

CRADLE OF THE REVOLUTION

It is hard to conceive that Tunisia was the birthplace of the Arab Spring. A wave of youthful aspiration swept the Arab world from there, but this has since come off the rails in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, while in Syria and Bahrain the Arab uprising was still-born.

In comparison to its neighbours Tunisia, following independence from France, has always been seen as a haven of tranquillity. Tunisia was the last place one would have anticipated the Arab Spring starting. It is a small country and was easy for former President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali to control; with the patronage of France, there seemed little reason not to expect more of the same. Libya under the idiosyncratic Colonel Gaddafi seemed a much more likely starting point – or indeed Egypt under Mubarak or Syria under Assad.

I have been in Tunisia on a number of occasions, and it is patently a very Westernised and secular society. Tunisians are observant Muslims but not in a way that interferes with their everyday lives. This is in part a legacy of the French colonial administration and the fact that it was an autocracy firmly ruled by former President Ben Ali for two and a half decades.

While militant Islam took seed in much of the Arab world, Tunisia was spared such turmoil. That has now changed. The West has much to be apprehensive about concerning the future of Tunisia, for it was being held up as the democratic model for the other states affected by the Arab Spring. Now, along with Egypt, Libya and Syria, it is potentially yet another major security headache that could be impossible to resolve.

In Tunisia, the very cradle of the Arab Spring, they have been watching events in Egypt, Libya and Syria with growing dismay. The fall of President Morsi and his Islamist Muslim Brotherhood government in Cairo has highlighted the ugly rift between those who want secular government and those who want it run by Sharia Law. The fear is that Islamists will ultimately get their way, not through violence but through the ballot box. The Arab world is faced not only by this source of sectarian-secular friction but also the wider sectarian Shia-Sunni civil war, which is currently raging in Iraq and Syria and threatens to engulf Lebanon. This does not bode well for Tunisia.

On the streets of Tunis it is hard to conceive that there was ever a “Jasmine Revolution”. Political slogans adorn the walls, but otherwise it feels like business as usual: armed police are still very visible but the army keeps a low profile. Tunisians have worked hard not to alienate foreign investors or the vital tourist industry, but like their Egyptian cousins have ended up with an Islamist government that

has failed to deliver. It is also notable that Tunisians remain as reluctant to discuss politics as they did under Ben Ali.

Tunisian Islamist leader Rachid Ghannouchi, who heads the Ennahda (Renaissance) Movement, must be looking to his secular opponents and the military with an air of concern. He is conducting a delicate balancing act between the secularists and the Salafists, and if he gets it wrong he could be unseated.

In the general election of October 2011 following the fall of Ben Ali, Ennahda gained just under 40 per cent of the vote, taking 89 of the 217 seats up for grabs. Ennahda took half the 30 ministerial posts, with its secretary general Hamadi Jebali becoming prime minister. Since then Ghannouchi and his supporters stand accused of being party to or at least turning a blind eye to growing radicalisation and political assassinations.

Ennahda likens itself to Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party, and its power share with two secular parties boded well until March when this was on the rocks. Ennahda claims it has a political, not religious, agenda on par with Christian Democrats, and yet radical groups such as the Salafi Ansar al-Sharia have no desire to keep post-revolution Tunisia liberal or secular. In October 2012, Lotfi Naguehd, secretary of the secular Call for Tunisia Party was, was beaten to death – presumably by Salafist supporters.

Ennahda is also accused of not doing enough to reign in the zealous activities of the armed militias of the Leagues for the Revolution. Similarly, the failure to draft a new constitution and electoral law has drawn fire from Ben Jaafar's Ettakatol party which forms part of the coalition. They are now eight months behind their deadline.

In early August tens of thousands of protestors took to the streets of Tunis demanding the resignation of the Islamist-led government. The demonstration was also to mark the six-month anniversary of the assassination of secular politician Chokr Belaid. Echoing the Jasmine Revolution of 2011, the crowds in Bardo Square chanted, “The people want the fall of the regime”.

There were similar demonstrations in February when riot police used tear gas on youths in Tunis's Bourghiba Avenue. Belaid, leader of the Movement of Democratic Patriots, was shot in his home at point blank range. His assassination led to the resignation of Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali, and his successor Ali Larayedh struggled to keep the secular parties onboard. The following month a cigarette vendor set himself on fire, mimicking the event that trigger the Arab Spring when Mohamed Bouazizi committed an act of self-immolation in December 2010.

According to Tunisian sources traditionally there has been



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Tunisian cigarette vendor Adel Khadri shortly after setting himself on fire in protest against the government

no real appeal in Tunisia for militant Islam, despite the fact that Moroccans and Tunisians fought jihad in Afghanistan against the Soviets. Previously radical Islamist activity has been fairly limited in the country thanks to Ben Ali's hand. Militants kidnapped two Austrian tourists in southern Tunisia in late February 2008. An al-Qaeda spokesman called Salah Abou-Mohammad said, "The Mujahideen have previously warned and alerted that the apostate Tunisian state cannot and will not be able to protect you [Western tourists], and the hands of the Mujahideen can reach you wherever you are on Tunisia soil". Previously, on 11 April 2002, al-Qaeda blew up a Tunisian synagogue on the island of Djerba killing 14 German tourists. Al-Qaeda official Sulaiman Abu Ghaith said his organisation took responsibility for the attack.

Today young Tunisians are being radicalised in Syria while al-Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb (AQIM), operating from Algeria, also remains a threat to southern Tunisia. In the last issue of *intersec* I highlighted Lebanese Hezbollah's role in the Syrian civil war. While Hezbollah has been helping to prop up Assad's regime, young Tunisians along with other Sunnis from the Arab world have been fighting alongside the opposition forces.

The Tunisian authorities are understandably tight-lipped about the numbers of Tunisians waging jihad in Syria. Ennahda is sensitive to allegations that the loss of state control over the country's mosques has given radical imams free reign to encourage young Tunisians to fight jihad in the name of protecting their fellow Syrian Sunnis.

Ennahda acknowledges that Tunisians are travelling to Lebanon and Turkey in order to cross over into Syria. It is believed up to 2,000 of them are fighting alongside Islamist rebels. This is quite a significant number when the total number of foreign fighters in Syria has been estimated at around 5,000. The Syrian government brands them "terrorists". The worry is that they are joining the Islamist fighters and not the secular Free Syrian Army. The likes of al-Nusra have already pledged their allegiance to al-Qaeda, and the last thing the Tunisian authorities want is the latter getting a foothold in their country.

In early June AQIM are thought to have been responsible

for the deaths of two Tunisian soldiers and the wounding of at least two others near the Algerian border. In January, in response to the French military intervention in Mali, an AQIM splinter faction killed 48 foreign workers at the In Amenas plant in Algeria. The remote area around Mount Chaambi where the Tunisian soldiers were killed is difficult to police.

In recent months the Tunisian security forces have been hit by a series of mine explosions. The Tunisian armed forces are small and have limited equipment. The army consists mainly of mechanised infantry supported by a number of tank battalions; it does have Special Forces and paratroop units that could take on a counter-insurgency role, however. The air force has a few light ground-attack aircraft and helicopters that could be employed in a similar role. These forces though would be stretched by any wide spread guerrilla activity in Tunisia's mountainous region.

Fresh elections are due in December, but whether they will solve Tunisia's underlying problems remains to be seen. Unlike Egypt, Tunisia's military has little history of meddling in politics, so while a coup may be unlikely more violence on the streets looks almost certain. Like Egypt and Morocco, Tunisia does not want any activity that could be detrimental to the valuable tourist trade.

To the west, Algeria fell into bloody conflict during the 1990s after the military headed off an Islamist electoral victory. The Arab Spring might have passed Algeria by but it remains ripe for change, as the current ruler has been in power since 1999. Even Morocco has not escaped the attentions of militant Islam and the monarchy remains under pressure for greater economic and political reforms. To the east of Tunisia both Libya and Egypt is teetering on the brink of chaos.

Ennahda knows that economic and political reform is the only way to head off radicalism. Well over a hundred Tunisians returning from Syria have been imprisoned, but the worry is that this will only serve to radicalise them further and turn them against the Tunisian government. The slow pace of reform in Egypt and Libya following the Arab Spring is having predictable results; the question is, can Tunisia avoid the same mistakes before it is too late?

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