

# 108479-001- GENERAL BACKGROUND NOTE

Nizar Ben Salah;

Imen Al Nighaoui;

© 2019, MAGHREB ECONOMIC FORUM



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction, provided the original work is properly credited.

Cette œuvre est mise à disposition selon les termes de la licence Creative Commons Attribution (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>), qui permet l'utilisation, la distribution et la reproduction sans restriction, pourvu que le mérite de la création originale soit adéquatement reconnu.

*IDRC Grant/ Subvention du CRDI: 108479-001-Countering youth radicalization in Tunisia through inclusion*



# TACKLING YOUTH RADICALIZATION THROUGH INCLUSION IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY TUNISIA



**Maghreb Economic Forum**

# General Background Note

*This project is carried out with the technical and financial support of  
International Development Research Center of Canada*



International Development Research Centre  
Centre de recherches pour le développement international

**Canada**



# CONTENT

Introduction	<b>1</b>
The History of Terrorism in Tunisia	<b>2</b>
1. The Class of Kleptocrats	<b>3</b>
2. Freedoms and Liberties	<b>4</b>
3. Super powers on the rescue	<b>5</b>
4. The economic reforms	<b>6</b>
5. The rise of Terrorism	<b>8</b>
6. A multidisciplinary government strategy	<b>10</b>
Conclusion	<b>11</b>

# INTRODUCTION

The widespread assumption that any political change can only come with the assistance of a super power was contradicted when an up-rise in Tunisia toppled a regime that reigned for over twenty-three years. The world was taken aback by these events in a country that “seemed the best in the class: stable, presentably secular, engaged in a steady process of “Economic reform”<sup>1</sup>. Realities proved to be extremely different from the outward carefully drawn image of the country. Despite Tunisia’s positive reputation amongst a myriad of governments, the country became immersed in a political mayhem that remains unsorted to this day. The latest Africa Report refers to “the political infighting” as the main cause for stagnation in economic reform and the primary reason that the European Union (EU) and International Organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) continue to place Tunisia on black lists for terrorism and money laundering<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, the Tunisian Labor Union (UGTT), Tunisia’s strongest Labor Union, is lobbying for more and more strikes against IMF recommendations to the government, making the prime minister’s job to reconcile between the different actors and stakeholders even harder.

---

<sup>1</sup>Chayes, Sarah. *Thieves of State: Why Corruption Threatens Global Security*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016.

<sup>2</sup>“Country Profile.” *The Africa Report*, December 2018, 201

# THE HISTORY OF TERRORISM IN TUNISIA

These uncertain times created countless opportunities for terrorist organizations. Large-scale recruitment operations were publicly authorized under the veil of freedom of speech. Extremist influencers such as Kamel Zarrouk (Ansar al-Sharia leader who was touring the country preaching for Jihad), or Seif Ediine Ben Hassine (Abu Iadh) who held the infamous meeting of salafists in Kairouan gathering around 5000 supporters, both of whom emphasized “feelings of injustice shared by large spans of the population – particularly those from marginalized regions and poor urban peripheries that most often encounter state brutality, corruption and social exclusion”<sup>3</sup>.

Despite its prevalence, terrorism is not a new phenomenon to Tunisians. A series of attacks in 1986 and 1987 on hotels in Sousse and Monastir by a group calling itself Islamic Jihad<sup>4</sup> accelerated the fall of President Habib Bourguiba’s life-long presidency through a Medical Coup by his prime minister Ben Ali. In late 2006, the largest military operation in the history of the country was launched to track a group of 40 terrorists hiding in the mountains of Solimane. In a leaked classified intelligence report from the American Embassy in Tunis, 30 convicted terrorists not only expressed their hatred to the regime and its cruel security apparatus, but also, listed the war in Iraq as a top motivation. “Several had aspired to join the “resistance” there. Because of the logistical difficulties of doing so, they opted for “jihad” in Tunisia instead”<sup>5</sup>. The concept of Islamic Solidarity was spreading among young Tunisians, some of them were extreme in upholding it to the point of violence. This was consistently fueled by the ongoing dispute in the holy land between Palestinians and Israelis, the war in Iraq, and most recently, international intervention in Syria.

<sup>3</sup>“How the Islamic State Rose, Fell and Could Rise Again in the Maghreb.” *International Crisis Group*, no. 178 (July 24, 2017).

<sup>4</sup>Willis, Michael J. *Politics and Power in the Maghreb: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from Independence to the Arab Spring*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

<sup>5</sup>“Submit Documents to WikiLeaks.” *About*. Accessed December 28, 2018.

# 1

## THE CLASS OF KLEPTOCRATS

To sustain power; Ben Ali followed the steps of his predecessor by eliminating the military from the political scene, terrorizing and excluding the Islamists, and setting “a powerful internal security apparatus focusing on the ministry of interior”<sup>6</sup>. The strengthening of Ben Ali’s regime over all sectors in Tunisia gave a way to the rise of a new class of kleptocrats led infamously by the family of his wife, The Trabelsis. The Tunisian efficient bureaucratic system served to cover and legitimize the dominance of this class of businessmen within the banking system, the mining industry and most importantly the importing and exporting network, through both formal and black-market routes. The effects of this mob-ran economy “was a market flooded with cheap imported consumer goods that undermined both local industry and importers not wired into the network. Such distortions fray an economy, exacerbate unemployment, and reduce resilience of a country like Tunisia to demographic pressures or global downturns”<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>6</sup>Willis, Michael J. *Politics and Power in the Maghreb: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from Independence to the Arab Spring*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

<sup>7</sup>Chayes, Sarah. *Thieves of State: Why Corruption Threatens Global Security*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016.

## 2

## FREEDOMS AND LIBERTIES

The economic marginalization and the political domination of kleptocrats were not the only driving forces for resentment and anger among the general population. The people of Tunisia were disappointed from the regime that did not meet the expectation it set in the declaration of November 7th, 1987. After 23 years of authoritarian rule, human rights violations reached its apogees. In 2010, The Freedom House classified Tunisia as “Not Free” and gave the country a score of 6/7 (1=best, 7=worst) in Freedom Rating<sup>8</sup>. Freedoms were suppressed at all levels. Freedom of speech was controlled by state surveillance programs. The ratified-laws imposed various restrictions on universities and associations. Freedom of press was limited; only two state owned channels were broadcasting in the country, serving as a propaganda medium for the president, and “more than 100 Tunisian journalists live in exile, according to Canadian Journalists for Free Expression”<sup>9</sup>. Ben Ali ran unopposed in three of the elections and won the other two by almost 90 percent. The dominance of his party on the Parliament allowed him to ratify the constitution multiple times in his favor; a referendum in 2002 gave him the right to be nominated for a fourth time<sup>10</sup>, then for the elections of 2009 the parliament changed the age restriction from 70 to 75 allowing him to be nominated while the same law helped him eliminating one of his opponents, Mohamed Harmel aged 75 during the 2002 elections<sup>11</sup>. All branches of the government were at the service of the Ben Ali’s regime, even the judiciary. Tunisians lost faith on the corrupt justice system and mixed feelings of injustice and hatred toward the regime started to surface as the situation deemed unbearable. In 2008, the riots of the Gafsa Mining Basin were a paramount mile-stone leading to the Jasmine Revolution of 2011. The leaderless and spontaneous rebellion lasted over six months, the government response took “the shape of a collective punishment, aimed at generating terror, at choking the feeling of resistance and at breaking the ties of solidarity within the population”<sup>12</sup>, but the police quickly deescalated the use of force and the government was forced to review its policies in the region and release the arrested protesters. Ben Ali survived this up-rise because he strongly controlled the media, “the only professional images that were broadcast were shot by Fahem Boukaddous, member of the PCOT, for the opposition satellite television channel Al-Hiwar Attounsi”<sup>13</sup>. Even though Tunisia was highly ranked among its Arab counterparts in terms of freedoms and liberties, specifically to women, its people suffered injustices and imprisonment for decades.

<sup>8</sup>Freedomhouse (2013, August 05). *Freedom of the world report, Tunisia 2010*

<sup>9</sup>Ibid

<sup>10</sup>Eric Gobe. *Tunisie 2002 : un référendum pour quoi faire. Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord, CNRS Editions, 2004, p. 381-413.*

<sup>11</sup>Larbi. (2010, July 05). *L'opposition à Ben Ali et les élections de 2004.*

<sup>12</sup>Eric Gobe. *The Gafsa Mining Basin between Riots and a Social Movement: meaning and significance of a protest movement in Ben Ali's Tunisia. Working paper. 2010.*

<sup>13</sup>Ibid

# 3

## SUPER POWERS ON THE RESCUE

Ben Ali’s strategy began to weaken as the country’s resources dwindled and reports of police brutality and cries for help were heard by the international community. Influential countries such as France and the United States criticized Ben Ali’s practices regarding human rights and the economy. However, critics quickly faded away after the U.S. president George W Bush declared the “War on Terror”. The Tunisian government was among the first of generous countries to offer its support and crack down on “Islamic Jihadists”. With security interests becoming a major priority following the September 11th attacks, the United States turned a blind eye on many Human Rights violations. Europe quickly followed the U.S. after a terror attack in Djerba killed a number of European nationals in 2002. Figure 1 shows the financial support of the international community to Ben Ali’s regime. The moving average draws the decline of international aid during the first years of his presidency (to pressure his policies), then the influx occurs by the end of the 90s, reaching new highs starting from 2003. Decision makers publicly supported Ben Ali and applauded his role in leading the fight against terrorism. Jacques Chirac, the French president, infamously stated during an official visit to Tunisia in late 2003 “the first human right is to eat, to be looked after, to receive an education and to have somewhere to live’ in reference to relative economic success and stability of the country”<sup>14</sup>. Even though Jack Chirac was blamed, criticized and even mocked for his announcement, he did not alter his strategy.

Net official development assistance and official aid received

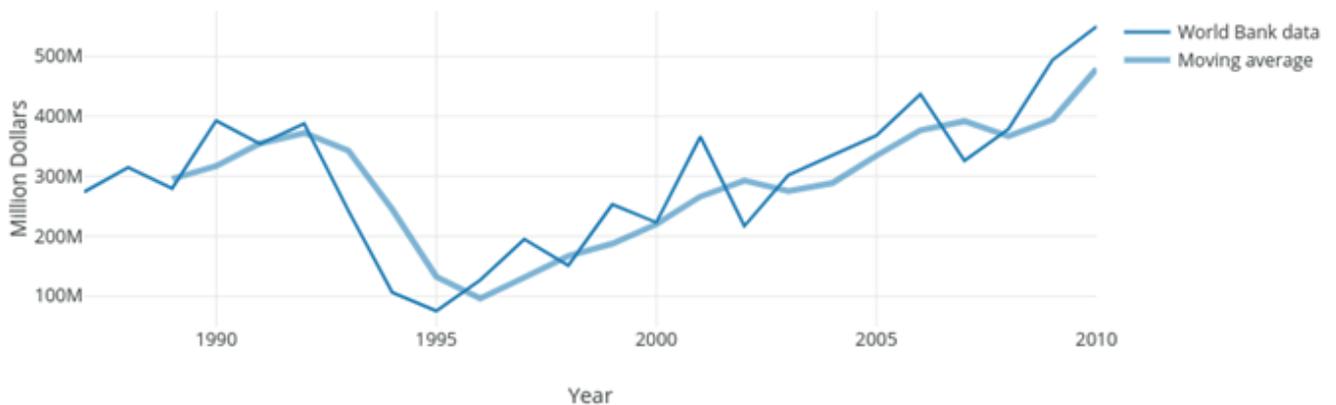


Figure 1: Net Official Development Assistance and Official Aid Received During Ben Ali’s Presidency. Source: World Bank data

<sup>14</sup>Willis, Michael J. *Politics and Power in the Maghreb: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from Independence to the Arab Spring*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

# 4

## THE ECONOMIC REFORMS

With a new-found support from the world super powers, Ben Ali assured the economic reforms he led showed signs of healing and improvement. World Bank Data confirmed a constant, and a positive tendency in most of Tunisia’s economic indicators placing it along with the IMF and the World Economic Forum as “The most competitive economy in Africa”<sup>15</sup>.

Indicators	1990	2000	2010
Primary school enrollment rate (%)	92.4	95.6	98.7
Progression to secondary school (% of primary)	-	75.3	74.5
Ratio of girls-to-boys in primary & secondary education (%)	83.5	97.6	101
Prevalence of malnutrition (Stunting %)	-	16.8	10
Infant mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)	40.3	24.7	14.8
Maternal mortality ratio (per 100,000 live births)	130	84	56
Access to improved water source (%)	81	90	96
Access to improved sanitation facilities (%)	74	81	94
Life expectancy at birth (all/women)	70/72	73/75	75/77

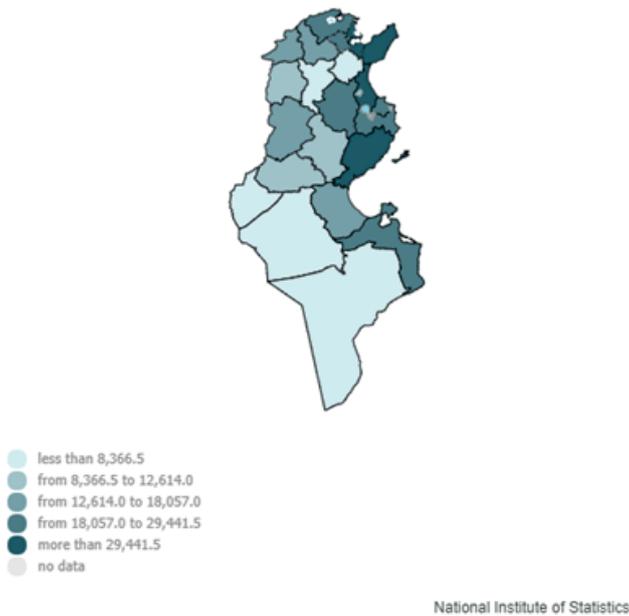
**Table 1: Main Economic Indicators Reported by the World Bank Data During Ben Ali’s Presidency**  
**Source: World Bank Report: The Unfinished Revolution.**

These indicators, however, were a well-crafted misrepresentation of the inner workings of a system proven to be very fragile in the years following the revolution. A report by the World Bank, titled *The Unfinished Revolution*, acknowledges the failure of its organization to spot the weakness of the economy in Tunisia, and explains that “The dearth of economic opportunities in the interior parts of the country fueled even more frustration. While economic conditions improved for all, significant disparity persisted between the coast and the interior regions of the country. Average poverty rates remained four times as high in the interior of the country, compared to the richer coastal areas”<sup>16</sup>. This disparity was driven by multiple factors primarily by the economic policies and the advantages given to the coastal cities in resource allocation and infrastructure to attract more investments.

<sup>15</sup>World Bank. 2014. *The unfinished revolution : bringing opportunity, good jobs and greater wealth to all Tunisians* (English). Washington, DC : World Bank Group.

<sup>16</sup>World Bank. 2014. *The unfinished revolution : bringing opportunity, good jobs and greater wealth to all Tunisians* (English). Washington, DC : World Bank Group.

Evolution of private companies



Geographic representation of the number of private companies in the country by state in 2010.

Source: National Institute of Statistics

In Figure 2 the histogram, in the bottom right corner of the graph, shows a constant increase in the number of private firms in Tunisia. The map, however, clearly shows the disparity in the geographic distribution of the job market. While the coast is flourishing, the internal parts of the country are marginalized and remain unaffected by the economic reforms. This explains why many Tunisians tend to migrate to the suburbs of Tunis or other major cities in search for employment.

## 5

## THE RISE OF TERRORISM

Even though the Islamic political party “Ennahda” had gained vast popular support as “the most credible alternative to the old system”<sup>17</sup> in the wake of the revolution, some radicalized youth did not consider it to be representative of their ideology, nor a representative of their ambition to apply Sharia Law in the country. They leaned more toward extreme groups such as Ansar Chariaa (ISIS) or Okba Bni Nafaa (Al-Qaida). These groups were responsible for recruiting, sending and training young Tunisians to join wars in conflict zones as members of ISIS or Al-Qaida.

By the end of 2013, the Tunisian government led by Ennahda regained control over its borders and mosques along with banning all extremist organizations. The response was brutal; a video transmitted by the terrorist group “Okba Bni Nafaa Brigade” shows a number of terrorists declaring the war on Tunisian soil and threatening to assassinate the president, Beji Caid Essebsi, and Ennahda Leader, Rached Ghanouchi, describing them as infidels.

The number of terrorist attacks in Tunisia increased by the end of 2013, and even with a steady linear decrease of these incidents, as shown in figure 3, they remain relatively high compared to the country’s record. A number of these attacks were largely influential on the Tunisian Economy.

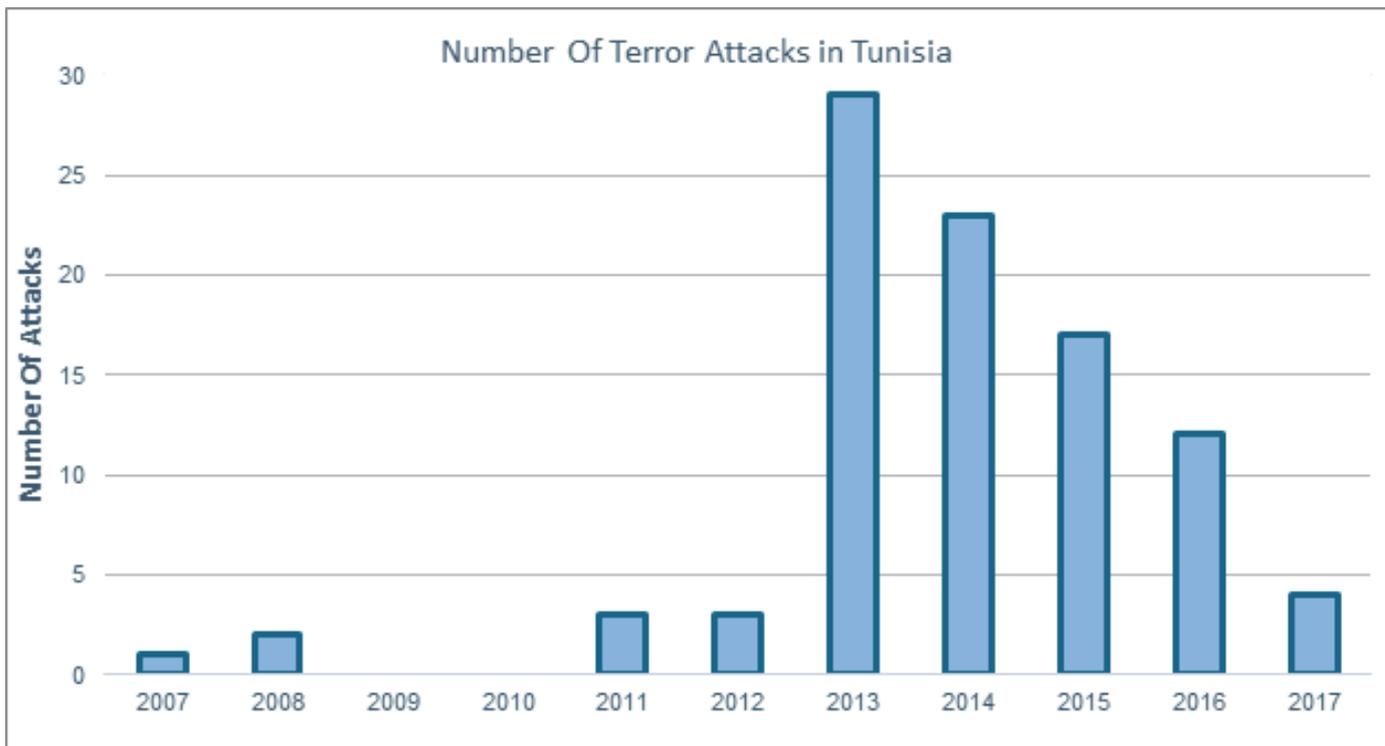


Figure 3: Number of Terror Attack in Tunisia

Source: Global Terrorism Database

<sup>17</sup>Chayes, Sarah. *Thieves of State: Why Corruption Threatens Global Security*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016.

The year 2015 had the most significant attacks, and their impact was especially detrimental to the tourism sector. The number of tourist arrivals plummeted reaching an all-time low as attacks continued to target tourists (Figure 4). To list a few: on March 18th, 2015, an armed attack on the Bardo Museum killed 22 visitors; on June 26th, 2015, an armed assault on tourists at a beach resort in Sousse killed 38 tourists, most of them from Great Britain; Lastly an attack on the bus of presidential security guards in Tunis City killed 12 officers.

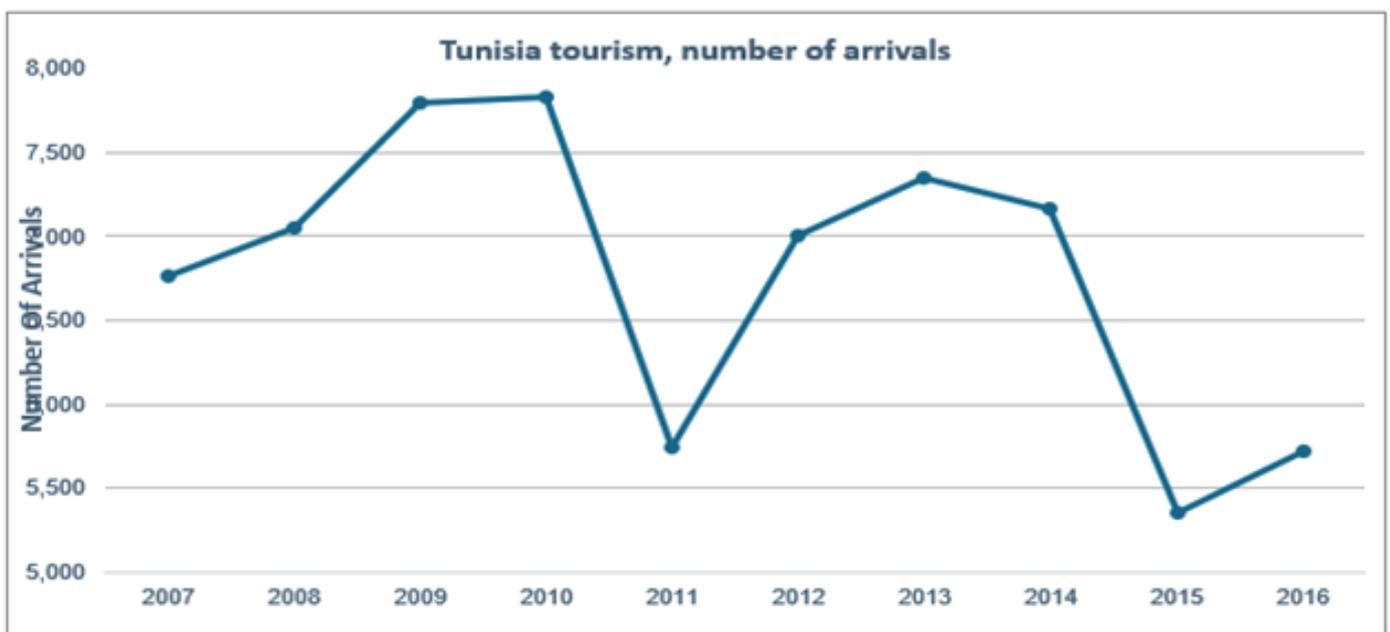


Figure 4: Number of Tourist Arrivals to Tunisia  
 Source: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/ST.INT.ARVL>

## 6

## A MULTIDISCIPLINARY GOVERNMENT STRATEGY

The tipping point in changing the government's strategy toward terrorism was the Battle of Ben Guerdane. In March 2016, after the American attack on a terrorist camp led by Tunisian Foreign Fighters in Sabratha (A Libyan city near the Tunisian border), survivors of this group attempted to seize the southern city of Ben Guerdane. The attempt failed, and 36 terrorists were killed. The danger upgraded from mere attacks for propaganda to an assault on the sovereignty of the government. This attack helped in reestablishing the confidence lost between the residents of Tunisia and its security personnel. It also exposed the great link between trafficking routes, smuggling lords and the terrorist network. A wide range of decisions were taking at all levels. The president extended the "State of Emergency" that gives security forces more freedom to act on terrorism related activities. On October 6th, 2017, Yacer Mosbah, the Ministry of Interior's communication officer, declared that during the first seven months of 2017 the security forces dismantled 828 terror cells and arrested 831 people for crimes related to terrorism<sup>18</sup>. Nevertheless, terrorists adapted to the security strategy of the government and managed to attack on multiple occasions. The paramount event was on October 31st, 2018 when a woman suicide bomber exploded herself in Avenue Habib Bourguiba in Tunis targeting a police check point and injured 20 people. The relative success of this attack proved that the security solution by itself cannot stand on the face of terrorism.

A series of multidisciplinary measures were followed by the Tunisian government based on four pillars: prevention, protection, prosecution and response to attacks. In one hand, internally, the Tunisian Parliament has ratified a new law in 2015 to fight terrorism and money laundering which replaced the 2003 counterterrorism law. Even though some human rights activists were not satisfied with the final version, the law received a world-wide applause for the improvements from the previous law. In another hand, Tunisia engaged with the international community in multiple programs to fight terrorism. To list a few: Tunisia became a member of the G7+6 grouping cooperating in matters of intelligence and security; The Tunisian Civil Society launched programs funded by USAIDS, Great Britain, Germany and Japan (...) to improve the political and cultural engagement of the population; Many governments offered grants and launched interest free projects targeting the internal states of Tunisia to improve its economic status and reduce the gap between regions.

<sup>18</sup>Kapitalis.com. "Sécurité : Bilan De La Lutte Antiterroriste à Fin Juillet 2017." Kapitalis. October 06, 2017.

# CONCLUSION

The economic instability remains a huge problem for the Tunisian government, altogether with the political unrest. This economic failure and the highly charged political scene are negatively impacting the mitigation efforts, especially, that the feeling of frustration, injustice and failure, along with the lack of equal economic opportunities are among the main drivers of youth radicalization. Furthermore, as ISIS and Al-Qaeda are losing lands and battles in Syria and Iraq, many Tunisian foreign fighters have started returning to their home country. Therefore, overcoming these crucial problems will determine the future of Tunisia as an emerging democracy in the MENA region.