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Security Assistance Monitor

BEYOND PERFORMANCE:

LESSONS LEARNED FROM U.S. SECURITY ASSISTANCE TO TUNISIA

CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL POLICY
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INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the long, drawn-out wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, American policymakers' growing aversion to military operations involving the large-scale deployment of United States (U.S.) troops has precipitated a rise in programs that train, advise, and equip foreign security forces to conduct counterinsurgency and counterterrorism missions. In the two decades since 9/11, these programs have expanded rapidly in scope, cost, and global reach under the assumption that the enhanced capabilities of foreign partners would benefit U.S. national security interests and minimize the need for direct U.S. intervention. But after more than $170 billion spent in the last twenty years through Department of Defense (DOD)-funded programs to build up foreign militaries, the track record for Security Sector Assistance (SSA) programming is uneven at best.

The varying degrees of success and deficiency of these programs raises the question of what variables are contributing to positive SSA outcomes, and what lessons learned can inform ongoing and future SSA initiatives. The following case study looks at U.S. SSA activities in Tunisia, a country that is generally considered a model case for SSA amongst U.S. government agencies and U.S. Africa Command, especially compared to similar programs in the wider Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

This report identifies a number of positive elements in the current U.S.-Tunisia framework, particularly at the tactical and resource allocation levels. Commendable practices from both Tunisian and U.S. officials have substantially improved the country's security environment, both in terms of terrorist activity and insurgent militancy. However, the report also finds that the relative success of this nascent security partnership is due in large part to unique conditions in Tunisia, many of which do not factor into current SSA thinking, leaving a blindspot in the U.S.'s understanding of its security relationship with the country. The current paradigm for evaluating security cooperation isolates socio-political considerations from security aid analysis, and thus poses a serious challenge to ensuring SSA aligns with broader strategic objects, rather than working at cross-purposes to them. With regard to Tunisia, the U.S.'s lack of a holistic approach in understanding the impact of security cooperation creates unseen vulnerabilities in the country's democratic transformation, many of which are, ironically, obscured by successes in the country's security services.

Accordingly, this report takes a holistic look at Tunisia's unique civil-military and political history in its broad assessment of Washington's security partnership with Tunis. By mapping out these factors, this project aims to illustrate conditions and decisions that aid in the development of strong, healthy, and mutually beneficial security partnerships.

This report identifies several key lessons learned from the U.S.-Tunisia SSA partnership that

helped shape both success and shortcomings of the relationship. They include the following:

- Security assistance impacts the political landscape of a recipient country, especially in environments undergoing governing transformations, socio-political changes, or unrest.
- Civilian-military relations and the historical relationship between the security sector and national governance are determining factors in the efficacy or SSA and in the risks associated with assistance.
- Robust frameworks for SSA, with political buy-in up and down chains of command from both patron and recipient, are essential for aligning interests, working towards sequenced long-term objectives, and providing a foundation for Assessment, Monitoring, and Evaluation (AM&E).
- Fresh starts are valuable. In the inception phase of security partnerships, both patron and recipient have an opportunity to make important structural, strategic, and political decisions that will shape the trajectory of the relationship, including a spirit of collaboration, candor, and political buy-in.

Taken together, in the Tunisian context, the report finds that the prioritization of performance in the U.S.-Tunisian security partnership has undercut efforts towards security sector reform. While a highly disciplined and tactically thoughtful U.S. security assistance framework has contributed to laudable improvements in the capabilities in Tunisian security services, current evaluative paradigms that silo assistance from its potential political impact in environments where security governance, civil-military affairs, and political reform are in flux leaves a significant gap in the current U.S. understanding of its security partnership with Tunis. Accordingly, the report recommends that any evaluative framework for U.S. security assistance should systematically assess the political implications of aid, with a special attention to the realms of security governance and political reform.

HISTORY OF THE U.S.-TUNISIA SECURITY PARTNERSHIP

Analyzing the impact, efficacy, and consequences of U.S. security assistance in any given context requires a comprehensive understanding of the unique security environment in which aid is being deployed, both in terms of security threats as well as the security architecture that is meant to absorb U.S. assistance. The unique history and development of Tunisia's security sector provides some insights into the evolution of its SSA partnership with Washington.

The Bourguiba and Ben Ali Eras

Tunisia's security sector stands apart in the MENA region. By and large, Arab states emerging from foreign rule did so at the hands of strong military institutions, which were often the arbiters of independence and dominated the political economies of the post-colonial period. Indeed, most sectors of society expected that military institutions would dominate the power structures of newly independent states for the sake of jumpstarting administrative and economic development.[1]

Tunisia's military, on the other hand, was formed after the country's independence from France in 1956, and, thus, was bereft of the independence credentials that were sources of power to the armed forces of other Arab states. Similarly, Tunisia faced no substantial threat from its neighbors, and adopted a neutral foreign policy, limiting the need for a robust national defense establishment. Moreover, Tunisia's first President, Habib Bourguiba, was wary of the armed forces – coups and countercoups led by military figures across the region made a strong impression on the new President, who saw the military as a unique threat to his state-party system.[2] As a result, Bourguiba's government kept its military institutionally small, under-resourced, and away from the centers of power. As noted by Derek Lutterbeck, one of the foremost experts on the Tunisian armed forces, "there is arguably no Arab country in which the identity of the armed forces has been more clearly distinct from the regime in power."[3]

Instead, the coercive apparatus of the Tunisian state became housed squarely in the Ministry of Interior (MOI), which dwarfed the Ministry of Defense (MOD) in political clout and material resources.[4] The phenomenon grew even more pronounced following the "soft coup" of Zine Abedine Ben Ali in 1987.[5] Under Ben Ali's rule, the internal intelligence and security services saw a massive expansion in their political power and in their material fortunes. As described by author Stephen Erdle, "the mukhabarat [internal intelligence and security force] has grown so much in size and clout that they have virtually become a 'system of their own' or a 'state within the state', which is increasingly imposing its rules and logic on public life and decision making."[6]

The military, on the other hand, became progressively more marginalized. And though small-scale militancy inside the country, simmering regional conflict, and Tunisian participation in United Nations peace keeping and humanitarian missions necessitated consistent, if moderate, modernization and professionalization of the military, officers remained underpaid, under-equipped and deprived of political power.[7]

This dynamic not only defined Tunisia's security architecture, but also had a profound effect on the relationships of the armed forces and the internal security services to the regime,

their conception of their own organizational interests, and the public perceptions of both institutions. The MOI embodied the police state that leered over the shoulders of Tunisians, while the military was seen as distinct from the regime's repression.

On the eve of Tunisia's revolution, the country's security structures reflected those of a police state – dominated by an internal security apparatus preoccupied with the preservation of the regime rather than the protection of citizens. The MOD - small, underfunded, and isolated from the political machinations of the state - had nonetheless built a reputation as a professional disciplined force, one step removed from the ills of the Ben Ali government.[8]

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the orientation of Tunisia's security sector towards regime preservation, the rise of transnational security threats across the MENA region drew increasing levels of U.S. interest, particularly after 9/11 and ensured some degree of security cooperation between Tunisia and Washington.

U.S. security aid was relatively limited in the years prior to the Tunisian revolution. Between FY2001 and FY2010, Tunisia was the 12th largest U.S. security aid recipient in the MENA region out of 19 countries, just behind Oman and Morocco. In that period, the $141 million it received from the U.S. paled in comparison to countries like Jordan ($3.3 billion), Lebanon ($483 million), and Yemen ($337 million), to say nothing of Israel ($25 billion), Iraq ($21 billion), and Egypt ($13 billion).[9]

The vast majority of that assistance to Tunisia came in the form of $88 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) – a State Department grant program providing funds for countries to purchase U.S. defense articles and services. Notably, in 2008 and 2009, assistance also included a total of $18 million in the DoD's Section 1206 Train and Equip program, which authorizes the DoD to support the national security forces of foreign countries to conduct counterterrorism and other such activities. Significantly, the International Military Education Training Program provided an important military-to-military exchange between Washington and Tunis's senior officer corps, contributing to strong human connections that would prove useful in the years after the revolution. In addition, Tunisia was a beneficiary of the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership program, a regional post-9/11 initiative developed out of concern for the Sahel's vulnerability to terrorist activity.[10]

Notwithstanding the significant portion of senior Tunisian military officers who came to the U.S. for training, during this period, the bulk of U.S. engagement continued to be with Tunisia's internal security services, which were seen as being at the forefront for the country's counterterror efforts.[11] Indeed, the notion that the MOI was central to inuring the country against terrorism threats was often used as an excuse to justify more broadly repressive policies.[12] In reality, the threat posed by armed groups to Tunisia's security was minimal. Be-

yond a handful of clashes between security services and armed groups, Tunisia was victim to just a single terrorist attack between 1991 and the fall of Ben Ali in 2011.[13]

Table 1. U.S. Security Assistance to Tunisia Between FY2001-FY2010[14]

Security Aid Program	Total
Foreign Military Financing	$88,170,000
Section 1206 Train and Equip Authority	$18,283,786
International Military Education and Training	$16,358,000
Emergency Drawdowns	$10,000,000
Service Academies	$2,559,094
Excess Defense Articles	$1,390,800
Regional Centers for Security Studies	$1,289,304
Combating Terrorism Fellowship Program	$1,021,007
Non-Security Assistance - Unified Command	$933,372
Section 1004 Counter-Drug Assistance	$833,000
Nonproliferation, Anti-Terrorism, Demining, and Related Programs	$699,000
Aviation Leadership Program	$191,807
Professional Military Education Exchanges	$105,223
Enhanced International Peacekeeping Capabilities	$18,292
Grand Total	**$141,852,685**

The Revolution and a New Partnership

Tunisia's 2011 revolution was a turning point for the country's security sector and for its security relationship with Washington. Tunisia went from being an afterthought to a central pillar of U.S. Middle East policy, and the country in the region where the wave of democratic reforms seemed most likely to hold firm. In this context, the immediate post-Ben Ali era would be defined, in large part, by a re-negotiation of the country's security sector landscape, taking place amidst a flood of international security assistance aimed, simultaneously, at demonstrating political support for the country's transition to democracy, encouraging Security Sector Reform (SSR), and addressing a growing security vacuum.

The favorable mythology around the Tunisian military's role in shepherding the ouster of

Ben Ali, including widespread belief in the ultimately false assertion that chief of staff of the land army, General Rachid Ammar, refused Ben Ali's orders to fire on protesters, allowed the MOD to assume a central role in the immediate aftermath of Tunisia's Arab spring.[15] The MOI, on the other hand, seen as a vestige of the ousted regime, was, for the first time, sidelined in favor of the armed forces.[16] The jockeying of position over the management of the security sector took center stage, and decision-making authority over matters of national security became a political football in the early days of Tunisia's transition to democracy. By 2012, however, responsibility over security affairs had become divided amongst various centers of power in the new Tunisian government, diminishing the role of personalities in security governance in favor of institutional control.[17]

At the same time, a rush from the international community to encourage and support Tunisia's fragile transition overwhelmed the country and inundated an already reeling security establishment. International donors all wanted to be seen as contributing to Tunisia's nascent success, especially in the security sector. The U.S. was no different, and as one expert put it, in the rush to show support, the U.S. government eschewed a more deliberate effort to assess the needs of Tunisians, and simply sought to "do more of everything," scaling up existing programming without any robust assessment of the implications of changing circumstances. [18]

Tunisia, the catalyst of the Arab Spring, was seen as the essential beachhead for political reform in the Arab world, and as other efforts towards democratization in the region stumbled, shoring up Tunisia's transition, both in terms of addressing a rising security challenges (described in detail below) and demonstrating political support, became all the more central to U.S. policymakers.[19] Between FY2008 and FY2010, U.S. security aid to Tunisia averaged $21 million per year. That average more than doubled in the first three years after the revolution, to $45 million annually.[20] Although FMF still took up the largest share of U.S. security assistance in that time frame ($67 million), it was the State Department's International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) program that saw the most substantial spike in funding, jumping from zero to $31 million between FY2011 and FY2013. The assistance focused on a variety of issues, including police and justice sector reform, reflecting a broader conviction on the part of both Tunisians and the international community that domestic SSR would be essential to the country's nascent democratic transition.[21] In addition, Tunisia received significant International Military Education and Training assistance, which the government came to view as vital in the development of its officer corps.[22]

Table 2. Military aid Amounts by Program for Tunisia FY2011-FY2013

Program	2011	2012	2013	Grand Total
Foreign Military Financing	$17,124,000	$29,500,000	$20,554,000	$67,178,000
International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement	$1,500,000	$22,500,000	$7,999,000	$31,999,000
Section 1206 Train and Equip Authority	$12,959,721	$6,872,000		$19,831,721
Nonproliferation, Anti-Terrorism, Demining, and Related Programs	$3,060,000	$2,700,000	$2,520,000	$8,280,000
International Military Education and Training	$1,950,000	$1,837,000	$2,155,000	$5,942,000
Service Academies	$1,096,431	$525,244	$739,776	$2,361,451
Combating Terrorism Fellowship Program	$38,550	$402,970	$572,529	$1,014,049
Regional Centers for Security Studies	$281,512	$377,516	$8,751	$667,779
Section 1004 Counter-Drug Assistance			$34,000	$34,000
Grand Total	**$38,010,214**	**$64,714,730**	**$34,583,056**	**$137,308,000**

But Tunisia's security aid, both from the United States and other international donors, lacked a clear framework for organization, with a mix of objectives and resources that were either incompatible or redundant. Deconfliction among donors, even close U.S. allies, was almost non-existent, as each patron pursued bilateral initiatives irrespective of other efforts. The issue was compounded by the reality that Tunisians were loath to reject any form of SSA, regardless of their ability to absorb the assistance or whether it was compatible to other incoming systems, practices, or capabilities.[23]

Similarly, domestic and international efforts aimed at promoting SSR stumbled over internal political hurdles, particularly the growing distrust between the security services and Ennahda, an Islamist political party that dominated immediate post-Ben Ali governments. The rejection of SSR initiatives, the politicization of police recruitment, and the growing distrust between the MOI and Ennahda were emblematic of longstanding suspicion held between Islamists and secularists. Its manifestation in the national security realm translated into a deadlock on SSRs despite the centrality of those efforts in Tunisia's transition towards democracy.[24]

This axis of conflict was compounded by continued institutional competition between the MOD and MOI, who also looked at SSA as a useful resource to tip the scales of power in

their favor. Proximity to the United States, a newly central external presence in the defense and security landscape of Tunisia, became an issue of access and prestige measured, in part, through security cooperation.

Finally, as Tunisia's rival political parties — specifically Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes — sought compromise as a means of sustaining the country's fragile transition, deliberations on sensitive issues, including the SSR, stalled.[25]

The Rise of Counterterrorism and the Fall of Reform

Despite an outpouring of U.S. and international SSA, Tunisia's security situation deteriorated rapidly in the years after 2011.[26] Domestically, years of neglect and marginalization of communities outside of favored regions of the country, as well as abuses perpetrated by the state, nurtured an environment where passive support or a more general laissez faire attitude towards armed groups permeated.[27] Growing violence and ungoverned space in neighboring post-Qaddafi Libya as well as spillover of regional militancy from Algeria and elsewhere, also contributed to a rising threat of sub-state armed groups, including ISIS and Al Qaeda offshoots. In addition, conflicts across the region, particularly in Syria, catalyzed the movement of foreign fighters, with high proportions traveling from Tunisia — among the highest per-capita in the world — to other hotspots, with the added risk those fighters posed if and when they returned home. [28]

Of particular concern was the increasingly violent conflict in the country's northwest, where rising violence from Katiba Uqba ibn Nafi (KUIN), affiliated with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and the Islamic State-linked Jund al-Khilafah-Tunisia (JAK-T) took a severe toll on both MOD and MOI forces.[29]

The rise in violent incidents produced two related phenomena. First, it laid bare the shortcomings of the international community's efforts to improve the capacities of the Tunisian security sector. Second, it diverted focus and attention, of both the international community and Tunisian civil-society, away from democratic reforms of the security services in favor of improved performance. [30]

Previously mentioned efforts by the international community, including the United States, to showcase security assistance and provide material support to Tunisia's transition resulted in an array of SSA efforts that were uncoordinated, without synchronized agendas, and which produced a "shopping list" attitude among Tunisian recipients – picking and choosing platforms or capabilities as desired without the rigor of traditional needs assessments or strategic objectives in mind.[31]

In the rush to claim a stake in Tunisia's new political enterprise, international donors created a marketplace of SSA in which Tunisians were highly empowered consumers. Accordingly, ensuring that aid packages were 'attractive' also became important elements of U.S. policy.[32] The rationale is not without some merit – access and influence for long term objectives required a "foot in the door" in Tunisia, and packages that were overly prescriptive could easily alienate Tunisians who rightfully have the ultimate vote in their security partnerships and could easily turn to other patrons. Nevertheless, the results were narrowly tactical packages that avoided broader approaches that might include substantial consideration of security governance and SSR.

At the same time, inefficiencies in SSA were compounded by institutional competition in the security sector that hampered both performance and efforts at political reform of the security services. Ironically, inefficiencies contributed to a worsening security environment that allowed stakeholders, both local and external, to de-prioritize reforms in favor of improved performance. [33]

The 2012 attack on the U.S. Embassy in Tunis and the political assassinations of 2013 compounded these trends, shifting discourse away from reform, and towards counterterrorism.[34] As described by authors Ruth Hanau Santini and Giulia Cimini:

> Counter-terrorism became the one and only priority and raison d'etre of the security establishment, and was accompanied by the demonization of those political forces that had tried to rein in the debatable practices of the past, as these actors were now accused of having weakened the overall performance of the security sector, making them indirectly responsible for terrorist attacks[35]

The attacks also had the effect of reinforcing the "selective" approach of the Tunisian government in choosing the SSA packages it wanted, including security governance approaches. In effect, with the prioritization of performance over reform, the centrality of technical assistance was elevated above other considerations, including security governance and civil-military norms. [36]

Though the de-prioritization of reform in favor of tactical effectiveness may have seemed a prudent choice given the immediacy of physical security threats, the choice ignored the significance of SSR in Tunisia's democratic transition. The structures of Tunisia's dictatorship were defined, in large part, by the dysfunctional use of the state's coercive means to preserve and protect the regime, and demands for justice often directly targeted the country's internal security services.[37] As was described to the authors of this report by a leading Tunisian political figure – "the revolution was, in many ways, a revolution against the Ministry of Interior."

In short, SSR was (and remains) pivotal to the health and longevity of Tunisia's democracy. To be sure, SSR is a broad and complex undertaking, but fundamental imperatives were broadly understood to be essential pre-cursors to a thriving Tunisian democracy. Such imperatives included improved transparency of the country's labyrinth of security services and bureaucracies; enhanced democratic control over security forces, including augmenting the role of the legislature and civilian executives in security governance; re-orienting institutional culture and bureaucracies towards humane, responsible, and accountable security practices; rooting out and divesting the security sector from rampant corruption; and incorporating mechanisms for justice that can be applied systematically to the country's enforcement institutions.[38]

Ultimately, the emerging salience of performance empowered Tunisia's security services vis-à-vis external aid patrons and emboldened the country's security sector to selectively borrow the assistance packages that were most institutionally appealing. In effect, the balancing act between the rightful agency and sovereignty of Tunisians and the responsibility of U.S. assistance to address American strategic interests listed towards Tunis. This 'agency problem' unsurprisingly resulted in a Tunisian security sector that was able to leverage the desire of the international community to stem militancy in the region as a means to shield itself from the thorny issue of reform.

The Aftermath of the 2015 Attacks

2015 was a watershed year for the U.S.-Tunisia partnership. Two high profile attacks, the Bardo Museum and Sousse attacks, illustrated in horrific fashion just how much Tunisia's security environment had deteriorated.[39] This deterioration was a definitive culmination of growing levels of violence across the country, including the two high profile political assassinations and a 2012 attack on the U.S. embassy in Tunis mentioned previously.[40]

Though insurgency style militancy had been a persistent and growing problem since the revolution, these attacks, directed at Western tourists and taking place in the privileged coastal parts of the country, rather than the more marginalized interior, sent shockwaves through the political and security establishments of both Tunisia and its Western donors.[41] The physical security imperative took center stage, while security governance was placed firmly in the back seat. Patience for seeing real improvements in the abilities of Tunisian security services to meet the rising threat had run out, and catalyzed a rethink in the international community's SSA framework and in Tunisian self-awareness of its own security shortcomings.[42]

On the domestic side, the Tunisian government controversially introduced a counterterrorism law whose expansion of the internal intelligence mechanisms and powers of the state's

coercive apparatus has been criticized as a return to a police state, though some have noted its relative improvements to previous such statutes. In addition, the military's role in domestic security affairs expanded vis-à-vis the MOI, a trend that began after the revolution but quickly increased alongside the rising levels of violence.[43] Frustrations with the MOI for its animus towards reform as well as its 'cherry-picking' attitude towards SSA, helped elevate the role of the armed forces. Finally, the decentralization of security management roles that occurred in the years after the resignation of Gen. Rachid Ammar and envisioned in the 2014 constitution were reversed to some degree, becoming more centrally situated in the office of the President.[44] SSA contributed to this centralization, as President Essebsi sought to leverage the availability of security assistance and the salience of performance to shape the bureaucracy of the state's security establishment. Though perhaps improving on efficiency, the move undermined the checks and balances enshrined in the 2014 constitution.[45]

From the international side, the rising violence instigated the creation of a new coordination mechanism for SSA – the G7+ format,[46] which, while not revolutionizing SSA, has enabled better coordination and de-confliction amongst international donors, while requiring "Tunisian authorities to come together, articulate shared demands, and design an overall strategy upon which specific requests could be formulated."[47] This was an important development that presaged a re-orientation of U.S. SSA, particularly in terms of assessing needs and matching resources with clearly delineated objectives.

The G7+ format also dramatically increased the centrality and visibility of U.S. SSA when compared to its European counterparts. The Tunisians reportedly preferred the pragmatism of U.S. security aid efforts, and the minimization of red tape. The elevation of Tunisia to a major non-NATO ally by President Obama also dramatically increased the direct bilateral engagement between the U.S. defense establishment and Tunisia's MOD.

With the U.S. firmly leading Tunisia's SSA enterprise, and with looming security imperatives weighing on both parties, Tunis and Washington began developing a more robust framework to guide their security partnership. The efforts culminated in the 2017 signing of a 5-year Bilateral Country Action Plan (BCAP), a pivotal moment in the SSA relationship between the two countries.

The BCAP, the product of good faith and honest soul searching from both Tunisians and American planners, represents a thoughtful and positive approach to U.S. security aid relationships that creates a shared basis of objectives, linking tactical to strategic outcomes, with sequenced benchmarks and resource requirements. Vitally, the BCAP benefits from strong political buy-in from both sides, and obligates both patron and recipient to honest, self-reflective assessments based on BCAP objectives. Importantly, the development of the BCAP was a collaborative process, and reflected a commitment from both Tunisian and

American stakeholders for long-term institutional development. Judging by reports from the ground, these efforts have paid off, with dedication and enthusiasm up-and-down the chain of command to the framework of the BCAP. As was recounted to the Security Assistance Monitor by an American military official based in Tunis, even low-ranking soldiers are able to discuss their operations and SSA development in terms of the BCAP.

Beyond the institutional culture that the BCAP helped foster, it also provided a living and evolving framework for both Tunisian and American practitioners to map out resource allocation, delineate roles and responsibility for both the recipient and the provider of SSA, and benchmark progress or identify shortcomings.

PROGRESS ON SECURITY, PERHAPS LESS ON DEMOCRACY

Tunisia's security sector has undergone dramatic changes since the 2011 revolution and has made laudable improvements in its capabilities, thanks in large part to international assistance. Across the U.S. government, officials have heaped on praise for the transformation of the Tunisian armed forces, which have indeed managed to make impressive strides against armed groups as well as adopt a more modern, agile, and responsive posture geared towards addressing a wider array of security threats.[48] MOI forces have also made improvements, particularly in the performance of National Guard units and moderate information sharing with other security institutions.[49]

In recent years, U.S. assistance has been a key to unlocking this string of tactical achievements on the part of the Tunisian security services. Since 2015, operations by Tunisian forces, aided by international partners, have helped curtail and dismantle a number of militant networks across the country, thwarted a several imminent attacks, and stemmed the illicit cross-border flow of militants and contraband.[50] Moreover, the U.S. has played a pivotal role in aiding the development of a cohesive Tunisian defense strategy and doctrine, widely understood to be fundamental to the institutional health of the country's security sector.[51]

Among the most notable achievements has been the substantial degradation of KUIN and JAK-T networks in the mountains of the country's northwest. In the first years after the revolution, both groups managed to gain a significant foothold, building supply networks, gaining recruits, and conducting attacks against security forces.[52] But since 2015, improved tactical integration of MOI and MOD forces, as well as broader enhancements in the country's security structures has allowed Tunis to substantially reduce the number and operational abilities of both KUIN and JAK-T.[53] Militant casualties have risen substantially, while losses on the side of the Tunisian government have continued to decline.[54] Both American and Tuni-

sian officials described the substantial improvements in the country's counterterror capabilities, especially of elite MOD units. Though the threat is evolving, the operational success for Tunisian forces in the northwest is commendable.

In this regard, the substantial U.S. security assistance to Tunis has enjoyed some measurable success. Millions in key programs like IMET, Sections 1206, 2282, and 333 building partner capacity programs, and FMF can reasonably be defended as having aided the improvements in Tunisia's security environment.[55]

This success is reflected not only in Tunisia's improved security environment, but also in the Tunisian people's perception of their own security. Public opinion surveys show that the number of Tunisians who identified terrorism as the primary problem facing the country has dropped from 47% in 2015 to just 1% in 2019.[56] Threats do persist, particularly in the border regions with Libya and in the mountains of the Kasserine region near Algeria, but for the time being, the investments made in improving the ability of the Tunisian security services to address those threats seem to have paid off.[57]

But success has not been cost-free, and the infusion of billions in U.S. military resources and training into an institutionally fluid environment has played an important role in the civil-military and security governance developments in the country, both of which pose a risk to Tunisia's democratic transformation.

Firstly, U.S. SSA plays into the complex and volatile institutional politics of Tunisia's security sector, where access to American patronage is seen as a matter of both prestige and of hierarchy in the country's security establishment. By providing the currency of competition, U.S. aid risks exacerbating both the lack of coordination amongst different security services and promoting zero-sum fissures in the security sector that corrupt efforts towards reforms that are essential to democratic governance.

Secondly, the role of the armed forces, so dramatically elevated since Tunisia's revolution, requires a delicate balance between empowerment and control. Though the military has historically submitted to civilian rule, it would be, as Sharan Grewal has noted, "accurate to conclude that the Tunisian military had been kept far from power, not that it was not interested in it." Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of Ben Ali's ouster, the military became an omnipresent force in the country's governing life, dominating the early post-revolution period.[58] Their return to civilian oversight in 2012 was a positive signal of the army's institutional interests, but not a given.

Moreover, the combination of the military's overwhelming popularity in Tunisia and rising public dissatisfaction with democracy's ability to deliver on the promises of the revolution has fostered an environment ripe for democratic backsliding. Indeed, a stunning 47% of

Tunisian civilians support military rule, a figure that is even more troubling considering the slow reversal of past norms that have kept military figures away from active political roles.[59]

Taken together, these second order consequences of U.S. security assistance reveal a key feature of international support for Tunisia's security sector – the centrality of performance at the expense of reform. Certainly, reform of Tunisia's security sector is an enormously complex topic and, as has been illustrated above, faces a variety of hurdles and political realities that external pressure alone cannot remedy. Nevertheless, a lack of pressure from the international community isn't helping things either. The seemingly widely accepted view that reform must be sequenced behind improved performance plays into the risks described above, and fails to account for the ways in which local and international wariness of reform is acting as a ceiling on progress for Tunisia's security services, including in terms of performance. More importantly, the prevailing attitude fails to account for the significance of defining the role of the country's security services in political, civil, and social life is in the health and durability of Tunisia's democratic transition.

Already, worrisome trends in the behavior of security services have begun to manifest.[60] Police have capitalized on emergency powers, in effect since 2015, to target individuals indiscriminately; internal security forces have reprised repressive tactics and practices, including the use of torture,[61] especially in already marginalized communities; the military has been seen as both seeking ways to crack down on dissent and taking a more active role in the country's political life, governance, and civil society.[62] Moreover, the operations in the country's northwest, where tactical success has been noted, have still resulted in troubling human rights abuses.[63] Though still far from the days of Tunisia's dictatorship, this regression suggests the governance and institutional reforms have not matched the rising clout of Tunisia's security sector, posing a risk to the country's democratic transition.

Fortunately, important factors, including U.S. security assistance, have acted as a bulwark against the democratic backsliding of the country's security sector. Long marginalized under the autocracies of Ben Ali and Bourguiba, the military has seen its fortunes rise alongside democracy. Their budgets have risen at an unprecedented pace, and their role in the security hierarchy of the country is undisputed. Moreover, it was the country's transition towards democracy that precipitated a dramatic rise in U.S. security assistance, much of which flowed to the armed forces. In effect, the military has seen the transition towards democracy as a boon to their own institutional well-being and prominence and, thus, sees an institutional incentive to preserve the country's transition, at least for the time being.[64] Similarly, diminishing counterterrorism threats have moderated the tendency of security services to justify repressive policies and tactics as necessary to tame insecurity, while the diminished stature and power of the MOI mitigates the threat it poses to the country's democratic institutions. [65]

Nevertheless, the scales can tip easily, and understanding how foreign security assistance impacts the balance of power in Tunisia's unsettled political environment is essential to ensuring the long-term health of Tunisia's democracy.

LESSONS LEARNED: SSA IN THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME

The evolution of Tunisia's security partnership with the United States offers a variety of lessons learned that should inform broader thinking on SSA, most especially when a security aid relationship is in its infancy or a new SSA relationship is being considered. They include the following:

- Security inevitably impacts the political landscape of a recipient country, especially in environments undergoing governing transformations, socio-political changes, or unrest.
- Civilian-military relations and the historical relationship between the security sector and national governance are determining factors in the efficacy or SSA and in the risks associated with assistance.
- Robust frameworks for SSA, with political buy-in up and down chains of command from both patron and recipient, are essential for aligning interests, working towards sequenced long-term objectives, and providing a foundation for Assessment, Monitoring, and Evaluation (AME).
- Fresh starts are valuable. In the inception phase of security partnerships, both patron and recipient have an opportunity to make important structural, strategic, and political decisions that will shape the trajectory of the relationship, including a spirit of collaboration, candor, and political buy-in.

The lessons above are broad but speak both to specific modalities and decisions elected by American and Tunisian practitioners as well as environmental conditions that illustrate the importance of the ecosystem in which SSA is implemented. Each is worth additional examination.

Security Assistance and the Political Landscape

Since 2011, America's guiding objective in Tunisia has been to support the country's democratic transition. As the State Department puts it, "Tunisia is a strong partner of the United States, and the U.S. Government is proud to support Tunisia in its transition to democracy.

In this effort, one of the United States' priorities is to help Tunisia provide a secure environment conducive to the development of democratic institutions and practices, and to inclusive economic growth."[66] In other words, U.S. security assistance is in service of Tunisia's broader transition towards democracy. This framing is important and should shape bilateral understandings of success in the SSA enterprise. Whatever tactical and operational objectives may be achieved, the degrees to which they contribute to the strategic level goals are essential to justifying or measuring the efficacy of SSA.

Unfortunately, the indirect political consequences of SSA are viewed as beyond the scope of existing DoD and DoS security assistance AM&E regimes. Instead, evaluations focus squarely on the development of capacities and capabilities of recipient security services.[67] Certainly, the U.S. government is not ignorant of how changes in the security sector and broader security environment influence a country's political stability, but current practices seem to ignore the incidental ways in which SSA can contribute to, exacerbate, or even remedy some of these developments.

In Tunisia, security assistance, while contributing valuably to the improvements in physical security, also plays into the complex transformation of the country's security institutions, their relations to each other, to the country's emerging political system, and to the Tunisian people. As was described to the Security Assistance Monitor by a former MOI official, access to U.S. training and resources fueled competition not just between ministries, but between individual units. Indeed, the role the U.S. plays in tipping the scales of institutional resources, prestige, and leverage vis-à-vis the country's security establishment has enormous bearing on the health of the country's democratic future. Competition within the security sector undermines not only the capabilities, but the professionalism of Tunisian security services, and risks creating an environment in which the pursuit of relative power could undercut commitments to improved security governance.[68] What's more, the elevation of performance over governance in Tunisia's bilateral security relationship with Washington has dangerously undermined SSR efforts that go to the heart of the country's democratic transition. At a time when security governance, SSR, and civil-military/security norms remain uneasy, security assistance injects a volatile element in the mix.

U.S. policymakers have a tough balancing act to perform here. The tension that naturally exists between short term exigencies and long-term strategic objectives is not unfamiliar to American officials. When a sacrifice must be made on the spectrum of short-term interests and long-term objectives, the former is a difficult sell, especially when it pertains the immediate physical security of the U.S. or American citizens. Nevertheless, American policy is not served when the balance between short- and long-term imperatives purely favors the immediate, and it is the responsibility of government to arch U.S. initiatives towards strategic objectives.

SSA often takes place in unsettled environments, where governance, civil-military norms, and political life are in flux. Fragile states are not only the ones most vulnerable to irregular security threats, they are also often wrestling with issues of good governance that are inextricably linked to the socio-political role of security institutions. In this context, American practitioners must understand security assistance as inherently political, bringing with it risks to political life and aspirations for progress on SSRs, civil liberties, and good governance.

Civil-Military/Civil-Security History

The security establishments of partner countries each have their own storied histories. Legacies of origins, power, institutional interests, and relations to domestic political life all shape the contemporary roles of security services, their performance, and how they perceive their place in the governing structures of their countries.

In Tunisia, the historically marginal role played by the armed forces and its deliberate isolation from the country's political life in favor of the MOI defined both the public's conception of the army and of its own institutional identity. In its circumscribed position, the armed forces had no access to diversionary non-defense interests, nor any significant patronage to offer its officers. At the time of the revolution, the small, professional, and popular armed forces were well positioned to enter into a security partnership with the United States. Inoculated, to some degree, from the worst excesses of the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes, their development and expansion translated into substantially improved performance, and not (yet) a significant threat to the country's political transformation. This is, of course, not a given and requires vigilance on the part of U.S policymakers, particularly during this fragile stage in Tunisia's political transition.

Mapping out the historical lineages of recipient security services offers insights into the institutional priorities, interests, and identities that can have an enormous bearing on how access to expanded resources will impact performance, civil-military relations, and security governance issues. A comprehensive U.S. assessment regime would incorporate such a practice in a meaningful effort to gauge the suitability of a partner for SSA.

Robust Frameworks for Security Sector Assistance

Beyond the socio-political realities that created a favorable environment for security cooperation, practitioners in Tunisia and the United States made crucial decisions on process and resource allocation that contributed to a strong partnership. BCAP brought together disparate training programs and wove them together into a guiding document that linked avail-

able resources and desired capabilities to overarching common goals.

The BCAP is premised on shared objectives, linking tactical to strategic outcomes, with sequenced benchmarks and resource requirements. The development of the BCAP was a collaborative process and reflected a commitment from both Tunisian and American stakeholders for long-term political institutional buy-in from both sides. The political buy-in from both sides, the commitment from implementers, and the obligation to periodic, honest, self-reflective assessments based on BCAP objectives meant the document continued to serve a valuable purpose.

U.S. security cooperation with any and all partner nations would benefit enormously from the guiding structure provided by a BCAP-like framework. Though, as was noted by several security cooperation officials, the BCAP is a difficult framework to replicate in other countries throughout the region, it is worth considering that the inability to create a BCAP with a partner country may be evidence that the conditions do not exist for a mutually beneficial security partnership.

The U.S.-Tunisia BCAP appears to be ahead of its time in that it incorporates critical requirements for U.S. security cooperation reforms with lines of effort built in specifically for AM&E and defense institution building. Moreover, the BCAP fosters strong collaboration between the U.S. and the partner nation, which is imperative for effective AM&E.

A Fresh Start

Most U.S. security partnerships are part of longstanding, complex, and multifaceted bilateral relationships. In many instances, established security assistance regimes become such deep-seated elements of an alliance that the need for clearly and narrowly delineated objectives for SSA diminishes. In effect, SSA becomes just another part of a partnership's enduring diplomatic 'baggage,' and its maintenance simply part of keeping up good relations. In these environments, it is easy for security assistance to become viewed as an entitlement on the part of the recipient, reducing U.S. leverage, and making the imposition of conditionality or performance benchmarks enormously difficult.[69]

To be sure, the U.S. Tunisian security relationship had important roots, as well as commensurate political baggage. Important security assistance programs existed prior to the revolution, including those that connected the U.S. national security sector with significant portions of the Tunisian military officer corps. But the centrality of the partnership in U.S. MENA policy began in earnest after the revolution. It was, in effect, a fresh start, or, as one DoD official put it, a "second marriage."[70] Though far from a blank slate, thoughtful practitioners on both sides were able to leverage the fresh start to have honest conversations as

to the intentionality behind security cooperation, develop specific objectives and measures of success, and imbue the partnership with a spirit of professionalism that can be difficult to impose in more longstanding arrangements. It did not happen overnight. Indeed, it took increasingly violent attacks in the years after the revolution to shock the partnership into a more forthright place. But improvements have been considerable.

In considering new or infant security partnerships, setting a professional, and forthright tone at the outset clearly pays dividends in terms of performance, and the efficacy of SSA. It is, as always, a delicate balance, and pedantic or patronizing approaches risk scuttling nascent partnerships all together. But whether or not such a foundation can be achieved should figure prominently in assessments as to whether a partner is suitable for SSA. Moreover, in places with more established security partnerships exist, it may be worth considering whether such relationships are due for a "fresh start," seeking to reset some of the ingrained and unhealthy norms that have developed over time.

CONCLUSION

The U.S.-Tunisia security partnership is not perfect. As has been described above, the narrow conception of U.S. security assistance and its relationship to the country's political development leaves room for misjudgment and risks that have the ability to undermine strategic bilateral objectives for Tunisia's future.

Nevertheless, the improvement in Tunisia's security environment, and the enduring commitment on both sides to Tunisia's political transformation is promising, and offers an opportunity to extract lessons learned that are both positive, and worthy of replication, as well as those less positive, and worthy of remediation.

The relative success of Tunisia's SSA enterprise is a result of a variety of factors including decisions made by American and Tunisian practitioners as well as environmental conditions. Though these environmental considerations would be difficult for parties on either side to influence, they nonetheless have an exceptional impact on the efficacy of U.S. security assistance.

But gaps in current U.S. security cooperation paradigms expose the partnership to a set of political and practical risks that have yet to factor into U.S. government analyses. Understanding how these various factors interact with one another to influence the effectiveness or risks of a given SSA enterprise offers important lessons that can inform broader thinking on ongoing efforts to better assess, monitor, and evaluate U.S. security assistance.

The FY2017 National Defense Authorization Act initiated a number of critical security cooperation reforms including congressionally mandated requirements for DoD to establish a framework for conducting AM&E of its security cooperation activities. While these reforms will almost certainly scrutinize more direct returns on investment for U.S. security assistance in terms of improved capabilities and performance, any such regime that fails to account for the political, strategic, and environmental considerations outlined above will fall short of providing a complete picture of SSA.

Moreover, as the U.S. seeks to promote good governance, human rights, and civil liberties abroad, understanding the direct and indirect risks SSA pose to these tenets is essential. This goes beyond the simple and minimal requirement that the recipient country must refrain from acts of human rights abuses. It is about understanding the relationship between security institutions, civil-society, governance, and the balance of power between them. As U.S. policymakers are well aware, the practical challenges of aligning the interagency process to create actionable approaches founded in this holistic thinking are considerable. It is, nonetheless, necessary.

Injecting military hardware, training, and services into any environment poses enormous risks and has a profound impact on local security, political, and social dynamics, not to mention broader U.S. interests. The bilateral approach to the U.S.-Tunisian security partnership offers valuable lessons learned in this regard, both from what has worked and what hasn't. Those lessons come at a critical moment for the wider American security cooperation enterprise, and as the U.S. government's approach to security assistance evolves, it should incorporate a more holistic model for understanding how its patronage shapes strategic level outcomes in partner states.

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