



NATO Foundation  
*Defense College*

Maghreb July 2016

## **Projecting stability beyond NATO's borders: an Intelligence Fusion Centre in Tunisia**

On the occasion of the 27<sup>th</sup> formal meeting of the heads of state and government of member countries in Warsaw, the Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) Jens Stoltenberg announced a comprehensive project to project stability beyond the alliance's borders. Stoltenberg mentioned a series of measures intended to stabilise the eastern members of the organisation such as the Baltic States and the Eastern European countries. Moreover, he confirmed the organisation's increasing interest in the southern front.

NATO is already committed to stabilising Afghanistan and Iraq, where the organisation is already present in different roles since several years. Nevertheless, Stoltenberg also mentioned two Maghreb countries on which the Atlantic alliance is focussing on: Tunisia and Libya. Considered as the success story of the Arab Spring, Tunisia is currently engaged in a quite difficult political transition. Intertwined economic setbacks and frequent terrorist attacks are pushing the country in a downward spiral. International support is needed to sustain the transition and in July 2015 the United States designated Tunisia its sixteenth Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA). According to the US State Department, the MNNA status offers tangible privileges, such as the eligibility for training, loans of equipment for cooperative research and development and foreign military financing for commercial leasing of several defence articles. The designation eased reviews and delivery timelines, streamlining procedures. As a result, in 2016 the US tripled their security assistance to Tunisia to roughly \$100 million and Tunisian authorities were able to install a 125-mile border wall and trenches equipped with electronic surveillance, creating a buffer zone against terrorists and traffickers.

The MNNA status and the military assistance from Washington helped the country to improve its defence system against terrorist groups. For example, on the 7<sup>th</sup> of March the terrorist offensive against the border city of Ben Guerdane was pushed back by Tunisian security forces. At the same time, there are growing concerns about the ability of the Tunisian military to contain IS' comeback in the country. In the last years Tunisia has provided the greatest number of foreign fighters to the terrorist organisation of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. According to recent estimates, there are at least 5.000 Tunisian fighting in Syria, Iraq and Libya. The recent setbacks of the organisation are worrisome, in particular those Libya. In fact, in his latest report to the Security Council, the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon warned about the risk of foreign fighters fleeing Sirte under the pressure of Libyan militias to regroup in neighbouring countries.

In this context, the 9<sup>th</sup> of July Stoltenberg announced the establishment of an Intelligence Fusion Centre in Tunisia. Aimed at providing support to Tunisian Special Forces, the Centre will involve military and civilian agencies, sharing

intelligence across different disciplines and focusing on the phenomenon of the Tunisian foreign fighters. The initiative could support Tunisian counterterrorism activities, deepening the cooperation between NATO and Tunis. However, two days after the Tunisian Ministry of Defence apparently contradicted Stoltenberg, saying that Tunisia has already an Intelligence Fusion Centre financed by Tunisian institutions and managed by Tunisian officials. The government confirmed the existence of bilateral and multilateral cooperation programmes, with NATO already providing training to the Tunisian military on intelligence procedures.

It is noteworthy that the denial occurred two days before the visit in Paris of the Tunisian Foreign Minister. On 13<sup>th</sup> July Khemaïes Jhinaoui met his French counterpart Jean-Marc Ayrault and demanded more support by France and the European Union. Scrutinising Tunisia's reluctance to deep its partnership with NATO, an increasing competition of different actors over the economic and military support to Tunisia seems to emerge. In March Ayrault was already in Tunis, where he confirmed France's support to the Tunisian government in the economic and military sectors. According to press sources, Paris is already providing intelligence to Tunisian security forces and approved a €20 million package to equip them (plus a €1 billion economic package to develop Tunisia's poorest regions), while Germany and the United Kingdom showed interest in training the Tunisian security forces. A better coordination between all these actors/competitors is needed, in smoothing Tunisia's transition and reinforcing the two decades old Mediterranean Dialogue of NATO.