

Responding to Sousse: Tunisia Needs Sustainable Economic Development Not a Security Crackdown

It is time for the EU to support initiatives tackling the economic stagnation, unreformed security system and marginalization of peripheries that feed radicalism and violence.

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While Tunisia was widely praised for the progress it has made since the 2011 revolution, two recent terrorist attacks have reminded the world of the challenges that the country faces. Both the attack in the Bardo museum on 18 March 2015 and the shooting in Sousse on 26 June 2015 were committed by young Tunisians with links to Libyan jihadist groups and targeted mainly foreign tourists. The Tunisian government, led by the secularist party Nidaa Tounes, has responded by [cracking down](#) on radical Islamist networks and adopting a new counter-terrorism law that has been criticised by [human rights groups](#) as granting too many unchecked powers to the authorities. The nascent Tunisian democracy thus has to navigate an increasingly difficult road marked by internal challenges in the form of [economic](#) and [demographic](#) pressures, [militant Islamist opposition](#) and stalling reforms. Instability in the whole [North Africa and the Sahel](#) only exacerbate internal issues. It will be very difficult for the Tunisian government to overcome all these challenges alone and it is time for the EU to help preserve the stability of the country.

Analysis: Economic pressures and marginalisation of peripheries

The recent attacks are especially troubling for the Tunisian economy. The tourist industry [provides about 14 per cent of the Tunisian GDP](#) and employs nearly 12 per cent of the working population (i.e. about 400 000 people). In total, 1 million Tunisians – out of a population of about 11 million – rely on tourism directly or indirectly. Furthermore, the tourist sector was [heavily indebted](#) even before the attacks, and a further fall in revenues would be likely to send destructive shockwaves over the rest of the economy. It [has been already projected](#) that the growth of the Tunisian economy, which has also been hit hard by [a sharp decrease in trade with Libya](#), will fall below 2 per cent. This would be a far cry [from the 7 – 8 per cent](#) growth which is needed to give the country enough jobs to tackle its unemployment rate, which is currently reaching 15 percent. The number of unemployed persons is even higher – [almost 40 per cent](#) – among Tunisian youth, who make up 40 per cent of the population.

The economic situation is especially worrying in the rural interior of the country, where unemployment is generally almost [double the national average](#). The interior, along with the impoverished neighbourhoods of the biggest cities, also harbours the main centers of the hardline Salafist movement, some members of which have close connections to jihadist networks. While poverty and joblessness alone cannot fully explain the appeal of militant Islamic radicalism, the overall frustration stemming from a poor – and now worsening – economic situation combined with feelings of being left behind by the coastal elites [gives jihadist recruiters](#) plenty to work with. It is no coincidence that two out of the three direct perpetrators of the recent terrorist attacks were originally from the Tunisian hinterland. The conflict in neighboring Libya also [presents an ideal opportunity](#) for military training and provides opportunities for militant groups to finance themselves through smuggling and other criminal activities.

However, the feelings of frustration with the post-revolutionary development also stem from sources other than economic marginalisation, including Tunisian citizens' [everyday experience with the state institutions](#). As a [recent report](#) by the International Crisis Group has pointed out, the internal security forces are viewed as too politicised, fragmented and weak to be able to truly provide security. At the same time, particularly among peripheral and marginalised communities, the security forces are perceived as abusive and corrupt, which feeds alienation and negative perception of the state, particularly [the police](#). The recently approved counter-terrorism law is [does not tackle](#) these issues, but, rather, reinforces the heavy-handed securitising approach that feeds resentment on the periphery and makes the state less, rather than more, responsive to the needs of the population.

Outlook: Strengthening the Economy and Reforming the Security Sector

Preserving the future stability of Tunisia is essential not only because it is a [close Western ally](#) in a volatile and strategically important region, but also because of the huge symbolic value of the Tunisian revolution and the subsequent democratic transition. This should also define the means of assistance provided by Tunisia's partners. These should not be guided only by security rationales, but should also support the development of inclusive democratic institutions.

The primary focus should be given to the economic recovery, particularly after the recent attacks and their impact on the tourist industry. The continuation of the economic stagnation could lead to increased polarisation between the beneficiaries of the current system and the rest of the society, which would not bring greater stability. While the main responsibility for reforming the economic system, which is [plagued by red tape and corruption](#), lies with the Tunisian authorities, their international partners should support the Tunisian economy by opening the access to their markets for certain products and directing the development assistance and investments to the peripheral areas with the highest levels of unemployment. As the World Bank has argued in its [detailed report on the Tunisian economy](#), the country has a huge potential for growth beyond the tourism and low-skilled industries, but it has so far failed to tap into it.

The second pillar of external assistance should be in the security sector. However, it should go beyond the arms and equipment supplies to the Tunisian military to also stress the need for deep reform, de-politisation and professionalization of internal security forces. The EU should support the implementation of reforms and encourage the ending of practices, which alienate already-marginalised parts of the population. While this requires long-term effort, Tunisia should not overwhelmingly prioritise a short-term security crackdown over the long-term development and democratisation of the country.

Recommendations:

- ◆ **The EU** should urgently explore the possibilities for granting market access to wider range of products produced in Tunisia to support the performance of the Tunisian economy.
- ◆ **The EU and its member states** should support the development of Tunisian peripheral regions through directed development projects and aid to encourage the inclusive development in the country.
- ◆ **The EU and its member states** along with other international partners of Tunisia should assist the Tunisian armed forces not only with gaining necessary weapons and equipment, but also with training in counterinsurgency and counter-terrorist operations along with capacity building projects directed in particular at the police and other internal security forces. Tunisia's partners should stress the need for deep security sector reform and professionalisation of police practices so that there would be a greater respect for human rights and an improvement in Tunisian citizens' experiences of dealing with the state.

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