



March 13, 2016

ISIS Raid on Coastal City of Ben Gardane in Tunisia Fails but Shows Rise in Daring and Inherent Threats of ISIS Infrastructure in Libya



Tunisian security forces search the city of Ben Gardane to clear it of ISIS operatives (Facebook page of the Tunisian Armed Forces, March 9, 2016).

ISIS Raid on Ben Gardane and Significance

1. On March 7, 2016, an ISIS force of several dozen operatives raided the Tunisian city of Ben Gardane near the Tunisian-Libyan border. Some of the operatives were of Tunisian origin. They apparently came from **Libya** with the intention of attacking the Tunisian military and security force installations located in Ben Gardane and damaging the image of the Tunisian regime. **The raid failed**, possibly because the ISIS operatives had not surprised the Tunisian forces (as was noted by the Tunisian president in a speech after the raid). **ISIS suffered heavy losses** (46 operatives killed and ten taken captive). There were 13 Tunisian security force dead.

2. The raid on Ben Gardane was part of **the year-old ISIS campaign against Tunisia**. The campaign is directed by **the ISIS infrastructure in Libya** and **carried out mainly by ISIS operatives of Tunisian origin**. So far the campaign has included attacks on the Bardo National Museum, foreign tourists in the city of Sousse and a bus carrying members of the presidential guard. Almost 100 people have been killed (most of them tourists and some of them Tunisian security personnel). Scores of people have been wounded, both civilians and security forces, and the Tunisian tourist industry has suffered heavy damage (See Appendix).

3. Despite the fact that the raid on Ben Gardane failed, **it indicated an increase in the daring and confidence of the ISIS infrastructure in Libya.** It was the first large ISIS raid in Tunisia, carried out by a large force that set out from Libya and was supposed to return. Until now ISIS's terrorist attacks in Tunisia had been covert, carried out either by individuals, squads or networks of jihadists attacking in the main cities. **Although this raid failed, ISIS will apparently continue its terrorist and guerilla campaign against the Tunisian regime, as it has publicly threatened.**

4. ISIS's campaign against Tunisia clearly indicates **the threats inherent in its growing infrastructure in Libya.** It threatens not only Libya but **all the countries of North Africa** (especially Tunisia, currently a main ISIS target) and **Western countries** (especially Italy, which is geographically close to Libya). The United States recently carried out several targeted killings of ISIS operatives in Libya, and it has been reported that Western military advisors are supporting the Libyan army in its war against ISIS. However, such pinpoint measures **cannot provide an effective response for the regional and international challenges posed by the strong foothold ISIS has established in Libya.**

ISIS's Raid in Ben Gardane – Overview



The border city of Ben Gardane and to the east, the border crossing at Ra's Ajdir (Google Maps).

5. At dawn on March 7, 2016, an ISIS force attacked bases and installations of the Tunisian military and security forces in the coastal border city of Ben Gardane.¹ A well-armed ISIS force of dozens of operatives carried out the raid. **They apparently came from Libya and infiltrated the city.** They may have had the help of collaborators from

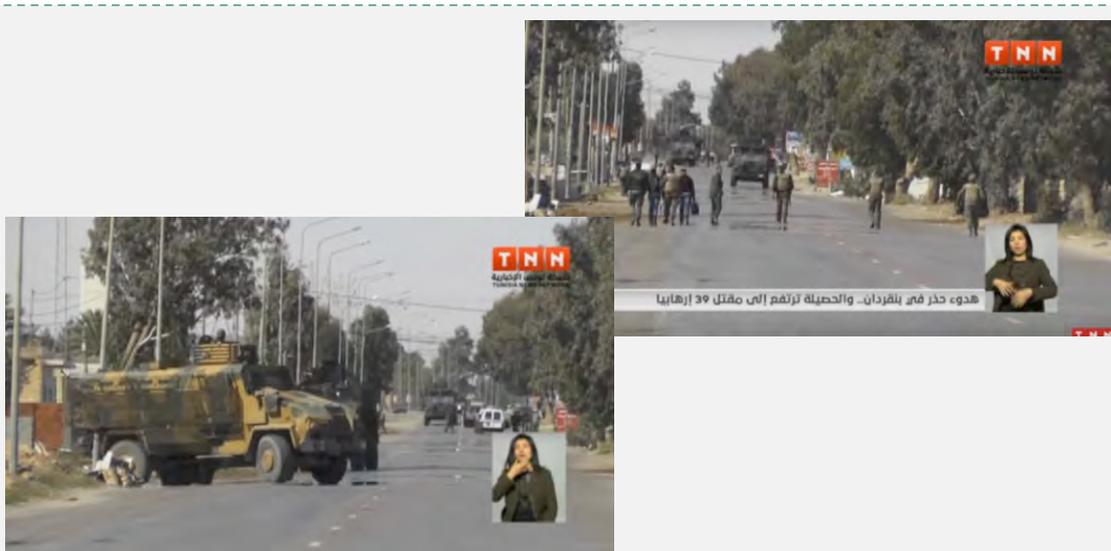
¹ Ben Gardane is a coastal city in southeast Tunisia lying close to the Libyan border. It has a population of 80,000 and is a commercial city and imports goods from Libya.

the city itself. **The objectives of the raid** were to take control of the city's military and security installations, kill their personnel, and damage the image of the Tunisian regime and security forces.

6. The attack began on March 7, 2016, at about 0530 hours with the call to prayer of the muezzin from a nearby mosque. It was followed by exchanges of fire throughout the city, ending at around noon on March 8, 2016. Tunisian security forces continued searching the streets for ISIS operatives after the fighting had ended.



Tunisian security forces patrol the streets of Ben Gardane, searching for ISIS operatives (Al-Jazeera, March 8, 2016).



Ben Gardane on March 8, 2016, the day after the ISIS raid (Shabakat Tunisia Al-Ekhbariya, March 8, 2016).

7. According to reports in Al-Jazeera, about **46 "armed men"** [i.e., ISIS operatives] and **13 members of the Tunisian security forces were killed**. Among those killed

was a Tunisian security officer who dealt with counter-terrorism activities (and was killed near his home). The Tunisian security forces took **ten ISIS operatives captive**. They also seized large quantities of weapons (Al-Jazeera, March 9, 2016, and Shabakat Tunisia Al-Ekhbariya, March 10, 2016).



Left: ISIS operative captured by the Tunisian security forces in Ben Gardane (Facebook page of Ben Gardane, March 7, 2016). Right: ISIS operatives killed in the raid on Ben Gardane (Al-Akhbar TV, Algeria, March 7, 2016).



Weapons seized by the Tunisian security forces after the raid on Ben Gardane (Al-Sabah News, March 7, 2016).

8. On March 10, 2016, a spokesman for the Tunisian government said **the authorities had identified the bodies of 22 terrorists killed in the raid on Ben Gardane. All the bodies identified [as of March 10, 2016] were those of Tunisian nationals** (Shabakat Tunisia Al-Ekhbariya, March 8, 2016). As noted, there are many

operatives of Tunisian origin in the ISIS infrastructure in Libya and **the organization's previous attacks in Tunisia were carried out by operatives of Tunisian origin** (See Appendix).

Response of the Tunisian Regime

9. Following the raid on Ben Gardane the Tunisian security forces closed the border crossings between Tunisia and Libya. They closed off the entrances to the city, imposed a curfew on the city and its surroundings and conducted street searches for ISIS operatives. On March 10, 2016, life returned to normal and mass funerals were held for those killed. Mourners carried banners with Tunisian nationalistic messages. In the days after the raid the Tunisian security forces detained people in Ben Gardane and other locations in Tunisia suspected of affiliation with ISIS (Al-Sakina, March 12, 2016).



A funeral held for one of the dead in the raid in Ben Gardane (Shabakat Tunisia Al-Ekhbariya, March 10, 2016).

10. Senior members of the Tunisian regime accused ISIS of trying to take over the city to turn it into an ISIS-controlled region in Tunisia. **Tunisian President Beji Caid Essebsi** said that the unprecedented organized raid might have been intended to take control of the region and establish a new [ISIS] province [*wilayah*]. However, **the Tunisian forces were expecting the raid and were in place**, and Tunisians, he said, could be proud of them (Al-Arabiya and Tunisian national TV, March 7, 2016). **Tunisian Prime Minister Habib Essid** held a press conference where he said that

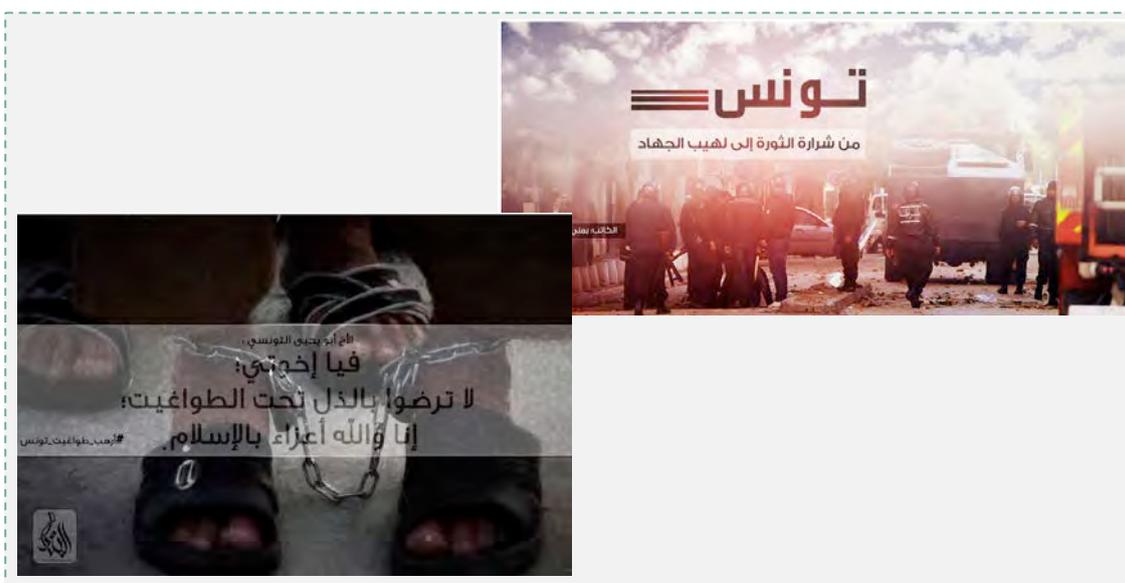
Tunisia had been exposed to a terrorist attack whose objective was "to establish an ISIS emirate in Ben Gardane" (Al-Jazeera, March 8, 2016).

11. In ITIC assessment, the raid on Ben Gardane was probably a hit-and-run raid of the sort ISIS has often carried out in Libya and other countries, and not a military operation to take control of Tunisian territory (as ISIS claimed; see below).

ISIS's Response

12. According to reports in the Arab and Tunisian media, ISIS claimed responsibility for the raid on Ben Gardane (although so far no formal version of the claim has appeared on ISIS websites). According to reports, on March 9, 2016, ISIS issued an announcement through its media unit, Al-Battar. The headline read, "The raid on Ben Gardane." According to the announcement, the raid was **the beginning of an all-out war against Tunisia**. ISIS called on the soldiers of the Tunisian army to "repent" before it was too late.

13. ISIS's announcement **was accompanied by an Internet propaganda campaign attacking the Tunisian government**. It called for a jihad against the Tunisian government and for the Muslim population to enlist (Justpaste.it, March 10, 2016). In addition, hashtags were created on the social networks to promote the overthrow the Tunisian regime, for example, #terrify the tyrants of Tunisia (#أرهب_طواغيت_تونس) (March 13, 2016). The hashtags had responses from Tunisians who attacked ISIS.



Left: ISIS picture of feet in chains. The Arabic reads "Don't be satisfied with the oppression of tyrants. We, by Allah, are proud of Islam" (Justpaste.it, March 10, 2016). Right: ISIS notice reading, "Tunisia – from the spark [that lit] the revolution [i.e., the so-called Arab Spring]." The picture shows the raid on Ben Gardane (Justpaste.il, March 10, 2016).

14. For an overview of the terrorist attacks carried out by ISIS in Tunisia during the past year, see the Appendix.

Appendix

Terrorist Attacks Carried Out by ISIS Last Year

Overview

1. ISIS's establishing itself in Libya and constructing a **territorial power base in the area around Sirte** turned it into a major Libyan, regional and international threat.² **During the past year ISIS in Libya has made a concerted effort to destabilize Tunisia**, ISIS's main target. It chose Tunisia because of its proximity to ISIS's centers of power and presence in Libya, Tunisia's weak government, its good relations with the West, and the presence of jihadist operatives affiliated with ISIS. In addition, Tunisia is a symbol because it is the country where the so-called "Arab Spring" was begun.

2. In ITIC assessment, the objectives of ISIS's activity in Tunisia are to **destabilize the regime, attack Western nationals and the tourist industry, and support the establishment an ISIS branch in Tunisia** (and to eventually turn it into another ISIS province.). It does that by dispatching operatives from its power base in Libya to Tunisia on terrorist and guerilla missions and by supporting the activities of Tunisian jihadists (including training them in military camps in Libya and providing them with weapons). **The large-scale hit-and-run raid on Ben Gardane, with operatives apparently leaving from bases inside Libya, is ISIS's new modus operandi, which it may continue using despite the failure of the raid on Ben Gardane.**

3. Most of the ISIS operatives who carried out attacks in Tunisia during the past year were **jihadists of Tunisian origin**. They were trained in ISIS camps in Libya and dispatched to Tunisia on missions. The terrorists who carried out the attack at the Bardo National Museum and in the city of Sousse were Tunisians who were apparently trained at the same camp near the city of Sabratah (located not far from the Libyan-Tunisian border³). On February 18, 2016, American planes attacked and apparently killed a Tunisian ISIS operative named **Nour al-Din Shoushan** in a training camp in Sabratah. An American spokesman reported that the attack had been carried out because it was believed that Shoushan and other ISIS operatives in the facility were planning to attack American and Western interests in the region.

² For further information, see the January 21, 2016 in-depth ITIC study "ISIS in Libya: a Major Regional and International Threat."

³ **Sabratah** is an important Libyan city located west of the capital city of Tripoli, half way between Tripoli and the border crossing at Ra's Ajdir. ISIS's military presence in the city is supported by operatives from the Salafist organization Ansar al-Sharia, but does not control the city. ISIS and local militias are engaged in power struggles in Sabratah..

Prominent Showcase Attacks in Tunisia

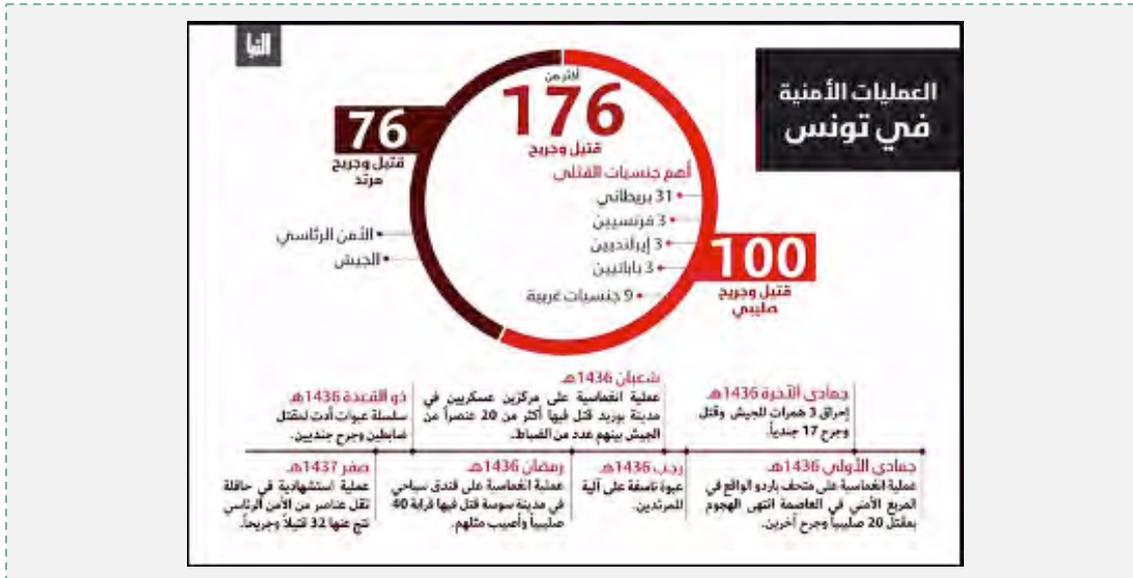
4. During the past year **ISIS carried out a number of showcase attacks in Tunisia**, notable for their daring, intending to cause as much loss of life as possible to civilians (including tourists) and local security forces. In addition, showcase terrorist attacks planned by ISIS were prevented by the Tunisian security forces (attacks on hotels and vital facilities, and the assassination of politicians). **The three most prominent showcase attacks carried out by ISIS during the past year were the following:**

a. **The attack at the Bardo National Museum in the capital city of Tunis (March 18, 2015):** Two armed terrorist carried out a mass-casualty attack at the **Bardo National Museum**, which is near the Tunisian Parliament building. **Twenty-three people were killed, most of them tourists.** The terrorists held them captive for several hours until they were overcome by the Tunisian security forces. An ISIS-affiliated network calling itself the Army of the Islamic Caliphate in Tunisia claimed responsibility for the attack. The network warned "all the infidels in Tunisia" that it was the first attack in a series (ISIS forum, March 19, 2015). **The terrorists who carried out the attack had trained at an ISIS camp near the city of Sabratah**, possibly the same camp where the terrorists who carried out the attack in Sousse had trained (See below).

b. **The attack on Western tourists in the coastal city of Sousse (June 26, 2015):** A terrorist disguised as a tourist entered a hotel in the holiday city of Sousse, south of Tunis. He went to the hotel beach and opened fire, killing 38 tourists, most of them from Britain. He was killed in an exchange of fire with the hotel security staff. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack. The terrorist was **Seifeddine Rezgui Yacoubi**, a Tunisian who had been radicalized. According to media reports, **he trained in a camp near the city of Sabratah**, the same camp where the terrorists who carried out the attack at the Bardo National Museum had trained.

c. **The attack on the bus carrying members of the presidential guard in Tunis (November 24, 2015):** A suicide bomber wearing an explosive belt blew himself up near a bus carrying members of the presidential guard in the middle of Tunis, **killing at least 12 of them.** ISIS claimed responsibility. The Tunisian authorities reported that the terrorist was **Hassan Abdelli**, a Tunisian from a working class neighborhood near the capital, who had been radicalized. The authorities suspected the explosive belt used in the attack had been brought in from Libya.

5. **ISIS boasts about the terrorist campaign it is carrying out in Tunisia.** On November 28, 2015, ISIS issued an infographic describing its attacks in Tunisia. According to the ISIS, since the attack at the museum in March 2015 it had carried out six more attacks in Tunisia killing and wounding 100 foreign nationals and 76 members of the Tunisian security forces (Akhbardawlatalislam.wordpress.com. November 28, 2015).



ISIS's infographic claiming six terrorist attacks in Tunisia since the attack on the museum. According to ISIS, 176 people were killed and wounded, 100 of them foreigners (33 British) and 76 Tunisians (soldiers and members of the presidential guard) (Akhbardawlatalislam.wordpress.com. November 28, 2015).