

EU-TUNISIA COOPERATION ON SECURITY AND COUNTER- TERRORISM¹

GILLES DE KERCHOVE

EU Counter-terrorism Coordinator²

The EU has developed a privileged working relationship with Tunisia.

The European Union's resolute commitment to support the Tunisian democratic transition since the January 2011 revolution remains intact and is a long-term concern. The EU stands firm on Tunisia's current challenges, such as the Libyan crisis and the threat of the return of terrorist fighters following the disappearance of the "Caliphate" in Iraq and Syria.

The EU and Tunisia have defined a new cooperation approach with the aim of providing the responses that best adapt to its rapid evolution and ambitious reform process, also in the security field.

The Tunisian revolution revealed the structural difficulties to be addressed by the security institutions and the judiciary. Reforms are underway to enable these key sovereign sectors to fulfil their missions while developing a culture of accountability and transparency based on respect for human rights and the rule of law.

The conclusions of the Council of Foreign Affairs held on 9 February 2015 (after the Charlie Hebdo attack in January 2015) and later those of 19 June 2017 called for stronger cooperation in the fight against terrorism, particularly in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region. It is in this context that since 2015 experts in security and counter-terrorism have been appointed in the region, including within the EU delegation in Tunis. These experts provide real added value to our cooperation, help to structure it more efficiently and meet the expectations of the Tunisian authorities.

Tunisia is currently the only Mediterranean Partner Country with which the EU has deployed so comprehensively the range of instruments at its disposal to fight against terrorism.

The EU has developed a privileged working relationship with Tunisia. It has started a series of visits (I went to Tunis five times in 2015, and also accompanied Donald Tusk, President of the Council of Europe, after the Sousse attack) that led to a high-level dialogue on "security and counter-terrorism"³ since September 2015 while promoting full respect for the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms. On 19 January 2017 the second high-level dialogue was held.⁴ The EU and Tunisia also agreed on a third meeting of this political dialogue in 2018.

Tunisia is currently the only Mediterranean Partner Country with which the EU has deployed so comprehensively the range of instruments at its disposal to fight against terrorism.

1. The original version of this article was written in French and is available at www.iemed.org

2. The contents of this article are the sole responsibility of its author and can in no way be considered as reflecting the views of the Council of the European Union or the European Council.

3. This dialogue was the first of this kind for the EU with a third country of the MENA region.

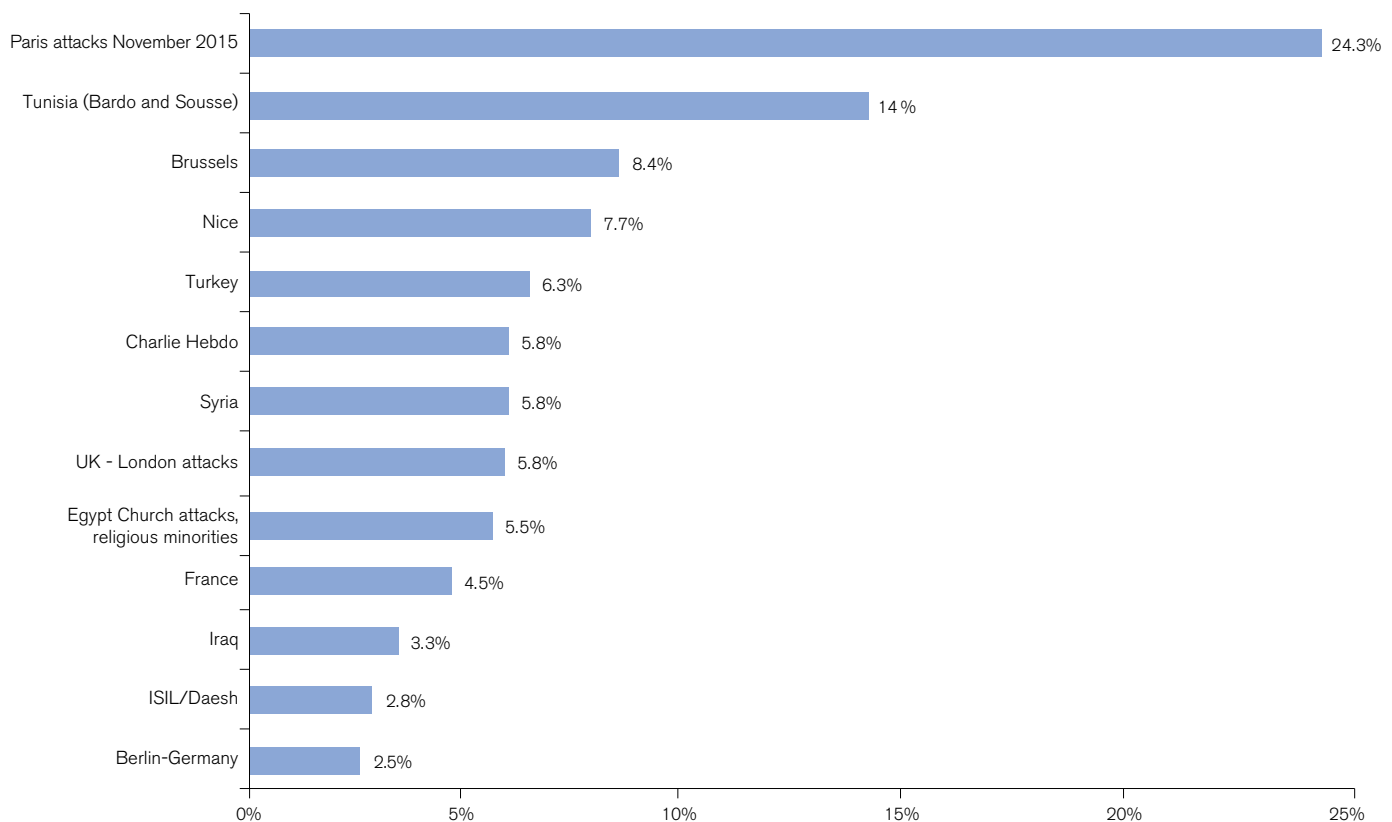
4. The priorities defined for 2017 are: implementation of the Tunisian strategy to fight against terrorism; fight against radicalisation; mobilisation of the EU justice and home affairs agencies (Europol, Eurojust, CEPOL); improvised explosive devices (IEDs); arms trafficking; protection of soft targets and aviation security; and the fight against money laundering, which finances organised crime and terrorism.

For its part, the Maltese Presidency of the Council of the European Union organised an official visit to Tunisia with the delegates of the EU member states of the Council's Working Party on Terrorism International Aspects (COTER) last April, which helped to make member states more aware of the Tunisian reality and bore witness to the improvement of the security situation thanks to a better Tunisian response to terrorism and increasingly more coordinated aid from the international community.⁵ Finally, I went to Tunisia on 16-18 October 2017 after the visits of Commissioners Hahn and Avramopoulos last summer.

As revealed by the Euromed Survey conducted by the IEMed, the terrorist attacks suffered by Tunisia in recent years have had an impact on the country but also on the European Union and the Euro-Mediterranean region as a whole.

Graph1: In your opinion, which terrorist attack(s) do you consider the most harmful to the stability of the Euro-Mediterranean region as a whole over the last few years?

(categories developed from the open-ended answers)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 8th Euromed Survey

Europe shares the same security challenges as Tunisia, with the emergence of new forms of crime and terrorism, the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters, as well as the same aspirations for human dignity and exemplary police forces.

5. The creation of the donor's platform "G7+6" is a remarkable example of good coordination on the ground.

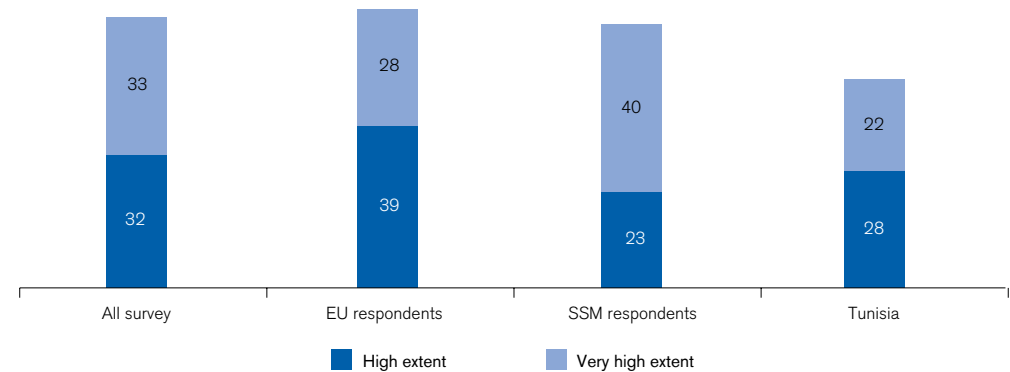
Tunisians are less positive about the policies implemented to fight the phenomenon of violent extremism than some of their neighbours. The EU action seeks in fact to support the Tunisian authorities to meet these challenges.

Thus, in the framework of a comprehensive “anti-terrorism package”, the EU has backed the reforms thanks to a “Security Sector Reform Support Programme” endowed with €23 million. The resources mobilised are suited to the objective pursued. The aim is to support the security sector in the implementation of the institutional reforms to strengthen its capacity to efficiently fulfil its missions with due regard to democratic values, fundamental rights and human rights as guaranteed in the new Tunisian constitution.

The results of the Survey seem to indicate that Tunisians are less positive about the policies implemented to fight the phenomenon of violent extremism than some of their neighbours, while still recognising the scope of the challenges.

Graph 2: To what extent do you consider that the overall efforts deployed so far in confronting violent extremism in your own country are effective?

(answers in %)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 8th Euromed Survey

L'approche sécuritaire seule ne peut pas donner beaucoup de résultats efficaces, il faut déployer plus d'efforts par une approche globale.

Tunisian respondent

En Tunisie jusque-là la réponse a été sécuritaire. La population civile s'est montrée très vigilante et empêché le pays de basculer dans l'horreur.

Tunisian respondent

Les forces de l'ordre ont réalisé des progrès notables dans leur lutte contre le terrorisme. Mais le vrai combat sera socioculturel.

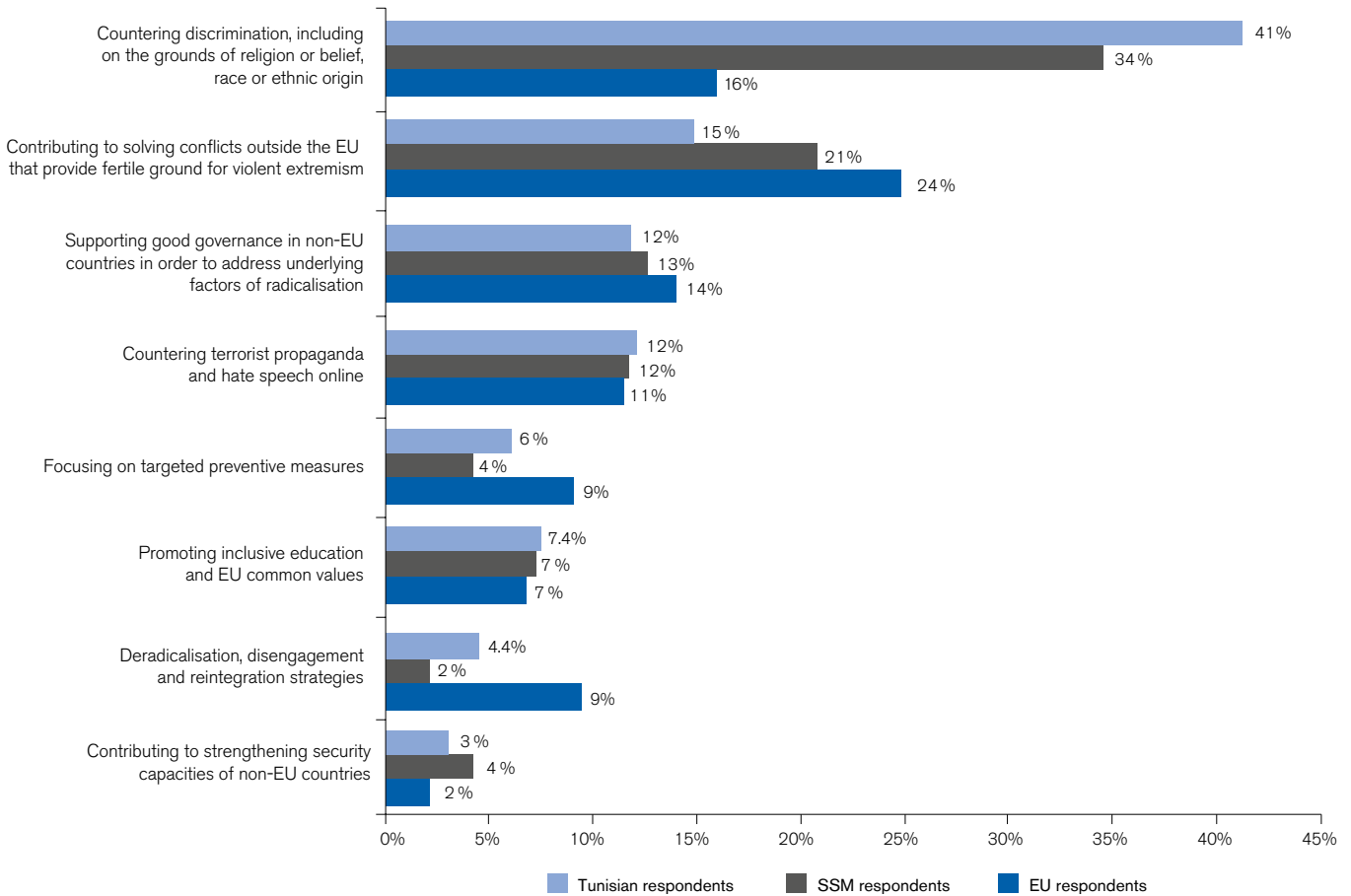
Tunisian respondent

The EU action seeks in fact to support the Tunisian authorities to meet these challenges. Three working lines were identified. A first section deals with the support for the reform of the internal security forces through the reform of the system of internal control and implementation of an independent external control system. Moreover, the project will enhance the technical and operational capacities of the state services to increase the efficacy of the security apparatus in terms of investigation and management of borders and crises.

Finally, the EU will contribute to the modernisation of the information services of the Ministry of the Interior and other institutions concerned with the main aim of better border control and efficiently fighting against terrorism.

As for strengthening the culture of the rule of law in the actions of the security forces, the project seeks, through the implementation of an internal and external control system, to monitor the behaviour of police officers to restore citizen confidence in the security institutions, fight against abuses and continue the fight against corruption. This effort seems in line with the views of those who, in response to one of the questions in the Euromed Survey on the priorities to be followed by the EU, considered that the EU should continue supporting the reforms concerning good governance.

Graph 3: What should the EU and its member states focus on as a matter of priority?
(results show the first choice out of three)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 8th Euromed Survey

L'UE est notre partenaire privilégié, notre passage obligé. Il convient de restaurer la confiance. Celle-ci dépend de son aide accrue au développement et de sa volonté réelle d'oeuvrer pour une paix durable au Proche-Orient.

Tunisian respondent

This EU support for the Tunisian security sector should be placed in parallel to the financial and technical support consequently aimed at the justice sector, another pillar of the rule of law.

This EU support for the Tunisian security sector should be placed in parallel to the financial and technical support consequently aimed at the justice sector, another pillar of the rule of law. The Justice Reform Support Programme in these two early phases represents an envelope of €40 million and contributes to the modernisation of the judiciary towards more independence, quality and efficacy.

In practice, the EU also puts at the disposal of Tunisia the experience of the member states and the technical means to help it guarantee the security of its land borders and to fight against transnational crime.

This element, implemented by UNOPS, notably foresees the modernisation of three command centres (Médenine, Tataoutine, Kasserine) as well as enhancing the capacities of the structures responsible for controls.

The border area with Libya (where the whole Tunisian population resisted terrorism, together with the police, by defending sovereignty, territorial integrity, the rule of law and Tunisian democracy) is facing specific challenges, linked to the existence of an old transborder trade between the two countries and its informal nature. This traditional ecosystem was heavily disrupted by the civil war in Libya. In this very specific context, the Danish Demining Group has implemented in Ben Guerdane a project aimed at strengthening the coordination between the local communities and local security officers.

The EU has rapidly implemented other initiatives to the benefit of Tunisia to assist it in the fight against terrorism. In particular:

- The adoption by Tunisia of the National Counterterrorism Strategy on 7 November 2016.
- The development of a global policy for the prevention of radicalisation. The EU has committed to mobilise the expertise of the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) for the benefit of Tunisia and to encourage direct cooperation between the experts of this network and the Tunisian platform against radicalisation.

Also the support from different European agencies:

- CEPOL (European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training). CEPOL organises efficient operational training to fight against terrorism.
- Europol, whose new regulation that came into force in May enables direct cooperation at a strategic level with Tunisia, without the need to negotiate a formal agreement.
- Eurojust
- The new European Board and Coast Guard Agency (replacing Frontex).

The support of the European Gendarmerie Force (FGE) for the Tunisian National Guard is also being put into place and support for the fight against money laundering, which finances organised crime and terrorism, may be considered. Some activities are also underway to strengthen the legislative framework and the Tunisian services on firearms trafficking.

Apart from these initiatives bilaterally developed by Tunisia, the EU has implemented regional projects to fight against terrorism that benefit this country as well as all countries of the European southern neighbourhood (such as the project Euromed Police IV).

Tunisia is also a priority for the 'Strengthening Resilience II' programme, which is implemented by the British Council, working with partners in the region and elsewhere. This project, which will run until 2021, builds on a successful pilot, implemented between 2015 and 2017, and is working to strengthen the resilience of young people and communities against violent extremist narratives in order to reduce the appeal of violent extremist groups.

As well as providing clarity around approaches that deliver resilience, the programme is expected to increase the resilience of young people in susceptible communities and increase the number of positive social, political and economic pathways. It will also provide:

- A better understanding of susceptibility to violent extremism.
- Effective communication strategies that provide an alternative to violent extremism.
- Transformative impact through dissemination and influencing of governments, think tanks and multilateral institutions.

We will continue to share our experiences to bring foreign terrorist fighters to justice, fight against their radicalisation in prisons and favour their integration into society.

Finally, a special mention should be made of the important initiative by President Essebsi and the High Representative Federica Mogherini in December 2016 for a Youth Partnership. This partnership is devoted to strengthening the prospects of Tunisian youths, who played a decisive role in the Tunisian revolution. Enriching the prospects of youths is also a way of enriching the country as a whole. And I am very hopeful about this joint initiative. It is by better mutual understanding that our societies will be able to face common challenges.

We will continue to share our experiences to bring foreign terrorist fighters to justice, fight against their radicalisation in prisons and favour their integration into society.

Gilles de Kerchove, Belgian senior European Union official. He was Director in the General Directorate of Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) in the General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union from 1995 to 2007, when he was appointed EU Counter-terrorism Coordinator.