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Incident Preliminary Analysis

Tunisia: Ben Geurdane Attack

7 March 2016

I. THE INCIDENT

Deadly clashes occurred on Monday 7 March 2016 between Tunisian security forces and armed men near the border with Libya in Ben-Gardane, Tunisia. The attacks targeted an army base, a national guard post, and a police station, leaving at least 53 people were killed in the clashes: 35 militants, 11 security officers and 7 civilians. The attack which started at dawn continued into the evening. According to reports the attackers have not yet been identified and several are still at large. Although the Tunisian government reported that no group has claimed responsibility yet, two IS-affiliated websites claimed that Islamic State group militants were involved in the fighting.

Tunisian President *Beji Caid Essebsi* denounced the attack saying it is “unprecedented and coordinated”, which also suggests that it was an attempt by the militia to take control of the region and declare it a province. Following the attack, Tunisia closed its border with Libya and imposed a curfew on both vehicles and pedestrians in Ben Gardane.

The assault comes less than a week after five militants crossed the border from Libya and were killed in a shootout with Tunisian forces in the same town. Security and military operation began in Ben Gardane the week



prior to the attack, following reports that fighters had been slipping across from Libya into Tunisia, through Ben Gardane, since the US air strikes of 18 February on ISIL training camp near Sabratha in Libya, not far from the Tunisian border. During the operation security forces clashed with armed men, which resulted in death of 5 militias and a civilian.

II. ANALYSIS

The Libyan crisis is spilling over into Tunisia at a disconcerting pace. Recently, Tunisia was the target of several terror attacks. The terrorists are clearly increasing their footprint in Tunisia taking advantage of a fledgling democracy facing socio-economic challenges such as unemployment and poverty.

The objective of the attack is not yet clear. However, it could be assumed that it was a demonstration by ISIS of its capacity to make incursions into Tunisian territory. The March 7 attacks could very well be meant to test Tunisian defenses, and to prepare for a large-scale attempt to take Ben Gardane.

Moreover, a disturbing number of Tunisian youths are reported to have travelled to Libya to join the terrorist group for training and fighting as foreign-terrorist-fighters. These people and the returnees are seemingly haunting the security of Tunisia.

Security forces were deployed in the area a week before the attack and despite these efforts, the militia managed to stage a prominent attack resulting in high casualties. Ben Gardane is also strategically situated and is regarded as a gateway to Libya. It serves as a hub for arms trafficking and smuggling of goods. As a result, there should have been a continuous and strong presence of security forces in this area.

This is not the first time Tunisian forces are clashing with terrorists along the borders of Libya in recent years. In an attempt to stop such incursions and cross border security threats, Tunisia recently erected a 200 kilometer barrier that stretches across roughly half the length of its border with Libya. The borderline has always been porous, with local communities from both ends crossing to and fro. Apparently, the constructed barrier is no deterrent to terrorist invasions. Probably, there are vulnerabilities which allowed these terrorists to enter Tunisia since they were in possession of heavy weaponry.

These terrorist attacks are certainly hurting the Tunisian economy which hinges on tourism. Tunisia cannot, at this point, afford an economic lapse which will make socio-economic grievances more intense and drive many to join criminal or terrorist groups.

III. CONCLUSIONS

The security situation in Libya is of great concern not only to Tunisia, but also to the stability of the Mediterranean region and beyond. The IS in Libya is seeking to expand by recruiting massively from neighboring countries. These countries, especially Tunisia which seems to

have fallen prey to terrorist venom coming from Libya, need to develop a robust approach in identifying and countering possible radicalization and recruitment avenues, designing deradicalization programs, and monitoring returnee terrorists. It is also important for the Tunisian government to address security loopholes that aggravate terrorism such as porosity of borders, inadequate border patrols and possible corruption.

This attack simply emphasizes an urgent need for a political solution in Libya which will alleviate the security burden on Libya's neighbors.

As foreign military interventions continue on terrorists in Libya, these terrorists will try to mount further attacks against Libya's neighbors as a decoy.

the Islamic State will likely continue to utilize its large contingent of Tunisian fighters to carry out attacks intended to undermine Tunisian stability.