have links to Islamic State and al-Qaeda's North African branch, AQIM, and to have been planning attacks during the month of Ramadan. Three other militants are detained. Source: [Al Jazeera](#) [104]
- **March 12, 2017:**Four militants on motorcycles attack a security checkpoint in the southern city of Kebili, killing one guard. Two of the assailants are killed in an ensuing shootout. In a separate incident, a soldier is wounded when a mine explodes in the Mount Sammama area of central-western Tunisia, in close proximity to an area that is favored by jihadists and near the Algerian border. Source: [France24](#) [105]
- **August 29, 2016:**Tunisian soldiers drive over a mine in the Kasserine province and are hit with a rocket-propelled grenade. Three soldiers are killed and six others are wounded in the explosion. Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#) [106], [Al Araby](#) [107]
- **March 8, 2016:**Gunmen attack Ben Gardane, a town near the country's border with Libya, killing 12 members of Tunisia's security forces and seven civilians, including a 12-year-old girl. Tunisian security forces kill 36 of the attackers, who are reportedly connected to ISIS. Sources: [Al Jazeera](#) [108], [New York Times](#) [109]
- **November 24, 2015:**A suicide bomber attacks a bus of Tunisian presidential guards, killing 12. Sources: [Reuters](#) [110], [BBC News](#) [111], [Reuters](#) [112], [Associated Press](#) [113]
- **June 26, 2015:**A gunman kills 38 tourists at a seaside resort hotel in Sousse, Tunisia. ISIS claims responsibility for the attack. In May 2017, six security officers and 20 others stand trial on charges ranging from failing to prevent or stop the attack to alleged involvement in preparing or inciting the attack. Sources: [BBC News](#) [82], [The Seattle Times](#) [114]
- **May 14, 2015:**Tunisian military forces kill four Islamic militants near the border with Algeria. Source: [Reuters](#) [115]
- **April 8, 2015:**Five Tunisian soldiers are killed and eight are wounded in an ambush in the Kasserine region. Okba Ibn Nafaa is suspected. Source: [Agence France-Presse](#) [116]
- **March 30, 2015:**In an operation in central Tunisia, security forces kill nine members of Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade, including the head of the group Lokmane Abou Sakhr, an Algerian who is thought to have masterminded the Bardo National Museum attack.

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- Source: [Agence France-Presse](#) [117]
- **March 23, 2015:**An improvised explosive device (IED) near the border with Algeria, in the Kef governorate north of Kasserine, kills one Tunisian soldier and injures two others.  
Source: [Challenges](#) [118]
  - **March 18, 2015:**Militants attack the Bardo National Museum in Tunis, Tunisia, resulting in the death of 21 tourists and a Tunisian policeman.  
Source: [Reuters](#) [81]
  - **February 27, 2015:**Tunisian security forces arrest 13 people, including five women, allegedly planning attacks against Tunisian security forces and connected to Okba Ibn Nafaa.  
Source: [All Africa](#) [119]
  - **February 18, 2015:**Four Tunisian national guardsmen are killed in a terrorist attack in the Jebel Chaambi area. Okba Ibn Nafaa is suspected.  
Source: [Le Monde](#) [120]
  - **February 7, 2015:**The Tunisian government arrests 32 Islamic militants suspected of planning “spectacular” attacks. Many of the arrested militants had returned from fighting in Syria, and are believed to be associated with AST. Source: [Reuters](#) [121]
  - **December 1, 2014:**Islamic militants behead a Tunisian policeman after he is kidnapped near the Algerian border. AST is suspected. Source: [Reuters](#) [122]
  - **November 5, 2014:**Islamic militants kill four Tunisian soldiers and wound 11 in an attack on a bus near the Algerian border. AST is suspected. Source: [Reuters](#) [123]
  - **October 24, 2014:**Following a 24-hour standoff between police and AST militants in the outskirts of Tunis, Tunisian security forces kill six militants, five of them women. One police officer is wounded in the firefight. Source: [Financial Times](#) [124]
  - **July 26, 2014:**An AST attack in Jebel Chaambi kills two Tunisian soldiers.  
Source: [All Africa](#) [125]
  - **July 16, 2014:**Okba Ibn Nafaa militants armed with rifles and rocket-propelled grenades kill 14 and wound 25 in an attack on military checkpoints in the Jebel Chaambi area.  
Source: [Reuters](#) [126]
  - **July 2014:**Following an Okba Ibn Nafaa attack, which killed 14 Tunisian soldiers, Tunisian security forces launch a massive crackdown, including airstrikes and a ground “combing” operation.  
Source: [All Africa](#) [125]
  - **May 23, 2014:**Two Tunisian soldiers are killed and five are wounded by an IED in Jebel Chaambi.  
Source: [Express FM](#) [127]
  - **April 18, 2014:**A Tunisian soldier is killed by an IED in Jebel Chaambi.  
Source: [Huffington Post](#) [128]
  - **February 16, 2014:**Four militants, disguised as Tunisian security officials, kill three policemen and a civilian and wound three others near Tunisia’s border with Algeria.  
Source: [Al Jazeera](#) [129]
  - **October 30, 2013:**AST members attempt to carry out two separate suicide attacks. One bomber blows himself up at the Riadh Palms hotel in Sousse, with no reported casualties. Security forces foil the other attempt and arrest a suspect allegedly targeting the mausoleum of former Tunisian president Habib Bourguiba.  
Source: [Reuters](#) [76]
  - **October 20, 2013:**The Tunisian military kills nine and captures four alleged AST figures suspected to have been involved in the October 17, 2013 murder of two policemen.  
Source: [Associated Press](#) [130]
  - **October 17, 2013:**AST militants kill two Tunisian policemen during clashes in Goubellat, Tunisia.  
Source: [Reuters](#) [131]
  - **August 4, 2013:**Two Tunisian soldiers are killed in clashes with militants near Jebel Chaambi. The Tunisian government announces that these deaths bring the number of Tunisian police and military killed by militants near Jebel Chaambi since December 2012 to 14. Source: [Agence France-Presse](#) [132]
  - **July 29, 2013:**Militants ambush and kill at least eight Tunisian soldiers near the border with Algeria, allegedly cutting the throats of three soldiers.  
Source: [Huffington Post](#) [133]
  - **July 25, 2013:**AST assassinates secular politician Mohamed Brahmi.  
Source: [Reuters](#) [134]
  - **June 6, 2013:**A roadside bomb in the Jebel Chaambi area kills two Tunisian soldiers and wounds two others.  
Source: [Jeune Afrique](#) [135]
  - **May 6, 2013:**The Tunisian government acknowledges that 15 police and soldiers were injured in the previous week by IEDs in the Jebel Chaambi area.  
Source: [Jeune Afrique](#) [136]
  - **February 6, 2013:**AST gunmen assassinate secular Tunisian politician Chokri Belaid on the doorstep of his home.

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Sources: [Washington Post](#) [137], [BBC News](#) [138]

- **December 21, 2012:**The Tunisian government announces the arrest of 16 members of Okba Ibn Nafaa.  
Source: [Long War Journal](#) [139]
- **December 10, 2012:**A Tunisian policeman is killed and four members of the National Guard are wounded in an attack by militants near the city of Kasserine, close to the border with Algeria.  
Source: [Jeune Afrique](#) [140]
- **September 14, 2012:**AST organizes protests in front of the U.S. embassy in Tunis.  
AST leader Seifallah Ben Hassine participates in the protest and reportedly incites violence against the embassy's security guards. Source: [War on the Rocks](#) [64]
- **June 2012:**AST organizes riots in Tunis in protest of the "Spring of the Arts" exhibit in Tunis's La Marsa suburb. Thousands of Islamists throw rocks and gasoline bombs at police stations, secular political offices, and courthouses. According to a government official, 65 police officers are injured, and 162 rioters are arrested. Source: [Reuters](#) [63]
- **May 23, 2012:**More than 5,000 Salafists attend AST's annual conference in Kairouan.  
AST leaders call on attendees to boycott the media, which they accuse of slandering the Salafist movement. Seifallah Ben Hassine also calls for the creation of an Islamic workers collective to challenge the secular Tunisian General Labor Union. Source: [Eurasia Review](#) [36]
- **October 2011:**After Nessma TV aired the animated film *Persepolis*, which briefly depicts God in human form, AST launches a "Day of Rage" against the broadcaster.  
Seifallah Ben Hassine calls on his followers to attack and destroy the owner of Nessma TV's home. Some 300 Islamist protesters descend on the station's offices intending to set fire to the buildings. Source: [Washington Institute For Near East Policy](#) [141]
- **April 11, 2002:**Fourteen German tourists, two French tourists, and three Tunisian nationals are killed and more than 30 others are wounded after a bomb detonates at the El Ghriba synagogue on the Tunisian island of Djerba. Al-Qaeda claims responsibility.  
Source: [BBC News](#) [73]

### **Domestic Counter-Extremism**

Since the 2011 revolution, Tunisia has worked to improve its security infrastructure amidst a surge in extremist violence. In 2015, the Tunisian government created the Agency for Defense Intelligence and Security, which served to further increase the army's role in counterterrorism operations. That same year the government launched the National Commission on Counter-Terrorism, which in November 2016 introduced a new strategy to fight "terrorism and extremism" that was developed alongside the country's National Security Council. Though few details of the strategy were publicly released, a presidential statement said the plan had four main pillars: "prevention, protection, judicial proceedings, and retaliation." (Sources: [European Council on Foreign Relations](#) [142], [Al-Araby](#) [143])

In late fall 2014, a new coalition government was elected in Tunisia and the Islamist party Ennahda lost its majority in the parliament. Reuters asserted that the new government has "taken a tougher line, going to court to take back mosques, sweeping up hundreds of suspected militants, and curbing militant websites that recruit for Iraq and Syria." In the fall of 2015, Tunisian security forces claim to have dismantled domestic jihadist cells that were plotting attacks against tourist sites in the country as well as public figures. In the fall of 2016, the government reportedly discovered three weapons caches and arrested dozens of suspected extremists, including four individuals suspected of planning to attack commercial and police targets in Tunis and to assassinate prominent politicians and journalists. The suspects, who had reportedly been communicating via Facebook, were arrested on November 17, 2016 in the capital's southern suburb of Ben Arous. (Sources: [Reuters](#) [51], [Newsweek](#) [144], [Al Bawaba](#) [145], [Al Masdar](#) [146], [Al Bawaba](#) [147])

The Tunisian government declared a state of emergency in July 2015 after an ISIS gunman killed 38 tourists at a seaside resort hotel in Sousse. The government has since continued to renew the state of emergency. The government again renewed the state of emergency in July 2019, a week after three suicide bombings in Tunis. (Sources: [BBC News](#) [148], [BBC News](#) [82], [The Seattle Times](#) [114], [Reuters](#) [95], [Morocco World News](#) [98])

Since the beginning of 2016, more than 15,000 suspected extremists have been monitored by Tunisian security forces. That year, the Tunisian government reportedly dismantled more than 160 jihadist cells and arrested over 850 suspected terrorists. (Sources: [Deutsche Welle](#) [149], [Wilson Center](#) [150])

The Tunisian government typically responds to domestic terror attacks by launching raids and other anti-terror operations. During a raid in February 2014, the Tunisian military killed seven AST combatants, including the prime suspect in Chokri

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Belaid's murder. During a second raid two days later, a suspect in the assassination of Mohamed Brahmi was arrested along with four other fighters. After the July 2014 Jebel Chaambi attack that killed 14 Tunisian soldiers, the Tunisian government launched a crackdown on mosques, radio stations, television networks, and websites sympathetic to AST and other jihadist groups operating in the country. The Tunisian prime minister's office stated: "The prime minister has decided to close immediately all the mosques that are not under the control of the authorities, and those mosques where there were reported celebrations over the deaths of the soldiers." (Sources: [AllAfrica](#) [151], [Al Jazeera](#) [152], [Al Jazeera](#) [153], [Financial Times](#) [124], [AllAfrica](#) [125], [Al Jazeera](#) [154])

To prevent radicalization, the government has taken steps to replace imams deemed extremist, though not all local communities acquiesced to the changes. In addition, in late 2015, the Ministry of Religious Affairs established a counter-narrative campaign, "We are Islam," targeting youth on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. As of June 2017, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research had allocated \$1.2 million over five years to study the roots of radicalization among young people and how to combat it. The initiative is a partnership between research centers in several Tunisian cities and the ministries of interior, defense, and health. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#) [106], [Al-Monitor](#) [155], [Al-Fanar Media](#) [156])

In 2016, the Tunisian Directorate General of Prisons and Rehabilitation worked with the U.S. Department of State, in part, to establish community reintegration centers to better prepare newly released prison inmates and mitigate recidivism and radicalization. (Source: [U.S. Department of State](#) [106])

### ***Legislation***

In a move that drew widespread criticism, the Tunisian Interior Ministry announced stricter regulations regarding the niqab in February 2014. The ministry stated: "In light of the terrorist threats that the country is witnessing and as some suspects and fugitives deliberately wear niqab for disguise and to escape from security units, the ministry... will tighten procedural controls on every person wearing a niqab within the framework of what is authorized by law." The government cited the case of Seifallah Ben Hassine, who reportedly evaded capture by wearing a niqab. The government has yet to enforce the policy. (Sources: [Al-Monitor](#) [157], [Al Jazeera](#) [158])

As early as March 2015, the Tunisian government introduced legislation making it more difficult for Tunisians under the age of 35 to travel freely to Libya, Turkey, or Serbia, key transit points to Syria and Iraq. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have characterized Tunisia's travel restrictions as arbitrary and have urged Tunisia to make legislative reforms. (Sources: [Human Rights Watch](#) [159], [Deutsche Welle](#) [160], [Amnesty International](#) [161])

Tunisia further strengthened legislation against extremism on May 17, 2019, when the government issued Decree 419 called "UN Measures to Prevent Terrorists from Acquiring Weapons of Mass Destruction," which extended the National Counter Terrorism Commission's (CNLCT) authority to sanction persons or organizations engaged in material support for terrorism. In July 2019, Tunisia banned the *niqab*, the Islamic full-face veil, in public places out of concern that it could be used to conceal weapons or explosives. The move drew accusations of religious discrimination from human rights groups. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#) [162], [Washington Post](#) [97])

### ***U.S.-Tunisia Cooperation***

In 2014, the United States pledged \$60 million in military aid to Tunisia to battle al-Qaeda-affiliated militants. U.S. military aid to Tunisia tripled in 2015, with the United States providing Tunisian security forces with border defense training, 52 Humvees, and a patrol boat. In February 2016, a U.S. airstrike on an ISIS training camp in western Libya targeted and killed dozens of foreign fighters including Tunisian Nouredine Chouhane, who is believed to have planned two deadly terrorist attacks in Tunisia in 2015. As of late June 2016, the U.S. had reportedly begun using a Tunisian air base to conduct drone strikes against ISIS targets inside Libya. A spokesman for the U.S. Africa Command acknowledged that "U.S. service members [are] working with the Tunisian security forces for counter terrorism and are sharing intelligence." He said U.S. security assistance to Tunisia, including the provision of equipment and training, has exceeded \$250 million. In January 2016, Tunisia received two ships from the U.S. military to help combat illegal immigration across the Mediterranean. In February 2017, Tunisia took delivery of six U.S.-made helicopters to reinforce the Tunisia army's reconnaissance and attack capabilities in "the war on terrorism." (Sources: [Al Jazeera](#) [163], [Washington Post](#) [164],



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[Defense News](#) [165], [Newsweek](#) [166], [ABC News](#) [167], [Reuters](#) [168], [Agence France Presse](#) [169])

The U.S. Department of State assesses that Tunisian counterterrorism efforts have improved substantially, particularly in the areas of weapons seizures, arrests, and operations to disrupt armed groups. Still, according to a 2017 U.S. Department of State report: “Tunisia needs more time and international support to complete the overhaul of its military and civilian security forces.” (Source: [U.S. Department of State](#) [2])

### *U.N. Initiatives to Counter Violent Extremism in Tunisia*

The Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) held a two-day workshop in Tunis in November 2015 to assist Tunisia combat extremism domestically. During the workshop, the CTED advised Tunisia on issues including law enforcement and border control. In July 2017, CTED held another two-day workshop in Tunis on the topic of “Strengthening Community Engagement in Implementing Security Council resolutions 1624 (2005) and 2178 (2014) and the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy.” On February 1, 2018, UNESCO launched a \$2 million two-year project to engage youth in Tunisia, Morocco, Libya, and Jordan in the prevention of violent extremism. Among other initiatives, the project will provide training on “countering online hate speech” and will develop “new media spaces to disseminate alternative narratives by and for youth.” (Sources: [United Nations](#) [170], [United Nations](#) [171], [UNESCO](#) [172])

### **International Counter-Extremism**

Tunisia is a member of the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Initiative (TSCTI), an international, interagency partnership between the U.S. and eleven countries in the Sahel-Sahara region. According to United States European Command: “The goal of TSCTI is to counter terrorist influences in the region and assist governments to better control their territory and to prevent huge tracts of largely deserted African territory from becoming a safe haven for terrorist groups.” Through the program, the U.S. trains national forces in each partner country with the objective to increase communication and collaboration on counterterrorism issues in the region. (Source: [United States European Command](#) [173])

Tunisia regularly carries out joint operations with Algeria to combat terrorism on their border. In summer 2014, the two countries conducted one of the largest military operations in recent years along their common border. The operation involved 8,000 elite Algerian soldiers and between 5,000 and 6,000 elite Tunisian soldiers. The mission aimed to weed out specific terrorist threats and enhance general security along cross-border transit routes. The two countries also agreed to cooperate to combat terror recruitment in their respective countries and to work to deny funding for terror groups. (Source: [Middle East Monitor](#) [174])

On June 22, 2019, it was reported that Tunisia would be removed from the blacklist of non-cooperative countries in the global fight against money laundering and terrorism financing. In October of that year, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) monitored and reviewed Tunisia’s progress in adopting an action plan implemented in November of 2017 to counter the financing of acts of terrorism. Tunisia was officially removed after FATF confirmed the regime’s compliance of the financial watchdog’s 29 recommendations, including freezing over 22 accounts of individuals and associations involved in suspicious financial transactions. (Sources: [Middle East Monitor](#) [175], [Financial Action Task Force](#) [176])

### **Public Opinion**

In the past, Tunisian citizens have openly demonstrated against extremism. In February 2014, four extremist militants disguised as Tunisian security officials near the Algerian border killed three policemen and a civilian. The attackers also wounded three security officers. Subsequently, protests broke out in the northwestern Tunisian city of Jendouba. Officials estimate more than a thousand people demonstrated in solidarity with the victims. (Source: [Reuters](#) [177])

Al Jazeera described the funeral of assassinated politician Chokri Belaid as “one of the largest outpourings of grief in Tunisian history, with an estimated one million people taking to the street.” The protests following the assassination were the country’s biggest demonstrations since the 2011 revolution that ousted former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Protesters called for the toppling of the Islamist Ennahda-led government, who they felt was complicit in the death. (Source: [Al Jazeera](#) [178])

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Five months later, thousands of protesters poured into the street mere hours after secular politician Mohamed Brahmi was shot and killed. Protesters clashed with police at the headquarters of the Interior Ministry. Like the assassination of Belaid, many felt the government had a hand in the killing. The politician's sister stated, "Ennahda killed my brother." In cities across the country, citizens burned tires and blocked roads. In the city of Sidi Bouzid, where Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi self-immolated in 2010, two local Ennahda offices were burned. Later, at Brahmi's funeral, "tens of thousands" of citizens protested against terrorism and called for the overthrow of the Islamist-led government. (Sources: [Al Jazeera](#) [179], [Al Jazeera](#) [129], [Al Jazeera](#) [66], [Al Jazeera](#) [180])

Following the 2015 attack on the Bardo Museum in Tunis, tens of thousands of protesters rallied in Tunis against terror. Some protesters were chanting, "Tunisia is free, terrorism out." French president Francois Hollande and Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, along with leaders from Poland, Belgium, Palestine, Algeria, and Libya joined protesters in Tunis 11 days after the attack on March 29. (Sources: [BBC News](#) [181], [Al Jazeera](#) [182])

On January 8, 2017, thousands of Tunisians marched in Tunis to protest the return of jihadis from Syria and Iraq. Tunisia's president said that stopping the return of Tunisian fighters to Tunisia would be unconstitutional. (Sources: [Reuters](#) [183], [Aspen Institute](#) [184])

Nearly 85 percent of Tunisians polled in December 2016 said that Tunisia's current economic situation was "somewhat bad" or "very bad," and 66 percent said the government should treat employment as its top priority for Tunisian youth. Sixty-one percent said the government does not sufficiently promote policies that help the country's youth. The International Republican Institute's Center of Insights in Survey Research has opined that Tunisia should prioritize the country's youth given that demographic's vulnerability to violent extremism. (Source: [International Republican Institute](#) [185])