

CRS Insights

Terrorist Attack in Tunis: Implications

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The March 18 terrorist attack in Tunis has focused global attention on Tunisia and its struggle to pursue democracy amid security threats and economic hardship. The attack killed at least 20 foreign tourists visiting the national Bardo Museum, along with a Tunisian police officer. Two assailants were also killed; [a third is reportedly at large](#). It appears to have been the deadliest terrorist attack by Islamist extremists in Tunisia since the country's 2011 popular uprising.

U.S. policymakers, including Members of Congress, may examine the attack's potential implications as they consider international responses to security threats in North Africa, and as Congress weighs the Administration's proposals to increase bilateral aid and defense cooperation in FY2016.

Tunisia is the "Arab Spring" country that has been most successful in transitioning to democratic rule. It adopted a new constitution in early 2014 and held national elections late last year. [President Obama has stated](#) that Tunisia's political transition can "inspire" people in the Arab world and beyond, and his February 2015 [National Security Strategy](#) states that "We will work with Tunisia to further progress on building democratic institutions and strengthening its economy." At the same time, [some observers have expressed concern](#) that Tunisia's newly elected government could be tempted to use security threats as a justification to crack down on Islamists or other political rivals, or resurrect repressive counterterrorism practices associated with past regimes. Tunisians from across the political spectrum have condemned the Bardo attack, but at times, disagreements over how best to approach security threats have contributed to [tensions](#) between Islamist and secularist political actors.

Evolving Threat

The Bardo attack represents a significant escalation in the perceived terrorist threat in Tunisia, although it follows a number of smaller-scale security incidents involving violent Islamist extremist groups in recent years (see CRS Report RS21666, [Political Transition in Tunisia](#)). In 2013, [two prominent secularist politicians were assassinated](#). In 2012, the U.S. Embassy in Tunis was targeted in an assault that breached the outer wall of the compound. As of January 2015, the [State Department warned U.S. visitors](#) to Tunisia that "attacks in tourist areas remain a possibility" and that "U.S. citizens should exercise caution when frequenting public venues that are visited by large numbers of foreigners, such as hotels, shopping centers, tourist sites and restaurants." (There were no known U.S. citizens among those killed or injured in the attack and the U.S. Embassy remains open, [according to the State Department](#).)

Several Tunisia-based extremist groups have emerged since 2011, including Ansar al Sharia in Tunisia (AST)—which U.S. and Tunisian officials blamed for the 2012 Embassy attack—and a cell known as the Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade (alt: Katibat Uqba Ibn Nafi), which is [reportedly affiliated](#) with Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), an Algerian-led regional network. The Tunisian military has led operations to counter terrorist cells near the northwestern border with Algeria. Insecurity along the Libyan border and in the remote desert south is also of concern. Tunisia is also reportedly a [top source of foreign fighters](#) to Syria and Iraq, and authorities have expressed concern that fighters could return to conduct attacks at home. Apparent competition between Al Qaeda and the Islamic State (also known as ISIS or ISIL) over recruits and attention in North Africa could conceivably spur rival efforts to carry out large-scale attacks.

Islamic State/Libya Link

On March 19, the Islamic State released an audio recording claiming responsibility for the Bardo attack.

Okba Ibn Nafaa also released a statement praising the attack. [Tunisian officials had indicated](#) that they had not established any formal links between the attackers and any particular armed group, but stated that the two identified gunmen, both Tunisian, had traveled to Libya in December for [weapons training](#). Some [news reports have suggested](#) that the training was conducted in the Libyan city of Derna, which has served as a base for both Ansar al Sharia in Libya and for a separate group loyal to the Islamic State. [Some observers noted a possible link](#) between the Bardo attack and the recent killing of Ahmed Rouissi, reportedly an Islamic State field commander in Libya, during clashes among Libyan factions in Sirte. Rouissi was wanted in Tunisia for his earlier links to AST and his reported involvement in the 2013 assassinations.

Potential Issues for Congress

The Bardo attack has highlighted ongoing debates within Tunisia between proponents of a more hardline approach to security and those who advocate prioritizing reforms to Tunisia's post-authoritarian security apparatus. For U.S. policymakers, the attack comes amid discussion of the appropriate scale and balance of U.S. aid and defense cooperation. Since 2011, the United States has substantially increased its security assistance to Tunisia, both to enhance Tunisia's counterterrorism capacity and to encourage security sector reform. (For detail, see CRS Report RS21666, [Political Transition in Tunisia](#).) U.S. officials also have emphasized efforts to boost bilateral trade and investment, while [calling on Tunisians](#) to embark on "essential" economic reforms. The Bardo attack, which appears to have been at least partly aimed at scuttling Tunisia's economic growth by targeting the vital tourism sector, may render such efforts more challenging.

Congress has shaped U.S. policy toward Tunisia through its authorization and appropriation of foreign aid, its [review of arms sales](#) and security cooperation activities, and its oversight. U.S. engagement and aid have also been affected by debates within Congress over the size of the federal budget, the global scale of U.S. foreign aid, and U.S. policy toward countries affected by the "Arab Spring." The State Department has requested \$134 million in bilateral aid for Tunisia in its FY2016 Congressional Budget Justification, more than double the FY2015 request, of which about 60% would be for security assistance. As Congress examines the Administration's proposal, Members may consider questions such as:

- To what degree are Tunisia-based Islamist extremist groups a threat to U.S. national security interests?
- What factors explain domestic extremism and participation by Tunisians in transnational terrorist groups?
- To what extent should the United States seek to pair counterterrorism assistance with support for greater legislative and public oversight of the security sector?