

# French, Tunisian presidents use terror attacks to cement military ties

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French president François Hollande took part in a march against terrorism organised on March 29 by his Tunisian counterpart, Beji Caid Essebsi, based on the “We are Charlie” march in Paris on January 11. It was in response to a jihadist attack on the Bardo Museum in central Tunis on March 18, which left 22 dead and more than 50 wounded, mostly foreign tourists.

Essebsi reciprocated with a two-day state visit to France on April 7-8. After revolutionary uprisings overthrew Western-backed dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, the French and Tunisian governments are using Islamist attacks to justify boosting police-state powers, indiscriminate surveillance, and the use of the army at home and abroad. This is designed above all to intimidate and suppress opposition in the working class against war and the austerity demanded by the banks and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

In Paris, Essebsi said, “France is our top partner...we are open to every kind of collaboration...economic, political, social and even on security,” while Hollande promised “exemplary cooperation” on these issues.

Already on March 20, two days after the Bardo assault, French imperialism was back in business supplying the Tunisian regime’s repressive forces. Hollande dispatched his interior minister, Bernard Cazeneuve, to Tunis, where he committed France to sending police to help with investigations of the Bardo attackers and providing advisors and trainers for frontier police and airport security.

Tunisia’s head of diplomacy, Taïbe Baccouche, has declared that negotiations for arms supplies are ongoing with France and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to block jihadist incursion from Libya and Algeria. France has just signed a deal to sell 36 Rafale fighter planes to the UAE, only weeks after it sold 24 Rafales to the murderous Sisi dictatorship in Egypt.

French imperialist interests in Tunisia, a former French colony, were staggered by the mass revolt of the working class and youth that forced Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali to flee to Saudi Arabia on January 14, 2011. This sparked mass protests in the Arab world, above all the revolutionary uprising in the working class that toppled Egyptian military dictator Hosni Mubarak weeks later. *Le Monde* recently lauded the transition from the Ben Ali dictatorship to the present parliamentary coalition of Essebsi’s Nidaa Tounes party with the Islamist Ennahda as a “model political transition.” In fact, the transition has been a struggle by the ruling elites to deprive Tunisian workers and youth of the fruits of the uprising, and to reestablish the feared police-state apparatus of Ben Ali. The Bardo killings are being exploited as a pretext to advance this process.

Founded in 2012 as a secular opponent of Ennahda, Nidaa Tounes united the supporters of the old Ben Ali regime and other pro-capitalist, petty bourgeois forces critical of the 2011-2014 Ennahda government.

Ennahda pursued reactionary economic policies and proved deeply unpopular in the working class. It also did little to discover the identity of the killers of Popular Front leaders Chokri Belaïd and Mohamed Brahmi, in February and July 2013, respectively.

In terms of their support for imperialism and finance capital and their hostility to the working class, Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes are indistinguishable. In this year’s legislative elections, Nidaa Tounes attacked Ennahda’s Islamism, enabling it to win the largest number of seats, though not a majority. Essebsi then chose to form a coalition government with Ennahda.

Zied Laâdhari, an Ennahda spokesman, was made a minister, while three other Ennahda deputies became junior ministers.

Hollande and France's ruling Socialist Party (PS) are eager to somehow stabilise bourgeois rule in Tunisia through some coalition of neo-colonial forces favorable to French imperialism. Having long rubbed shoulders with Ben Ali's Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD), which was a member of the so-called Socialist International together with the PS, they were happy to endorse a coalition between Ennahda and the old Ben Ali regime's supporters, aimed against the workers.

With a straight face, Hollande told Essebsi, an official in the Bourguiba and Ben Ali dictatorships, that he had "an exemplary track record regarding democracy."

In fact, the role of the Essebsi regime is to try to suppress and, if necessary, crush opposition in the working class over the conditions of poverty imposed on the Tunisian masses. It is for this reason that the French and Tunisian states are stepping up their security collaboration.

The number of people under the poverty line has increased by 30 per cent since 2011. Wages have not kept up with inflation, which grew by 5 percent last year while the Essebsi government, at the behest of the bankers, plans to cut subsidies on basic necessities. Unemployment is officially at 15 percent, 30 per cent for postgraduates.

Last February 7 and 8, violent clashes with the police took place in Ben Guerdane and Dehiba due to a crackdown on petrol trafficking over the Libyan border. These are desperately poor areas, in which the Tunisian state brutally repressed revolts, in Sidi Bouzid and Siliana in 2012 and Gafsa in 2013, under Ennahda.



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