

Tunisian army called out after terror attack kills 23

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The government of President Bejj Caid Essebsi has deployed the army in the streets of Tunisia in the wake of Wednesday's terrorist attack in downtown Tunis that claimed the lives of 23 people, including at least 20 foreign tourists.

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as ISIL or Islamic State) took responsibility for the attack, which was carried out by two gunmen dressed in military uniforms. It took place at the National Bardo Museum, which is next to the country's parliament in an upscale neighborhood surrounded by police stations and military barracks.

The principal targets of the attack were tourists who had been bused from cruise ships to the museum, which is located in a 19th century palace and houses one of the largest collections of Roman mosaics in the world. The gunmen fired on people getting off a bus and then chased a number of tourists into the museum, continuing to shoot and holding them hostage before both gunmen and tourists were killed by security forces.

There were spontaneous demonstrations in repudiation of the terrorist act both at the site of the museum and on the Tunisian capital's main thoroughfare, Avenue Habib Bourguiba.

Until now, armed actions by Islamist groups in Tunisia had been directed against the army and the security forces, particularly in the western area of Kasserine, near the Algerian border, where the Katibat Uqba Ibn Nafaa group has been carrying out an insurgency since 2012.

The reaction of the government to the attack in Tunis has been to tighten its repressive grip. The office of President Essebsi issued a statement Thursday saying, "After a meeting with the armed forces, the president has decided large cities will be secured by the army."

Tunisian Prime Minister Habib Essid, speaking on television Wednesday night, declared, "I want the Tunisian people to understand that we are in a war against terrorism and that these savage minorities do not frighten us."

On Thursday, Essid identified the two gunmen as Yassine Abidi and Hatem Khachnaoui, both Tunisian nationals. He added that Abidi had been "known to the security services" and had been "monitored" before the attack.

The father of Khachnaoui told the news web site alchourouk.com that his son had disappeared some three months ago, but had made contact recently from a cell phone with an Iraqi number.

Tunisia has sent the largest number of so-called foreign fighters into the ranks of ISIS and other Islamist groups fighting in Syria and now Iraq. Their number is estimated at between 2,000 and 4,000, and at least 500 are thought to have since returned to Tunisia.

Tunisians have also crossed the border into neighboring Libya and joined Islamist militias there. There was widespread speculation that Wednesday's attack was carried out in revenge for the death days earlier of Ahmed Al-Rouissi, a Tunisian who had led a group of ISIS fighters in Libya. He was killed in clashes near the town of Sirte, where ISIS has confronted a rival Libyan Islamist militia based in Misrata.

Al-Rouissi had also been a senior member of Ansar al Sharia, a Tunisian Islamist organization. Before joining ISIS, he was suspected of responsibility for a series of bombings in Tunisia as well as the 2013 assassinations of two secular nationalist politicians, Chokri Belaid and Mohammed Brahmi.

In the final analysis, the atrocity in Tunis was the result of the spillover from the catastrophes created by

the US wars in Iraq and Libya and the proxy war Washington has waged in Syria, backing Islamist militias in an attempt to oust the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

Combined with these external pressures are the continuing political and economic crises of Tunisian society. More than four years after the mass revolutionary upheavals that toppled the Western-backed dictatorship of Zine El Abidine Ben-Ali, none of the aspirations for jobs, democratic rights and social equality that brought the Tunisian working class—the principal force in the revolution—into struggle have been realized.

At least 20 percent of the workforce—and more than 40 percent of young workers—are unemployed. Over the past few years, the inflation rate has stayed at between 5 and 6 percent, while wages have remained stagnant, leading to a precipitous decline in living standards.

A Pew poll conducted last year found that 88 percent of Tunisians felt the economic situation was bad, 70 percent were dissatisfied with their country's political life, and that 77 percent believed that those at the top of the income ladder wielded too much power.

The terrorist attack is expected to deepen the economic crisis, dealing a blow to tourism, which accounts for 7 percent of the country's GDP and employs 12 percent of its workforce. Tourism had already fallen off since 2010. In the immediate aftermath of Wednesday's attack, major cruise ship lines and tour operators announced that they were halting trips to Tunisia.

Western governments and think tanks had hailed Tunisia as the "success story" of the so-called Arab Spring on the grounds that it has not been subjected to the kind of sociocide meted out to Libya and Syria in Washington's wars for regime change or seen the kind of mass arrests and killings that have taken place under the US-backed dictatorship of former army commander Abdel-Fatah El Sisi in Egypt.

While last December Tunisia held its first direct presidential election, and also last year adopted a new constitution that supposedly guarantees basic democratic rights, the country still lives under the shadow of the former dictatorship of Ben Ali. It is his collaborators and allies, including President Essebsi, who now hold power in alliance with a collection of ex-Stalinists, union bureaucrats and bourgeois

counterrevolutionaries.

In the weeks leading up to Wednesday's terrorist attack, a military court sentenced a blogger and former activist in the 2011 uprising, Yassine Ayari, to six months in jail on charges of defaming the army for exposing financial corruption among top military officers and defense ministry officials.

More recently, the government ordered the arrest of the popular comedian Migalo, whose real name is Wassim Lahrissi, and television host Moez Ben Gharbia on charges of having "offended the president." They are being held without bail until March 25 when they will be arraigned in court.

The terrorist attack gives the Essebsi government the pretext for assuming—in the name of fighting terrorism—police-state powers that will inevitably be used to suppress opposition within the working class to its reactionary pro-capitalist policies.



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