



**NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE FOUNDATION**

**STRATEGIC TRENDS**

March 2015

**MAGHREB**

**Islamic State regional expansion in Maghreb**

Islamic State’s increasing presence in North Africa became more evident after the heinous attack in Tunis. On March 18th two gunmen entered into the Bardo museum and killed 17 visitors from Japan, Italy, Colombia, Australia, France, Poland and Spain. Moreover, two Tunisians were among the victims, including a police officer. More than 40 people were injured before security forces managed to kill the terrorists. From a political perspective, the attack was intended to derail the democratic transition of Tunisia, often indicated as the sole success of the Arab Spring. Furthermore, it was a huge blow for Tunisia’s economy, very dependent on the tourism industry.

Conflicting reports emerged in the following days. Through an audio message and a written transcript, two days later the Islamic State (DAESH or Dawla) claimed responsibility for the attack, the worst in Tunisia since the bombing at the el-Ghriba synagogue, carried out by al-Qaeda on April 11th 2002. However, on March 23rd a large police operation netted 23 suspects in connection with the attack. Commenting the operation, Interior Minister Najem Gharsalli affirmed that the attack was organised by Lokmane Abou Sakhr, an Algerian jihadist leader of the al-Qaeda affiliated Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade, an armed group active along the border with the Algeria.

The cell was mainly composed by Tunisians, but also consisted of an Algerian and a Moroccan. The different nationalities involved represent a general trend among terrorist groups in the region, which operate primarily along frontiers that are difficult to monitor. As an example, two Islamist militants were killed in the first week of March near the Algerian border, where military has often been targeted in ambushes.

Even though the primary responsibility of the attack is not clear, it is worth noting the direct threat posed by jihadism in Maghreb and the ongoing expansion of terrorist activities in North Africa. The Islamic State has been building a presence in Tunisia, where authorities counted more than 3.000 foreign fighters who have been in Syria and Iraq. Most of them have returned and the Islamic State is also profiting from jihadists defecting from al-Qaeda affiliated groups such as Ansar al-Sharia and Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade. Many groups are also rebranding themselves, in order to gain attention and resources from the successful example of the Islamic State.

Nevertheless, Libya continues to represent the main source of instability for Tunisia and the region in general. In the first days of March, Tunisian security officers found two large arms caches near the Libyan border. Moreover, a prominent Tunisian jihadist, Ahmed al-Ruwaysi, was allegedly killed in Sirte, where Misratan brigades started to clash with the Islamic State.