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THE SECURITY SECTOR REFORM IN TUNISIA

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Tunisia, with its transformation since 2011, presents a successful example for democratization in the region. However, one of the important steps of the democratization, structurally reforming state institutions which have been the mainstay of the authoritarian regime has not been accomplished yet. In particular, unrealised structural reforms in the security institutions raise concerns and a number of risks on behalf of democratization of the country. Since 2013 Tunisia has faced serious security problems and as a result, the decision makers in the country prioritize security in their policies. From this perspective, there is an urgent need for structural reforms in the security sector, which ensures them a new structure, paving way for democratization and even more accompanying democratization. This work, considering the importance and needs for structural reforms, examines the transformation experienced by Tunisian security agencies in the post-2011 era. In addition, the state of security institutions, together with the contents of the change, have put the changing security threats and policies of the last four years in the country under the spotlight.

The new political structure in Tunisia has been experiencing a profound transformation by differentiating from an authoritarian rule which reached its climax during Ben Ali's presidency in a rapid, radical, and visible manner. However, despite Tunisia having reached a successful transformation and achieving significant gains in post-2011 era; it is hard to argue that the country could carry out structural reforms, especially in strategically important sectors and institutions. The democratization process itself is quite long, requiring decades and compelling processes; and this transformation is a fragile and delicate process which is constantly in danger of setbacks, especially if one looks to the previous examples in Latin America and Eastern Europe. In this context, structural reforms are of crucial importance to the realization of the democratization process. For Tunisia, which had been defined as a "police state" by many

researchers and academics, and described as "an open prison" by human rights associations, the realization of structural reforms within the framework of democratic procedures in the security institutions is essential. Especially the country's recent confrontations with serious security concerns, this situation creates discontent among Tunisians. Therefore, the new government is expected to prioritize security in its policies. In this respect, with structural reforms security institutions must be structured in a way that catalyze and accompany democratization process.

The need for transforming the security institutions with the structural reforms has become more noticeable with the rapid shift in the security and threat perception since 2011 in Tunisia. In the period after the 2011, priority for the the transitional government in Tunisia is to convince Tunisians to go back to their homes and ensure

the street peace. The aim of terminating mass mobilization in the popular protests of 2010-2011 had shaped the policies implemented in 2011 and 2012. But by 2013, security and threat perception was no longer a mere law and order problem; there has been a rapid shift toward radicalism and terrorism. The causes of this shift are mainly increasing conflict in Algeria-Tunisia border, military casualties, the deaths of soldiers in clashes, and political assassinations of a number of opponents. In addition, one should not overestimate the effects of the changing regional dynamics in this shift. On one hand the coup in Egypt and the repression of opposition within the context of “war on terror” in post-coup era, on the other hand the transboundary effects of instability and civil war in Libya has transformed security perceptions of both Tunisians and decision makers in Tunisia. In addition, the concerns on radicalism of

secular elites both from the coalition government as well as from the opposition rapidly increased. Following the attack against Bardo Museum, a building next to Parliament, on the 18th of March and death of 21 tourists in this attack, mainly led to the adoption of these concerns on radicalism, as well as with international actors, including the European countries. The conversion to a security perception makes inevitable the structural reform of the security sector in Tunisia on one hand, but poses potential risks which may cause setbacks for a successful democratic transformation on the other.

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Security Institutions and their Current State in Tunisia

Tunisian Army: The Tunisian army represents a unique example in the region in terms of staying out of politics and the role it plays in the demise of authoritarianism in Tunisia in 2011. Despite the fact that the Tunisian army had been pushed out from the political balance and its capacity had been systematically limited

since the Bourguiba era in order to avoid any possible coup attempts, it has been appreciated as a small but well-trained army. The army has an estimated force of around 47,000 personnel.¹ It consists of Land Forces, Air Forces and Naval Forces. It is estimated that the Land Forces have 27,000 personnel and its technical capacity is quite limited compared to other regional countries.² Likewise, it is reported that both Naval and Air Forces also suffer from deficiency of personnel and technical capacity. In addition to these deficiencies, the

army has also been deprived of economic resources in order to prevent military intervention to politics since the independence. For example, while the Egyptian army is a significant monopoly in Egyptian economy via its direct investments in communication, infrastructure, construction sectors and food industry; the Tunisian army holds no economic power and its budget has been determined annually by the government. The share of military spending in GDP in the Tunisia was 1.5% in 2005, 1.6% in 2006, 1.3% in 2007, 1.3% in 2008, and 1.3% in 2009.³ This data shows no significant increase in post-2011 era; it was 1.8% in 2012 and reached to 2% in 2013.⁴ Despite all these limitations, the Tunisian army has participated in 20 peacekeeping operations in total, 16 missions within the frame of appliance of the United Nations and 4 missions under the auspices of the African Union.⁵

It is already mentioned here that the Tunisian army has stayed out of politics in the country. However, there are three vital exceptions of this in Tunisian political history. The army played an active and leading role in the repression of worker protests of 1978, the 1984 Bread Riots and the 2008 Gafsa Riots. However, excluding these examples, army has stayed out of domestic security issues Furthermore, the Chief of General Staff, General Rashid Ammar changed the course of political developments in 2011 by disobeying Ben Ali's order to suppress the protests by army.

After 2011, Tunisian army, whose popularity increased among the public, was forced to intervene in internal security issues. At the beginning of the transition period that began with the removal of Ben Ali, especially in 2011, internal security forces withdrew from the streets because of their close ties with the former

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regime. The resulting gap was filled by the army, who has assumed the responsibility of ensuring peace and security in the country. However, this situation has become a major issue for the Tunisian army following the security issues, becoming more problematic as the threat of terrorism occupies the top at the agenda. In 2012, the statement by former Defence Minister, Abdelkarim Zbidi, saying that the army should withdraw its primary duties, is a declaration of the current problematic situation. In 2013, the heavy casualties on the Tunisian-Algerian

border led to more criticism and thus, Tunisian army began to voice out its demand for reforming the Ministry of Interior and the Police Forces. As a result, in the country it was discussed to delegate internal security issues to internal security forces in order to free the army from the internal security burden as well as to increase the capacity of the army.

Tunisian Internal Security Forces: While the Tunisian army has increased its popularity among the Tunisian people and became the hero of Jasmine Revolution; the Tunisian Police became the



focal point of hatred against former regime and has been accused of protecting Ben Ali, his family and his regime. Even today it is still referred to with the repression and torture crimes committed against Tunisian people. The Interior Ministry building, after the end of Ben Ali's rule, continued to be an important venue of demonstrations for about two years. As mentioned before, because of the harsh reactions, police forces were forced to withdraw from the streets in the aftermath of 2011 and many of their duties were delegated to the military.

In essence, the internal security forces subsidiary to Ministry of Interior is composed of Police Force, the National Guard, the Judicial Police, the Intervention Forces, and the Presidential Guard Forces. In addition, there are several diverse police units under the Police Forces such as tourism police, university police and political police.⁶ The National Guard, which operates in

the coastal and rural areas, is described as a paramilitary organization, involved in many cases of torture. The Presidential Guard Forces were in charge of protecting the president and his family, and it was rumoured that it had influence on the decision-making mechanism during Ben Ali rule. Ben Ali nominated Ali Seriati, the former chief of the presidential guard, to combat the suppressing of the protests of 2010-2011. However, he failed to succeed in this mission partly because of his unpopularity among other security units. The Judicial Police is a subsidiary to the Ministry of Interior, but their duty station is within the Judiciary. In particular, the Judicial Police was known as the unit which extracted confessions by torture during Ben Ali rule. The Political Police are the units having the worst reputation among Tunisians, hence the unit had to be dissolved and all staff were transferred to regular police units in the

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period after 2011. The political police was known for profiling activities in addition to torture. The fate of the profiling files is still unknown.

The total number of staff in these units had varied according to different sources, but their estimations were too high. Prior to 2011, foreign observers reported that the police had about 80.000 forces, while the Tunisian opposition claimed that the number is around 133.000.⁷ Also, it was reported that the Presidential Guard Forces had 8.000 staff, while The National Guard consisted of

20.000 staff.⁸ However, in the period after 2011, it was understood that these figures were greatly exaggerated, and the estimated numbers were higher than the actual number because of part-time employees and paid informants. According to Mohammad Lazhar Akremi, the former minister delegate to the Ministry of Interior in charge of reforms, the internal security forces numbered 49,000 prior to 2011, and then increased to 61.000 with the new recruitment of 12.000 forces to the police department.⁹

Ben Ali, who rose to the presidency from the internal security institutions, diversified the security units under the internal security forces and divested them of any central command in order to prevent a coup. These policies in the end successfully prevented the coup attempts, but led to the failure of internal security units in combating large-scale protests of 2010-2011, which spread to whole country.

The governments, which came to office between the years 2011-2014, were able to applied limited policies for reforming the structure of the Ministry of Interior. During first two interim governments led by Mohammed Ghannouchi, who had served significant posts during Ben Ali era, 42 top officials were removed from their position in Ministry of Interior. Former Tunisian Interior Minister Rafiq Belhaj Kacem, the former Chief of the Presidential Guard and the former Chief of National Guard were arrested

and each one was sentenced from 15 to 20 years in prison. However in 2014, these cases were reopened and released from prison due to reductions in their sentences. For example, one of the closest men to Ben Ali, Ali Seriati, the former Chief of Presidential Guard, was released from prison on May 2014.¹⁰

The Ministry of Interior has been one of the most resilient institutions against reforms and governments in post-2011 era. Especially, it is expressed that Interior Minister of the first troika government, Ali Larayedh, failed to adopt structural reform for reconstructing internal security forces. However, one should not overestimate the resistance against reforms shown by the ministry. For example, a video recording was released to discredit the former interior minister Ali Larayedh.¹¹ The appointment of a number of figures, who were regarded as threat, arrested and exposed to a serial

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of coercive acts including torture, has not been completely accepted by cadres of Ministry of Interior. However, it does not seem possible to solve this problem only by elimination of current figures holding posts in the ministry. Therefore, the implementation of structural reforms is a necessary step.

Pain of Transformation and Emerging Security Threats

On the contrary to other North African countries, which removed their autocrats in 2011 but have been crippled with authoritarian

resilience and instability; Tunisia, with its deep transformation, continues to progress towards democratization. However, serious obstacles and challenges continue to rise on the path of democratization in Tunisia. One of the most formidable of these obstacles and challenges are its security issues. The security issues were composed of public order and peace related issues in post-2011 era, but then transformed to a national security threat with the rise of regional security concerns by 2012.

For the first year after the removal of Ben Ali, the

primary security concern in Tunisia was to calm the streets following the riots of 2010-2011 without causing indignation and to restore the public order in the country. During this period, internal security units withdrew from the streets, and as previously mentioned, the Tunisian army has been appointed to carry out these tasks. Security issues have been seen as a problem of law and order during this period in general terms. In addition, during this period, the agenda in Tunisia was shaped by democratization debates. In parallel to these dynamics, governments adopted compromising and integrative policies toward Salafi groups, which were on the rise as a political force in the country. The first coalition government led by Hamadi Jebali had tried to integrate political groups as much as possible to the political structure. In this period, Nahda leader Rashid Ghannouchi leagued together with Salafi youth and

groups many times, tried to give moderate messages and called for their active participation to politics. The statements made by Rashid Ghannouchi during his meetings with Salafis had taken a wide place in Tunisian media and triggered several speculations and accusations of ‘having a hidden road map’. As a response, Ghannouchi gave an interview to Reuters, reminding that ‘Tunisia needs to take lessons from its history’ and stated that ‘demonizing’ Salafis may lead to radicalization.

However, by 2013, the country was dragged into a political crisis due to political assassinations; and security issues were again climbing higher on the agenda. The assassinations of Chokri Belaïd on 6 February 2013, and Mohamed Brahmi on 25 July 2013 triggered deep political turmoil as well as led to a total transformation of the security perception and security policies. The compromising and integrative policies that were also

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adopted by the second coalition government formed by Prime Minister Ali Larayedh on March 2013 were abandoned and a shift in security policies began. On 27 August 2013, Prime Minister Ali Larayedh blamed Ansar al-Sharia as the perpetrator of political assassinations as well as the reason behind the escalating violence in the country, and announced that it would be officially designated as a “terrorist organization”.¹² The second coalition government, which gave priority to fighting against terrorism and to security policies, initiated operations on rural areas of

the country and border lines with this announcement. During the second coalition government, the Nahda Party also increased its criticisms against Salafi groups, and accused them of spreading armament and political instability in the country. Moreover, the coalition government pointed the finger at the Salafi groups as the source of weapons seized in rural areas in addition to clashes on Tunisia-Algeria border. These policies also had been adopted and expanded by Mahdi Juma, Prime Minister of the technocrat government and former security adviser of Ali



Larayedh. The technocrat government had organized operations both by internal security forces and army on one hand, and had worked to establish a separate and independent unit for war on terrorism on the other hand.

Despite the shift in security policies, the governments in charge between 2011 and 2014 had tried to keep a balance among the security policies and democratization process. However, there are serious concerns about if the new government formed by the leadership of Nidaa Tounes also continues to carry a similar sensitivity. The founder of Nidaa Tounes and current President Caid Sebsi, just after his victory in presidential election, announced that the new government will mobilize the country's 'hard' and 'soft' powers regarding the security issues. 'Hard' powers are defined through the instability in Libya and thus border security by Sebsi, and hence 'include the technologically

advanced security measures'. In this respect, it is possible to predict that decision makers in the country, in the upcoming years, will strengthen the army, which is one of the smallest but most well-trained professional armies in the region. Thus, in the coming period, the new government as well as the president will focus on the enhancement of the army's capacity, in other words, the modernization of the army on one hand; and prioritize shifting the army towards the national and border security issues by removing it from internal security problems on the other hand.

Sebsi, while he defines soft power, refers to 'intelligence gathering' and especially gives signals of re-establishing state control over mosques in the country. First of all, intelligence gathering was one of the most important tools used during Ben Ali regime for repression. Hence, efforts mentioned by Sebsi naturally remind us of the internal

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security forces subsidiary to Ministry of Interior. Structurally reforming the security forces and intelligence services is the most prominent objectives of the period after 2011 in Tunisia, which had been defined as a police state. However, despite the successful elimination of some figures, important steps in the implementation of structural reforms so far have not been taken, and this deficiency is alarming. Under these circumstances, the return of the prominent figures from the former regime's party to active politics under the roof of Nidaa Tounes brings the possibility

of a re-establishment of the former intelligence and security network. The transfer of responsibilities regarding internal security that was assumed by the army to internal security forces is inevitable as well as necessary. However, there is a high probability that new government would likely be reluctant to adopt structural reforms in security agencies. In addition, Sebsi's statement of re-establishing state control over the mosques in the country brings the danger instrumentalisation of internal security concerns for repression through rhetoric on radicalism.



Conclusion

In the new era, there are strong indications that the army will shift its focus to a national security issues while the internal security forces will gain more strength in domestic politics. However, the ties between Nidaa Tounes and the former regime raise the risk of pushing democratization into the background. The new government, which is likely aiming to obtain practical success in the short term, will probably adopt significant security policies. Hence, the relations between Nidaa Tounes and security elites will be decisive in the future.

Providing support to countries struggling with the challenges of the transformation process is one of the most frequently recommended considerations. However, international support, especially during the times when there is a strong impression that security concerns have increased

and created an international instability, focuses on the development of the capacity of the security forces. At that point, a goal or priority of international support is not to achieve a security sector, which is based on accountability, transparency and democracy, through structural reforms. Tunisia, in 2014, is confronted with exactly this risk. This risk is increasing every day with the postponement of structural reforms. Tunisia will shift its focus on security policies with the impact of security issues spreading from the neighbouring countries such as Libya, Mali and Chad; the internal security and order issues; the distribution of tasks among the army and internal security forces; and border security issues. All these may result in missing the opportunity to implement structural reforms in security sectors, which are already resilient to reforms.

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