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**MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES**

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**TITLE:**

Tunisia and the Arab Spring: Origins, Causes, and Consequences

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE  
OF MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

**AUTHOR:**

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## **Executive Summary**

Title: The Arab Spring and Tunisia: Origins, Causes, and Consequences

Author: Special Agent Ryan McSeveney, United States Department of State (DOS)

Thesis: The origins and causes of the Arab Spring or “Jasmine Revolution” – as it was referred to in Tunisia – are steeped in the country’s long, diverse, and paradoxical history of foreign influence, colonialism, independence, modernity, and plurality as well as the habitual oppression of religious and political expression amid a perpetually beleaguered economy.

Discussion: What were the origins, causes and consequences of the Arab Spring? This thesis will attempt to answer those questions. In particular, the analysis will dissect the large number of Tunisian nationals who departed their country after the revolution to serve as Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and elsewhere. The thesis will also explore US foreign policy toward the region before, during, and after the Arab Spring. The analysis will examine how or if the United States Government (USG) properly employed the instruments of national power to achieve national security and foreign policy objectives during the Arab Spring.

Conclusion: Nearly ten years after the revolutions began in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Tunisia has emerged as the sole democratic state of the Arab Spring. Today, Tunisia is a vibrant and democratic society that emerged from the chaos, violence, and instability that still plagues Syria, Libya, Yemen, and to some extent Egypt. To date, Tunisia has held unfettered elections, installed a pluralistic legislature, and inaugurated President Kais Saied in October 2019. The outcome of the Arab Spring in Tunisia is a tale of successes and failures, as well as ten years of trials and tribulations on a frenetic trajectory to democracy. The country’s diverse, rich, and progressive history of plurality, openness, tolerance, resilience, and perseverance paved the way for the modern state of Tunisia after the Arab Spring. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that the other countries of the MENA will have the same success as Tunisia and its people.

## Outline

### I. Introduction and Thesis

- A. Thesis: The origins and causes of the Arab Spring or “Jasmine Revolution” – as it was referred to in Tunisia – are steeped in Tunisia’s long, diverse, and paradoxical history of foreign influence, colonialism, independence, modernity, and plurality as well as the habitual oppression of religious and political expression amid a perpetually beleaguered economy. On December 17, 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi self-immolated in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia. Nearly ten years after the watershed moment, Tunisia has emerged as the sole democratic state of the Arab Spring. However, the realities of status quo economics, social stagnation, and an ever-growing terrorism threat comingled with slow, if not non-existent political reform after the revolution threaten the only democratic experiment in North Africa.

### II. Background of the Arab Spring

- A. In December 2010, the Arab Spring began in Tunisia. The “Jasmine Revolution” ignited a series of uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) that radically altered the political, social, economic, security, and foreign policy landscape of the region.

### III. A Concise History of Tunisia

- A. Tunisia has been a geographic epicenter and a crossroads of thought, culture, religion, politics, and commerce in an area that is currently referred to as the MENA since biblical times.
- B. The Tunisian – United States (US) bilateral relationship began in the 1770s. The nations have shared a warm but often tumultuous relationship. The Arab Spring precipitated a series of events that challenged the relationship, however, both nations emerged as strong partners on Tunisia’s trajectory toward democracy.

### IV. The Origins and Causes of the Arab Spring in Tunisia

- A. The Paradoxical Presidency: Habib Bourguiba 1956-1987.
  - 1. The revolutionary, prisoner, diplomat, and statesman.
  - 2. Arab nationalism and independence.
  - 3. The establishment of a secular government, the pursuit of modernity, and the promotion of universal rights.
  - 4. The beginning of political and religious oppression in the pursuit of a secular state.
- B. The era of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali 1987-2010.
  - 1. Thievery, extortion, corruption, and the police state.

2. The intensification of counter-terrorism efforts and collaboration with the United States post-9/11. The passage of the 2003 counterterrorism law enabled enhanced electronic surveillance, eavesdropping, and informant networks with the help of the US Government (USG).
3. Disparity of education vs. opportunity and unemployment.
4. The Catalysts: Mohamed Bouazzizi, Tunisian Protesters, and Samir Tarhouni.
5. External Factors: Technology, social media, the leak of US diplomatic cables, and the world economic recession.

## V. The Consequences of the Arab Spring

- A. In 2012, the Islamist party, Ennahdha, won the majority of seats in the first parliamentary elections after the revolution.
- B. The mass emergence of democratic institutions, civil society organizations, and non-governmental organizations.
- C. The interim government granted amnesty to political prisoners including known terrorist leaders.<sup>1</sup>
- D. The Tunisian Security Services were confused, overwhelmed, and fearful of making decisions.
- E. Terrorist Groups capitalized on targets of opportunity from 2012 – 2016. Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia (AST), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), and the Islamic State (IS) conducted coordinated attacks across Tunisia that devastated the economy and resulted in high fatalities/casualties.
- F. The exodus of Tunisians to Foreign Terrorist Organizations in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and elsewhere.
- G. Tunisia succeeded in holding parliamentary and presidential elections in the face of serious obstacles. However, serious economic challenges remain for the country.
- H. Recidivism and radicalization in Tunisia post-Arab Spring: The Government of Tunisia (GOT) prevented roughly 30,000 of its citizens from traveling abroad to fight in foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs).<sup>2</sup> Such a high number presents an internal challenge for the GOT that must be addressed.

## VI. Conclusion

- A. The Fragmentation of the Instruments of National Power and the Aftermath of the Arab Spring.

## I. Introduction

An historical analysis of the origins, causes, and outcomes of the Arab Spring in Tunisia provides invaluable lessons for policy makers in a post-revolutionary Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The origins and causes of the Arab Spring or “Jasmine Revolution” – as it was referred to in Tunisia – are steeped in the country’s long, diverse, and paradoxical history of foreign influence, colonialism, independence, modernity, and plurality as well as the habitual oppression of religious and political expression amid a perpetually beleaguered economy. On December 17, 2010, a fruit vendor named Tarek el-Tayeb Mohamed Bouazizi self-immolated in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia igniting a series of events across the MENA. Nearly ten years after the watershed moment, Tunisia has emerged as the sole democratic state of the Arab Spring. However, the realities of status quo economics, social stagnation, and an ever-growing threat of radicalization and terrorism comingled with slow, if not non-existent political reform threaten the only democratic experiment in the MENA.

Such factors significantly contributed to the deterioration of the internal security situation in Tunisia from 2012 to 2016 and the mass exodus of Tunisian nationals to foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and elsewhere. Per capita, Tunisia is one of the largest exporters of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) in the world. Although the exact number is unknown to scholars and government officials, estimates ranges from 2,900 to 6,000 Tunisian nationals since 2011.<sup>3</sup> Many scholars have attempted to answer the question of “why” so many Tunisian nationals have joined FTOs throughout the MENA.<sup>4</sup> While the answers to the question are complex and multi-faceted, the motivations of most Tunisian FTFs are socioeconomic, religious, and political in nature. As scholars grapple to better understand the motivations of Tunisians and other foreign nationals who join FTOs, there is another issue at hand. Roughly

30,000 Tunisian nationals attempted to fight abroad but were prevented from doing so by Tunisian authorities and approximately 800 Tunisians have returned to Tunisia after fighting in Syria, Iraq, and Libya for FTOs.<sup>5</sup> As Tunisia continues down the path of democracy, its leaders will have to contend with many of its citizens who espouse radical interpretations of Islam, strive to fight for terrorist organizations, and seek to derail the democratic experiment through the use of terrorism and violence. Simultaneously, the Government of Tunisia (GOT) will have to respect the democratic ideals that the Arab Spring gave back to its citizens – freedom of speech, expression, organization, and assembly – while maintaining its national security.

## II. Background of the Arab Spring

In December 2010, the Arab Spring began in Tunisia. The Arab Spring ignited a series of uprisings across the MENA that radically altered the political, social, economic, security, and foreign policy landscape of the region. In Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt rampant protests, political upheaval, and revolutionary figures ousted long-standing authoritarian leaders Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Muammar al-Gaddafi, and Hosni Mubarak. Emboldened by their Arab brethren, protesters also took to the streets in Morocco, Syria, the Sudan, and Yemen. Tunisian President Ben Ali fled Tunisia in January 2011 bound for Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. In February 2011, President Barack Obama spoke directly to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, the Egyptian people, and the world during an internationally televised broadcast. President Obama said the transition of power in Egypt "must be meaningful, it must be peaceful, and it must begin now."<sup>6</sup> Shortly thereafter, Hosni Mubarak resigned the presidency after nearly thirty years in office. On October 20, 2011, Libyan leader Muammar al-Gaddafi met a much different demise near Sirte, Libya. A mob tortured, sodomized, and killed al-Gaddafi as onlookers videotaped the horrific

scene. In less than one year, the authoritarian regimes that ruled Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt for nearly three decades were over.

Initially, American and other Western leaders applauded the revolutions and supported free, transparent, and unfettered elections as well as the peaceful transition of power in a region that was historically void of a democracy. However, the optimism was short-lived as the security situation in the MENA quickly deteriorated after the fall of the authoritarian leaders. Tunisia slipped into chaos when peaceful protests turned violent and the country plunged even further into bedlam as a host of interim governments struggled to maintain order and the continuity of government from 2011 to 2014. As the months passed, American and other Western diplomats found themselves in the crosshairs of formidable terrorist groups that capitalized on the political ambiguity of the revolutions, impressionable populations, targets of opportunity, and the command-and-control shortcomings of the once menacing state security services in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt.

In September 2012, terrorist groups Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia (AST), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), and the Islamic State group (IS) launched coordinated and nearly simultaneous protests and attacks against American and other foreign diplomatic missions in Benghazi, Libya; Tunis, Tunisia; Cairo, Egypt; Sana'a, Yemen; and Khartoum, Sudan.<sup>7</sup> The attack in Benghazi, Libya claimed the lives of four Americans; US Ambassador Christopher Stevens, Sean Smith, Tyrone Woods, and Glen Doherty.<sup>8</sup> The attacks were a watershed in the evolution of the Arab Spring where the momentum shifted to terrorist groups who used violence and political assassinations to destabilize the region. For the United States Government (USG), the attacks could not have come at a more inopportune time. Approximately six weeks after the catastrophic attacks across the region, President Barack

Obama squared off against Mitt Romney for the presidency of the United States. Whereas President Obama's administration lauded the revolutions and embraced the opportunity of a free and democratic MENA, the reality of the situation permeated the American electorate as American diplomats lay dead in Libya. The political conundrum of the Arab Spring coupled with the unpreparedness of American intelligence and law enforcement to portend the revolutions and to safeguard its diplomatic missions dominated the foreign policy debate. However, the US and Tunisia persevered and expanded on a fruitful, although often tumultuous relationship that began over 200 years ago. An understanding of Tunisia's history as well as the bilateral relationship between the two nations is of paramount importance in the analysis of pre- and post-Arab Spring Tunisia.

### III. A Concise History of Tunisia

Tunisia has been a geographic epicenter and a crossroads of thought, culture, religion, politics, and commerce in the MENA since biblical times. The capital, Tunis, is located on the north eastern coast of the country on the Mediterranean Sea in close proximity to Europe. Tunis was once known as Carthage, the capital of the Carthaginian Empire in the first millennium B.C. Its resources and proximity to Europe made it a maritime center for trade and commerce. In the centuries that followed, the people of Tunisia experienced multiple invasions and occupations. From 146 B.C. to 1956 A.D., the Romans, Ottomans, French, and Germans all invaded, occupied, or conquered Tunisia. The impacts of foreign influence including language, culture, religion, norms, and history contributed to a unique, diverse, and multi-cultural Tunisian citizenry.

The bilateral relationship between the US and Tunisia can be traced back to 1797 when Tunisian authorities recognized American independence and accepted the appointment of an

American consular official in Tunis, Joseph Donaldson.<sup>9</sup> In 1803, President Thomas Jefferson dispatched a contingent of United States Marines to the region to counter the piracy efforts of the Barbary states (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya) that seized or impressed US sailors and vessels. Consequently, the First Barbary War ensued, and the United States Marine Corps stormed the beaches of Tripoli resulting in the defeat of the Pasha of Tripoli, Yusuf Qaramanli.<sup>10</sup> The fabled battle is described in the Marine Corps hymn, “From the Halls of Montezuma, to the shores of Tripoli.” Thereafter, the US and Tunisia signed a “Treaty of Peace and Friendship” that defined the relationship over the next two centuries. However, from 1881 to 1956 the Republic of France claimed Tunisia as its protectorate for political, commercial and economic purposes, thus hindering Tunisia’s ability to conduct its own foreign policy. Tunisia engaged in covert and surreptitious activity as well as political negotiations to gain its independence from France in 1956. Revolutionary figures emerged who defied the French colonialists and founded a free and democratic society.<sup>11</sup>

In 1956, the US recognized Tunisia’s independence and opened an Embassy the same year.<sup>12</sup> Since its independence from France, Tunisia and the US have maintained a symbiotic relationship based on military, political, counterterrorism, economic, and commercial interests. Beginning in 2011, the Arab Spring precipitated a series of events that challenged the relationship, however, both nations emerged as strong partners on Tunisia’s trajectory toward democracy. On September 14, 2012, AST conducted a coordinated and violent attack against the US Embassy in Tunisia. The attack resulted in the evacuation of all non-essential US diplomats, the deaths of several protestors, and a significant rift in US-Tunisian relations. On May 29, 2013, the US Embassy in Tunisia issued a press release that criticized the GOT and the Tunisian judiciary that handed down light sentences to the perpetrators of the attack.<sup>13</sup> Notwithstanding

the attack against the US mission in Tunis, the US continued to support Tunisia throughout its transition to democracy. According to the US Department of State (DOS), the USG has provided an estimated \$1.4 billion in foreign assistance to Tunisia in the form of economic, security, and military aid since the 2011 revolution.<sup>14</sup>

### III. The Origins and Causes of the Arab Spring

Habib Bourguiba was the President of Tunisia from 1956 to 1987. The first president of an independent Republic of Tunisia, Bourguiba ruled the nation for over thirty years until his Prime Minister, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali assumed power in 1987. In his lifetime, Bourguiba also bore the title of statesman, diplomat, revolutionary, and prisoner. Prior to World War II, as an attorney, Bourguiba gained notoriety as a defiant revolutionary who antagonized the French colonial power and rallied the Tunisian people for a free state. The French government took notice of Bourguiba's activities and his influence in North Africa, or more commonly referred to as the "Maghreb," which translates to "the West" in Arabic. Consequently, the French government imprisoned Bourguiba for sedition for eleven years.<sup>15</sup> After his release from exile and imprisonment in France, Bourguiba led Tunisia to independence in 1956. Bourguiba was also an instrumental figure in Algeria's costly and bloody war for independence from France that lasted from 1954 to 1962. Together, Tunisia and Algeria ended French colonialism in the Maghreb.

Once in office, Bourguiba promoted progressive ideals, secularism, and modernity for the Tunisian Republic. His Tunisia became a model of progress, equality, and diversity throughout the world. Bourguiba also advanced women's rights in an era and a part of the world where such progress was not necessarily welcomed. In 1957, President Bourguiba enacted laws that allowed women to vote, participate in elections, and hold public office. The women of Tunisia were the

first to have such rights in the Arab world.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Bourguiba improved women's access to education, revised hereditary rights, expanded employment opportunities, and allowed Tunisian women to use birth control. Collectively, Tunisian women had more rights than any other female population in the Arab world under President Bourguiba.<sup>17</sup>

Bourguiba also promoted sound, disciplined, and effective fiscal policies in his pursuit of a modern Tunisia. Bourguiba opened the country to foreign investment, marketed Tunisia a tourism destination, and he exported the nation's natural resources to partners in the European Union. In 1969, Bourguiba negotiated an agreement with the European Union whereby Tunisia became an "associate member" of The European Economic Community.<sup>18</sup> Bourguiba's implementation of sound economic policies resulted in 4 - 5% Gross Domestic Product (GDP) annual increases in the early decades of his administration.<sup>19</sup> Bourguiba also proved to be a skilled statesman and diplomat during a tumultuous time in world politics. During his tenure, Bourguiba guided Tunisia through the Cold War, the Arab-Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, and the passage of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 573 that condemned the Israeli aerial attack on the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) headquarters in Tunis that left 47 people dead.<sup>20</sup>

Habib Bourguiba's leadership, diplomacy, and unstinting quest for independence earned him the titles "the Supreme Warrior" and the "Father of Tunisia." However, not all Tunisian citizens agreed with Bourguiba's efforts to push the nascent nation towards modernity in the early years of the republic.<sup>21</sup> Historically, Tunisia was and remains until present day, a rather socially conservative society. Bourguiba's efforts to advance an agenda of such ubiquitous and rapid social change could not have been accomplished without the oppression of Tunisia's conservative religious and political factions. In a 2019 publication, scholar Haim Malka noted

the historical, religious, political, and cultural significance of Tunisia's Zaytouna Mosque, and Bourguiba's efforts to marginalize the religious establishment:

For centuries Zaytouna was more than a place of worship, it was one of the most important universities in the Mediterranean world. It produced famed scholars, trained generations of government bureaucrats, and oversaw educational branches across the country. Zaytouna represented a distinctly Tunisian religious-cultural-heritage that many Tunisians have described as "traditional Tunisian Islam," or simply "Zaytouni." It was open to the cultural influences of its milieu at the crossroads of Africa, the Middle East, and Europe while promoting orthodox Sunni jurisprudence. Habib Bourguiba... dismantled Zaytouna's educational units, nationalized Islamic endowments and property used to support the ulema, co-opted the ulema, and took numerous steps to secure state control over religious institutions and discourse.<sup>22</sup>

Bourguiba's efforts to suppress, limit, and control the religious activities of Tunisia's religious establishment nurtured the seeds of oppression during his presidency. Bourguiba employed and strengthened the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Interior to monitor activities in mosques, schools, businesses, labor unions, and his own government. The Ministries of Religious Affairs and the Interior commenced an era that limited and impeded free speech, expression, organization, and assembly of those who were not aligned with his goal of a secular and modern Tunisia. In the years that followed, the empowerment of these ministries led to the emergence of an advanced state security apparatus that struck fear in many Tunisians.<sup>23</sup>

In the late 1970s and 1980s, a series of international and domestic issues influenced Bourguiba's ability to govern Tunisia. In 1979, the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan galvanized and emboldened Islamists in Arab countries. In Tunisia, the Mouvement de la tendance islamique (The Movement of Islamic Tendency or MTI) and a precursor of Ennahdha, emerged as a formidable adversary to Bourguiba's control. In 1984, Tunisians took to the streets to protest Bourguiba's economic policies. In what became known as the "bread riots," Bourguiba's security services responded with violence, killing an estimated 150 protestors.<sup>24</sup> By 1986, Tunisia's economy was in a death spiral and the country had accumulated \$5 billion in foreign debt.<sup>25</sup> In 1987, the MTI conducted a series of attacks in

Sousse and Monastir that targeted the tourism industry. Bourguiba ordered the mass execution of the perpetrators who conducted the attacks and he imprisoned fifty-six members of the group, some of whom received life sentences for their role in the attacks.<sup>26</sup> Contemporaneously, Tunisia's economy contracted resulting in high unemployment, soaring food prices, and a lack of social mobility for Tunisia's well-educated citizens.

The paradoxical presidency of Habib Bourguiba end on November 7, 1987. Under the direction of Prime Minister Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, a team of medical professionals deemed Bourguiba medically and psychologically unfit to maintain the office of the presidency. The event was largely viewed as a bloodless coup d'état. Ben Ali quickly assimilated into the presidency and he moved even faster to minimize Bourguiba's legacy as the "Father of Tunisia." Ben Ali removed statues, national monuments, and photographs that bore Bourguiba's picture throughout the country.<sup>27</sup> Once again, Bourguiba went into exile. Only this time, he was exiled to his town of origin, Monastir, where Ben Ali's Ministry of Interior kept a close eye on him. Whereas Bourguiba is remembered as a revolutionary, a statesman, and a diplomat in the eyes of history, his successor is cast in a much less flattering light.

Ben Ali was the president of Tunisia from 1987 to 2011. He headed a kleptocratic government that employed various methods of thievery, corruption, extortion, and intimidation to enrich himself, his family, and his inner circle at the expense of the Tunisian people. In 1992, Ben Ali married Leila Trabelsi, a hairdresser with no formal education. Trabelsi and her extended family quickly capitalized on her newly found love for the president, as well as his power, business connections, and the enforcers of his regime, the Ministry of Interior. In the years that followed, their greed, corruption, and nepotism significantly contributed to the

beginning of the Arab Spring. After the revolution, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) commissioned a study that found Tunisia's investment code:

Was abused to enrich the ruling family. In the aftermath of the Tunisian revolution, assets of the Ben Ali clan were confiscated. The confiscation process...involved 114 individuals, including Ben Ali himself, his relatives and his in-laws, and concerned the period from 1987 until the outbreak of the revolution. The seized assets included some 550 properties, 48 boats and yachts, 40 stock portfolios, 367 bank accounts, and approximately 400 enterprises. The confiscation commission estimates that the total value of these assets combined is approximately 13 billion USD, or more than one-quarter of Tunisian GDP in 2011.<sup>28</sup>

The USG turned a blind eye to the rampant corruption and the lack of democracy in Tunisia prior to the revolution. Although successive US administrations were aware of the issues, Tunisia cooperated with the US on a host of foreign policy, military, intelligence, and law enforcement matters that were vital to US interests in the region. In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks in New York, Washington, D.C., and Shanksville, Pennsylvania, the relationship between the two nations improved due in large part to counterterrorism cooperation and Ben Ali's support for the US-led invasion of Iraq that toppled Saddam Hussein. Moreover, in April 2002, al-Qaeda attacked an historic synagogue in Djerba, Tunisia. The island and the synagogue were home to Tunisia's ancestral Jews who inhabited the island for centuries. The attack killed 19 people. The same individual who orchestrated the 9/11 attacks in the US, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, coordinated the attack in Djerba.<sup>29</sup>

The audacious attack demonstrated al-Qaeda's ability to strike under the nose of Ben Ali's formidable Ministry of Interior. Consequently, the Ben Ali administration passed enhanced legislation in 2003 that bolstered the ability of the state security apparatus to conduct electronic surveillance, eavesdropping, money laundering investigations, and human intelligence collection within Tunisia's borders and abroad at an unprecedented level. Human rights activists criticized the law, and many argued that it prevented due process of law, the indefinite detention of citizens without evidence, and gross human rights abuses. For Ben Ali, the law was yet another tool to

target political opponents, accumulate wealth, and further insulate his country from the scrutiny of human rights watch dog organizations. In February 2004, Ben Ali visited President George W. Bush at the White House. An official press release noted the cooperation of the two nations in the War on Terrorism and Ben Ali's support for the war in Iraq. President Bush also urged Ben Ali for a freer, transparent, and democratic Tunisia in front of the cameras, but that's as far as it went.<sup>30</sup> The meeting of the heads of state was a mere publicity stunt to grandstand the US's friendly relationship with an ally in the MENA.

From 2004 to 2011, a vast array of external factors contributed to the beginning of the Arab Spring and the demise of Ben Ali. The global economic recession of 2008 severely impacted Tunisia's economy, and once again the unemployment rate increased exponentially across the country. From 2008 to 2011, the unemployment rate for those over age twenty-five averaged approximately 15% and for those citizens ages eighteen to twenty-five the rate was as high as 30%.<sup>31</sup> In 2010, a US Army private leaked several hundred thousand classified Department of Defense (DOD) and Department of State (DOS) cables that WikiLeaks, a controversial group of computer hackers, published on their website much to the dismay of the US national security establishment. The episode was one of the worst security breaches in US history. Media outlets published classified cables authored by Robert Godec who served as the US Ambassador to Tunisia from 2007 to 2010. Although the leak of Godec's classified cables was an embarrassment to the USG and an insult to the Ben Ali clan, the Ambassador outlined a prescient analysis of the situation in Tunisia. In a cable titled, *"Troubled Tunisia: What Should We Do?"* Ambassador Godec lamented against the Ben Ali regime:

Tunisia is a police state, with little freedom of expression or association, and serious human rights problems. Many Tunisians are frustrated by the lack of political freedom and angered by First Family corruption, high unemployment and regional inequities.

Extremism poses a continuing threat. Compounding the problems, the GOT brooks no advice or criticism, whether domestic or international. Instead, it seeks to impose ever greater control, often using the police. The result: Tunisia is troubled and our relations are too.<sup>32</sup>

Although the impact of Godec's postulation is debatable, the revelations came as no surprise to the Tunisian populace. However, the rapid dissemination of the information through various social media platforms fanned the flames of revolution in Tunisia. It also shed light to the world on the pervasive corruption that plagued Tunisia. Furthermore, the use of Facebook and other social media web-based platforms allowed the Tunisian people to organize, communicate, and disseminate information at lightning speed. In late 2010, Ben Ali and his in-laws or more aptly, "the clan" as they were often referred, hung on to power by a mere thread.

Mohammed Bouazizi was an educated fruit vendor who hailed from one of Tunisia's many impoverished cities, Sidi Bouzid, located in the interior of the country approximately 250 kilometers south of Tunis. Historically, Tunisia's coastal cities Tunis, Hammamet, Sousse, Sfax, and Monastir shared an economic advantage over the cities of the interior part of the country. The coastal cities are flush with European tourists who visit the white sand beaches and the all-inclusive resorts with great frequency throughout the year. Furthermore, Tunis and Sfax are the seats of government, banking, and finance. In many other interior cities, like Sidi Bouzid, unemployment and poverty rates are substantially higher than those of the coastal cities. In November 2010, Tunisian police officers cited Bouazizi for selling fruit without a proper license. However, Bouazizi continued to sell fruit to make ends meet for his widowed mother and siblings. When a female police officer slapped and spit on Mr. Bouazizi several weeks later, he had reached his limit. Mr. Bouazizi doused himself in gasoline, light a match, and self-immolated in front of the government building in Sidi Bouzid. Bouazizi suffered severe burns and paramedics transported him to the local hospital where he was in critical condition.

Bouazizi's brother captured the horrific scene on his iPhone and the video quickly went viral shortly thereafter.

Before Bouazizi's death on January 5, 2011, President Ben Ali visited him at the Ben Arous regional hospital near Tunis. The president's publicity stunt and his efforts to calm the nation as large-scale demonstrations intensified throughout the country were futile. Massive protests continued, the "Jasmine Revolution" began, and Ben Ali's Ministry of Interior used lethal force to quell the protests. According to the Congressional Research Service (CRS), Ben Ali's security services killed an estimated 338 people and the tide turned in the favor of Tunisian protesters when Ben Ali's military had refused orders to use violence against unarmed protesters.<sup>33</sup> It is highly unlikely that President Ben Ali could have portended his demise or exodus to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia as he starred at a bandaged Bouazizi who barely clung to life.

Amid the revolution, another catalyst emerged whose foresight, bravery, and decision-making sealed Ben Ali's fate. Colonel-Major Samir Tarhouni quickly accelerated through the ranks of the Tunisian National Police. In 2007, at just 34 years old, Tarhouni led a team of counterterrorism police officers that dismantled a terrorist cell in Soliman, Tunisia and likely prevented an imminent attack. Ben Ali's Ministry of Interior took note of his leadership as well as his tactical and operational prowess. He was selected to command the country's preeminent counter-terrorism unit, *La brigade antiterrorism* (BAT) from 2007–2011. Tarhouni and the BAT were charged with hostage negotiation, investigations, terrorist interdiction, and the apprehension of wanted jihadists throughout the country.

Shortly after Bouazizi's death, Tarhouni made a unilateral decision that caused uncertainty, fear, and confusion for President Ben Ali, the Presidential Guard, and Leila Trabelsi. Tarhouni acted on a tip that he had received from his wife who worked as an air traffic controller

at the Tunis-Carthage International Airport. Tarhouni apprehended and imprisoned Trabelsi's extended family at the airport as they attempted to flee the country with vast sums of bulk cash and other valuables that they had stolen from the Tunisian National Treasury.<sup>34</sup> Fearing that he and his wife were in danger, Ben Ali consulted with the head of his security, Ali Seriati. Seriati advised Ben Ali that he could no longer guarantee his safety. Shortly thereafter, Ben Ali's flight took off from Tunis-Carthage Airport bound for his indefinite exile in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. It was the last time Ben Ali was in Tunisia. In October 2019, Ben Ali died at the age 89 in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

## V. The Consequences of the Arab Spring

*"We must also confront the fact that poverty is producing terrorism, a new phenomenon for Tunisia. The scourge of terrorism should have been addressed more decisively by Ennahda. Instead the Islamist government allowed in radical foreign preachers who lured thousands of vulnerable young people to join al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq."*<sup>35</sup>

- Tunisian President Béji Caïd Essebsi, 2014

The Tunisian people can pride themselves on the removal of an authoritarian regime as well as their resilience, perseverance, and commitment to a free and democratic society in the immediate aftermath of the Jasmine Revolution. However, a power vacuum ensued that consumed the nation and the battle for Tunisia's future commenced. A variety of political parties that were outlawed under Ben Ali emerged from obscurity and political activists established an array of newly found political parties that represented the diverse demographics of Tunisian society. Moreover, an abundance of democratic institutions, civil society organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) rejoiced in the new-found freedoms that the revolution had provided. The entities became an integral part of the democratic process as well as a counterbalance to the political juggernaut that consumed post-revolutionary Tunisia.

According to estimates, roughly 7,000 to 10,000 new political and social organizations registered with the interim government.<sup>36</sup>

Béji Caid Essebsi, a former government official in the Bourguiba administration and a secularist, assumed the role of interim Prime Minister in 2011. In the same year, Essebsi established guidelines for national elections. Insofar as the future of Tunisia rested in the hands of its population, the Jasmine Revolution was also subjected to external factors that impacted the country's internal politics, foreign relations, and security atmosphere. While Western nations like the United Kingdom (UK), France, and the US provided foreign assistance to promote pro-democratic reforms and the peaceful transition of power; other non-state actors including terrorist groups (many of whom the DOS had officially designated as terrorist organizations) had ulterior motives. In short, the groups attempted to destabilize the fragile nation to install a more pro-Islamist form of government and to undo Tunisia's long and proud history of tolerance and modernity. The effects of these non-state actors markedly influenced Tunisia from 2011 to 2016, resulting in catastrophic terrorist attacks, devastating economic consequences, and the near derailment of the once peaceful revolution.<sup>37</sup>

In October 2011, the Ennahdha Party (translated in Arabic to "the Renaissance" or more commonly referred to in English as the "Islamist Party") won the majority of seats in the first parliamentary elections after the revolution. The party formed a "Troika" government that constituted a coalition with two other secular parties.<sup>38</sup> The MTI was the precursor to Ennahdha, and the majority of its leaders had either served in exile or in prison under the Ben Ali administration. In the 1990s, a violent civil war erupted in neighboring Algeria. The Ben Ali government targeted the leaders of Ennahdha en masse to insulate their power, prevent acts of terrorism and sabotage, and above all, to prevent a civil war on Tunisian soil. Nearly 20,000

members of Ennahda were tried for acts of sedition, attempted assassinations, and instigating coups against the regime.<sup>39</sup>

In 1992, the leader of Ennahdha, Rachid Ghannouchi, fled the country after he was sentenced to a life sentence in absentia for his involvement in the organization and perpetration of crimes against the state.<sup>40</sup> Following the revolution, Ghannouchi returned to Tunisia from exile, and he was soon at the helm of power. Islamists, jihadi-Salafists, and former members of the MTI seized on the power vacuum and manipulated a younger population of impressionable Tunisians. The party launched wide-spread protests and conducted sit-ins at local universities to promote more radical Islamic values. The Ennahdha party gained significant traction in the pursuit of a less tolerant, modern, Tunisia.

Contemporaneously, AST, AQIM, JN, and IS capitalized on targets of opportunity from 2011 to 2014. The terrorist organizations planned, funded, and executed complex attacks across Tunisia that devastated an already fledgling economy. Complicating matters further, the Tunisian security services were plagued by command-and-control shortcomings, and frequent resignations at the senior levels of the Ministry of Interior. In short, the Tunisian Security Services were confused, overwhelmed, and fearful of making decisions. Furthermore, the interim government passed a general amnesty law in 2011 that freed many individuals from prison who were known terrorists or had affiliations with sophisticated terrorist organizations.<sup>41</sup> Many of those freed by the amnesty law had languished in prison for decades during the Ben Ali regime and used the security instability of the revolution as an opportunity to exact revenge against former foes.

Ben Omar Ben Hassine, also known by his nom de guerre Abu Ayyad al-Tunisi, was an Islamic militant who fought in the Afghan war against the Soviet Union in the 1980s and served

a lengthy prison sentence while Ben Ali was in power. Upon his release from prison after the revolution, Ben Hassine headed AST and his group conducted a series of attacks and assassinations that tore Tunisian society apart. In 2013, AST and its affiliates assassinated two opposition leaders in the suburbs of Tunis. Chokri Belaid was killed in front of his residence on February 6, 2013 and Mohamed Brahmi met the same fate on July 25, 2013.<sup>42</sup> The audacious and cunning assassinations of two liberal politicians in broad day light put Tunisia on edge. Massive protests ensued and many Tunisians criticized the Ennahdha party of complicity in the assassinations and leniency on security matters. The assassinations coupled with other attacks against Tunisian security services also disrupted the economy and the Tunisian public's optimism in the post-revolution era decreased exponentially. In 2014, Pew Research conducted a survey in Tunisia that revealed unsettling results. The research found that 81% of Tunisians were dissatisfied with the progress in the country after the revolution.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, Tunisia's GDP began a steadily steep decline from 2011 to 2014 and the unemployment rate among Tunisians of all ages soared to all-time highs (reference Annex 1 for further information).

The nation was on the brink of civil war when a quartet of Tunisian civil society organizations negotiated an agreement whereby Ennahda relinquished its control to a technocrat government to reestablish order.<sup>44</sup> In 2015, the Noble Prize Committee awarded the peace prize to the "Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet for its decisive contribution to the building of a pluralistic democracy in Tunisia in the wake of the Jasmine Revolution of 2011."<sup>45</sup> According to the Norwegian Noble Prize Committee, The Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet is comprised of "the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT, Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail), the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts (UTICA, Union Tunisienne de l'Industrie, du Commerce et de l'Artisanat), the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH, La

Ligue Tunisienne pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme), and the Tunisian Order of Lawyers (Ordre National des Avocats de Tunisie).”<sup>46</sup>

Although the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet was able to bring the country back from the brink of civil war, the persistent lack of opportunity in post-Ben Ali Tunisia and the perpetuity of internal conflicts precipitated a disenfranchised and dispirited population. Consequently, Tunisians joined FTOs in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and elsewhere en masse. Scholar Aaron Zelin proposed several explanations for the massive flow of Tunisians to FTOs in the aftermath of the revolution.<sup>47</sup> Zelin’s comprehensive and thorough explanation for the FTF phenomenon in Tunisia is congruent with Ted Robert Gurr’s *Relative Deprivation Theory*, outlined in his landmark book *Why Men Rebel*. Gurr contends that, “perceived socio-economic and political injustices” and “failure to achieve aspired goals triggers frustration that makes violence more likely.”<sup>48</sup> These theories can easily be applied to explain the intrastate conflict in Tunisia during the Arab Spring and the largest number of FTFs per capita.

In summation, Tunisia and its population of well-educated, multi-lingual, and ambitious citizens encountered the same types of grievances in post-revolutionary Tunisia as they had under Ben Ali’s kleptocracy, i.e., corruption, nepotism, and thievery. The optimism and hope of a better future including improved access to employment, healthcare, education, the political-process, and the like quickly evaporated in the aftermath of the Jasmine Revolution. The economic status-quo remained and utter disappointment with the lack of progress in post-revolutionary Tunisia set in. Whereas the interim governments of Tunisia could not provide opportunities for its citizens, FTO’s could. FTOs enticed Tunisians across socio-economic lines including men and women with promises of adventure, opportunity, status, and companionship in the global fight against the same types of authoritarian regimes that had robbed Tunisia’s

citizens of wealth for generations. It was a call to arms by AQIM, AST, JN, and IS.

Unfortunately, many disenfranchised Tunisians took the bait.

The massive flow of Tunisian nationals to FTOs can also be explained as a matter of geographic practicality and logistical ease. Unlike some of the other MENA countries, Tunisians can move with relative ease between the highly porous Tunisian-Libyan border. The deteriorated security situation and the inability of the Libyan government to monitor or respond to the influx of foreigners has nurtured a fertile ground for terrorist training facilities. Two areas have proved to be a transit point for Tunisians to flow into Libya – the cities of Ben Guerdane and Ras Jedir. Once in Libya, Tunisians can easily assimilate into Libyan society and obtain the necessary training to wage terrorism attacks against civilian installations back in Tunisia or abroad. Moreover, the modern freeways in and around the border region have served as a highly convenient logistical hub with little, if any immigration controls. Illicit materials are easily procured and transited across the border.

The GOT merits credit for their efforts to curb the number of Tunisians who have attempted to travel abroad as FTFs and for their cooperation with the international community to combat terrorism. In February 2019, the head of Tunisia’s Counterterrorism Commission reported that the country had prevented 17,000 Tunisians from traveling to war zones.<sup>49</sup> In the same year, the country took additional preventative measures to address the issues of domestic terrorism, recruitment, and radicalization. First, the Tunisian parliament passed legislation to establish a “domestic counter-terrorism finance capability” that will provide investigators and prosecutors with the necessary tools to monitor terrorist financing, freeze assets, and designate individuals and organizations as terrorists.<sup>50</sup> Second, Tunisia and the US have collaborated on judicial sector reform, law enforcement training, and penal reforms.<sup>51</sup> In fiscal year 2019, the

USG provided a total of \$191 million in foreign assistance to Tunisia of which \$19.1 million was earmarked for these endeavors.<sup>52</sup> However, the threat of radicalization remains a constant threat and the GOT will have to balance its security concerns with the promises of the revolution for a more free, transparent, open, and democratic state. In the future, Tunisians will have to grapple with the right mixture of civil liberties and security so as not to make the same mistakes as their predecessors.

## VI. Conclusion: The Fragmentation of the Instruments of National Power and the Aftermath of the Arab Spring

During the Arab Spring, American policy makers failed to properly employ the instruments of national power. The National Defense Strategy (NDS), the USMC Commandant's Planning Guidance (CPG), and the DOS Joint Strategic Plan (JSP) emphasize the criticality of the instruments of national power (Diplomatic, Informational, Military, and Economic or DIME) to achieve national security and foreign policy objectives.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, the documents underscore the interagency dynamic and the whole-of-government approach as the bedrock of American policy to address transnational issues for the greater good of the American people, international partners, and mankind. On the contrary, the American instruments of national power were grossly fragmented and disjointed during the Arab Spring and its aftermath.

While the DOS bore the bulk of responsibility, blame, and criticism for the security failures that led to the attacks and killings of Americans at US diplomatic missions in 2012 and the rampant instability that still plagues the MENA today, the informational component of DIME or "I" also failed. The Intelligence Community (IC) should also bear the brunt of responsibility for the informational failure. US Army General (ret.) Stanley McChystal noted that the USG

could not have portended the events of the Arab Spring in what he described as the present day “data driven” and “data rich” operating environments.<sup>54</sup> His theory of unpredictability was common place and a frequent excuse in DOS, DOD, and the IC after the Arab Spring. However, one only needs to look at the slew of leaked diplomatic cables to contradict the argument. In particular, the former US Ambassador to Tunisia Robert Godec sounded the alarm bells to an impending revolution in Tunisia as early as 2009. Ambassador Godec’s cable (referenced above) is just one of many examples that are known to the general public. McChrystal is correct in the sense that the IC and the USG cannot predict geopolitical events with perfect certainty. However, the USG can predict the manner in which it employs the instruments of national power to address security issues abroad.

The national security professionals who are responsible for the “I” component of DIME not only failed to predict the revolutions that ousted Mubarak, Qadhafi, Ben Ali and destabilized Yemen and Syria, but also the violent terrorist attacks against the US Embassies in Benghazi, Khartoum, Sana’a, and Tunis the week of September 11, 2012. The effects of these security failures dealt a devastating blow to US diplomacy that persists until present day. For example, the US Embassies in Yemen, Libya, and Syria are closed, a signal of our lack of engagement with key foreign interlocutors and the neutering of the “D” component in the DIME approach in a region that is vital to US interests. Attacks on diplomatic missions, military installations, and USG personnel are an unfortunate reality of international diplomacy. Four noteworthy examples include the seizure of the US Embassy and the hostage-taking of Americans in Tehran, Iran in 1979; the suicide bombing of the US Embassy in Beirut, Lebanon in 1983; the bombing of the Khobar Towers facility in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia in 1995; and the destruction of the US Embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar-es-Salam, Tanzania in 1998. In each episode, the USG

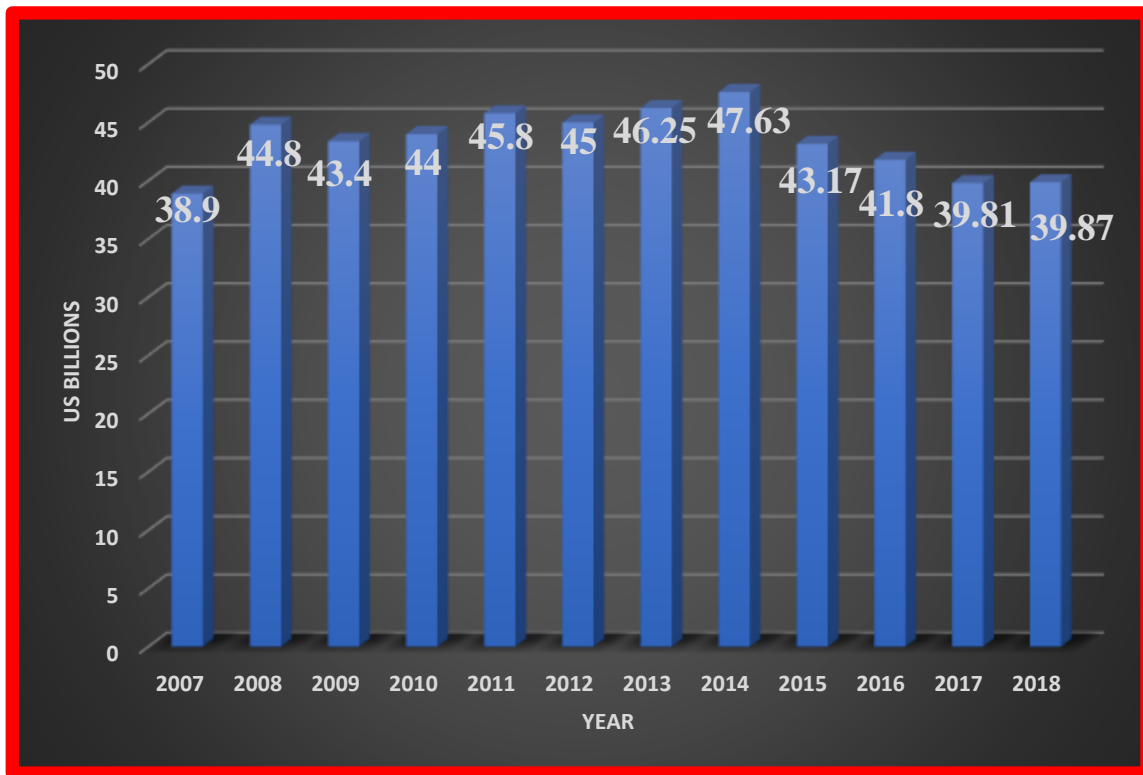
employed the instruments of national power to collect evidence and bring federal indictments against the perpetrators and the co-conspirators of each attack. Some of these fugitives remain at-large until present day. However, the law enforcement community of the USG has gone to great lengths to apprehend the fugitives. The terrorists who committed these atrocious attacks remain on the DOS's Rewards for Justice Program and the FBI's Ten Most Wanted Terrorist Lists.<sup>55</sup>

The failure of the USG to implement a swift and appropriate response to the attacks against US diplomatic missions across the MENA the week of September 11, 2012 suggests that senior US policy makers were either poorly advised by the IC or they were unwilling to accept the blame for such inadequate failures to safeguard Americans just eight weeks before the 2012 US presidential elections. The US has used a combination of covert action and judicial proceedings to bring justice to one of the conspirators of the Benghazi attack, however, the US largely placed the burden of proving culpability for the attacks on foreign governments who themselves were overwhelmed by terrorism and revolutions. The result was a lack of justice.

Ultimately, the revolutions of the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, and elsewhere belong to the citizenries of each nation, and the patriots who rose up in defiance of authoritarian regimes. The citizens bear the burden of their revolutions and they are responsible for the outcomes of the once hopeful and promising revolutions. As of 2020, Tunisia is a vibrant and democratic society that emerged from the chaos, violence, and instability that still plagues Syria, Libya, Yemen, and to some extent Egypt. To date, Tunisia has held unfettered elections, installed a pluralistic legislature, and inaugurated President Kais Saied in October 2019. The outcome of the Arab Spring in Tunisia is a tale of successes and failures, as well as ten years of trials and tribulations on a frenetic trajectory to democracy. Furthermore, the process of

democracy in Tunisia is one of patience, virtue, and flexibility. As scholar Safwan Marsi noted, Tunisia is an “Arab Anomaly.”<sup>56</sup> The country’s diverse, rich, and progressive history of plurality, openness, tolerance, resilience, and perseverance paved the way for the modern state of Tunisia after the Jasmine Revolution. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that the other countries of the MENA will have the same success as Tunisia and its people.

### Annex 1 – Tunisian Gross Domestic Product (GDP) 2007 - 2018



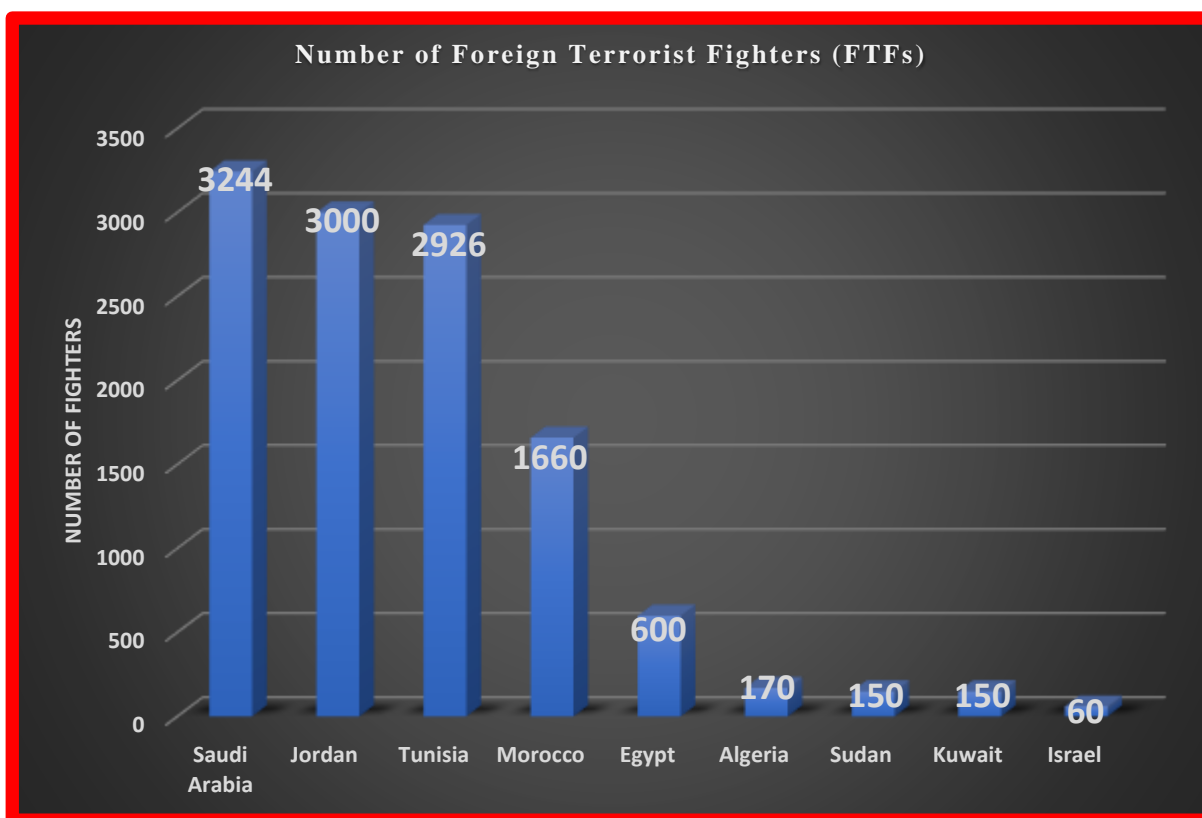
Source: The World Bank. <https://data.worldbank.org/country/tunisia?view=chart>

**Annex 2: Number of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) per capita from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)**

Country	Total Population	Number of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs)
Algeria	42,972,878	170
Egypt	104,124,440	600
Israel	8,675,475	60
Jordan	10,820, 644	3000
Kuwait	2,993,706	150
Libya	6,890,535	600
Sudan	45,561,556	150
Tunisia	11,721,177	2926
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA)	34,173,498	3244

Sources: Barret, Richard. “Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees.” *The Soufan Group*, October 2017. <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017-v3.pdf>. *The CIA World Fact Book*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/> and Alexis Arieff, The Congressional Research Service, *Tunisia: In Brief*. Washington, DC: November 2019, 3, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RS/RS21666/62>.

**Annex 3: Graphical Depiction of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)**



Sources: Barret, Richard. “Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees.” *The Soufan Group*, October 2017. <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017-v3.pdf>. *The CIA World Fact Book*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/> and Alexis Arieff, The Congressional Research Service, *Tunisia: In Brief*. Washington, DC: November 2019, 3, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RS/RS21666/62>.

## Endnotes

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<sup>3</sup>Zelin, “Tunisian Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria,” *The Washington Institute*, 2018, 2, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/tunisian-foreign-fighters-in-iraq-and-syria>.

<sup>4</sup>Since the Arab Spring began in 2010, a host of scholars and counterterrorism professionals have studied the phenomenon of Tunisian and other nationals as Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs). Scholar Aaron Zelin of the Washington Institute authored the article noted in the endnote above and the book, *Your Sons Are at Your Service: Tunisia's Missionaries of Jihad*. Richard Barrett of the Soufan Group, a for-profit security firm, published an article titled, “Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees.” Barret’s article provides a comprehensive report on the number of FTFs who have traveled to Iraq, Syria, Libya and elsewhere. The basis of Barret’s findings is based primary government sources, media reports, interviews, and open source materials. Scholars Haim Malka and Margo Balboni of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) also analyzed the FTFs of Tunisia in their article titled, “Tunisia: Radicalism Abroad and at Home.”

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