

## Tunisia



One man was behind the horrific terrorist attack in Nice, France, was Mohamed Lahouaiej Bouhlel, a 31-year-old deliveryman and petty criminal. Bouhlel, who was killed by police at the scene, was a French citizen. But the detail that many terrorism experts immediately zeroed in on was his country of origin: Tunisia. That's right: The country that is often hailed as "the success story of the Arab Spring" because it has actually managed to stick with democracy since the downfall of its dictator in 2011.

That Bouhel is Tunisian once again raises the question: Why is liberal Tunisia, of all places, producing so many terrorists? The experts have long since determined that Tunisia is a disproportionate source of recruits for radical Islamist causes.

Despite the country's relatively small population of 11 million, Tunisians are conspicuously over-represented among the fighters of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. According to recent estimates, 7,000 Tunisians have joined the cause - more than any other country, including much larger ones such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt.



The attack by home-grown terrorists struck fear and disgust into the rest of the population - and by murdering tourists, they took deadly aim at Tunisia's key money-earner. However, their brazen assault on the Parliament and museum complex in the heart of the capital also revealed their basic weakness. Tunisia's reservoir of murderous extremists is too small to risk an uprising - though sadly it's big enough for atrocities - which means the country's fledgling democracy might be strengthened if it can face down the enemy within.

There are also, according to numerous reports, thousands of Tunisians training and fighting for jihad in Libya, Tunisia's next-door neighbor, which has a strong Islamic State presence.

Indeed, the Tunisian authorities have boasted that they've prevented some 12,000 other potential jihadists from leaving the country for Syria since 2013 - a statistic hardly as comforting as they apparently would like it to be.

But Tunisian jihadists haven't only been active overseas. Over the past few years they've staged several high-profile attacks on their own country. Since 2013, terrorists have assassinated secular politicians, targeted popular tourist sites (virtually shutting down an industry on which much of the economy depends), and engaged in myriad clashes with the police.



In March, Libyan-based jihadists, presumably of Tunisian origin, staged a full-scale assault on the Tunisian border town of Ben Guerdane. Though local security forces coped pretty effectively with the attack, ultimately winning the battle, it was a worrying sign of the jihadists' ambitions and aggressiveness. All of this, needless to say, stands in

rather stark contrast to Tunisia's remarkable progress at establishing democratic institutions. The country has held several rounds of free and fair elections, and it now boasts a vibrant range of free media and civil society groups. Some Tunisians are saying that the collapse of the dictatorship in the 2011 revolution and the establishment of democratic institutions that followed had given jihadists new freedom to organize, travel, and share information. Religious radicals, it was pointed out, can now openly watch satellite broadcasts of hard-line clerics streamed in from the Gulf.

Others, including some government officials, worry that the security apparatus was fatally weakened by post-revolutionary reforms - though that argument seems somewhat diluted by the government's competent response to the Ben Guerdane attacks in the spring. Still others mentioned the failure of democratically elected leaders to address the country's persistent economic malaise. Though the official unemployment rate is around 15 percent, it's estimated to be double that for young people, who see correspondingly few opportunities for bettering their lives.

The country's first post-independence leader, President Habib Bourguiba, who took power in 1956, was a staunch admirer of Turkey's legendary Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. Like Ataturk, he was a radical secularist who imposed a modernizing agenda, including women's rights and Western-style education, while ruthlessly suppressing the forces of traditional religion.

The problem, of course, is that pushing traditional religion to the side doesn't mean that everyone is going to agree. Aggressive modernization almost always incites a backlash - and so it has gone in Tunisia, where those with an inclination to traditional Islam have often ended up feeling marginalized in their own country.

A very similar dynamic took hold in Turkey, under Ataturk and his heirs. There, though, a gradual opening of the political landscape in the late 20th century allowed Islamists to channel their ambitions into electoral politics, embodied by the rise of current President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Bourguiba and his successor, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, allowed for no such expression of alternative opinions; the organizers of Tunisia's leading Islamist party, Ennahdha, returned from exile only after the 2011 revolution. Other Tunisians who gravitated to Islamist politics sought more radical outlets. Some joined al Qaeda, while others assumed prominent roles in the war in Iraq.

It was one of those veterans of the Iraqi jihad, a man named Boubaker al-Hakim, who later played a key role in organizing the attacks on the French satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo. Like Bouhlel, the attacker in Nice, he was also a French citizen - a reflection of the darker side of Tunisians' long and intimate obsession with their former colonizer. For elite Tunisians, France is the country of their aspirations. For less privileged Tunisian migrants, stuck in menial jobs and relegated to the fringes of society, France is the place that constantly reminds them of their second-class status, symbolized by its institutionalized contempt for their "backward" religion.

In the case of such people, it's easy to see how recourse to radical Islam is as much a matter of identity politics as it is of religion. Indeed, judging by the reports coming in from Bouhlel's acquaintances and neighbors, he appears to have been motivated as much by a generalized sense of frustration and rage as by ideology.

Because the victims of the attack were mainly foreigners it is easy to think of Tunisia's terrorist problem as international - certainly, the few thousand Tunisians who have gone to fight jihad in Syria or Iraq are part of an international terrorist movement.

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