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The role of security assistance in reconfiguring Tunisia's transition

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ABSTRACT

In many contexts in the Mediterranean, Security Assistance (SA) is perceived to have contributed to state fracture or prolonged conflict. In Tunisia, in contrast, SA has increased the performance and capacities of the security forces in matters of counterterrorism and migration control. However, in this article, by analysing SA's reordering impacts, I argue that it has *interacted* with political developments to reconfigure Tunisia's volatile political landscape in two ways. Firstly, SA programmes have acted to reinforce the coercive capacities of Tunisia's security forces *vis-à-vis* the general population. Secondly, vertical SA practices contributed to the reconfiguration of power dynamics between different actors in Tunisia's security sector, helping consolidate power in the increasingly authoritarian hands of the executive as well as the increasingly politicized security forces. Furthermore, in the final section of this article, I reflect upon the entanglements between security assistance, Tunisian political economy and the economic interests of many provider states. In doing so, I make the case for a 'recoupling' of security studies and political economy in analysis of external interventions in the Mediterranean to better understand their reordering impacts.

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Introduction

When the Ben Ali regime fell in January 2011, it was clear the establishment of a democratic regime would require a radical overhaul of Tunisia's security sector. Ben Ali's autocratic regime had drawn its legitimacy and durability from a social contract based on providing a basic level of economic and physical security and an exceptionally heavy-handed police state for those that resisted (Hibou, 2006). The police were key to maintaining his power while the Tunisian armed forces had been left purposefully underfunded and politically marginalized for fear of military coups[1]. Thus, the Tunisian transition demanded significant reform of the repressive Internal Security Forces

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(ISF) and the Ministry of the Interior (MoI)[2] responsible for them. It also posed questions about the role of the armed forces moving forward.

External actors, fearing further instability in the Mediterranean region, were quick to offer assistance to the Tunisian transition including, but not limited to, loans and official development aid (OECD, 2022[3]). A proportion of this international assistance was aimed at reforming and increasing the capacities of Tunisia's security forces (Securityasssitancemonitor, n.d[4]). However, since 2011, Security Sector Reform (SSR), which emphasizes the increased oversight, transparency and effectiveness of security services has slid down the political agenda[5]. Meanwhile, Security Assistance (SA), defined here as foreign actors training and equipping the security forces of another nation state, has become the focus of security partnerships in Tunisia. Tunisia is not the largest recipient of SA in the region (Binder, 2021), but has received comparatively large amounts since 2011 particularly given its size and lack of full-scale conflict. This combined with Tunisia's transitional political context means that SA is arguably able to have more impact[6]. Indeed, SA programmes in Tunisia have contributed to the legitimacy, performance and capacities of the security forces in matters of counterterrorism and migration control (Cimini & Santini, 2021; Santini & Cimini, 2019; Shah & Dalton, 2020; Yousif, 2020).

SA is part of a broader trend of externalization of security as well as post-interventionism in the Mediterranean (Santini & Tholens, 2018). Within policy-making circles, SA has been modelled as a technocratic and apolitical answer to SSR's supposedly problematic and Eurocentric normative agenda[7]. However, as scholars have shown, SA is inherently political (Reno, 2018; Billerbeck & Tansey, 2019; Rolandsen et al., 2021; Tholens & Al-Jabassini, 2023). Training and equipping foreign security forces necessitates human interactions in already complex political and institutional landscapes situated in parts of the world often experiencing instability and conflict. In proxy conflict settings, civil war contexts or authoritarian systems, SA can contribute to state fracture, prolong conflict, or reinforce the coercive capacities of the state (Billerbeck & Tansey, 2019; Reno, 2018; Rolandsen et al., 2021). However, there have been fewer contributions which have engaged with the impacts of SA in transitional political systems such as Tunisia (Santini & Tholens, 2018; Santini, 2018). This is notwithstanding several important scholarly interventions exploring the 'unintended consequences' of SA on Tunisia's security sector and political system (Cimini & Santini, 2019). Indeed, in the post July 25 context[8], scholars and commentators alike have reflected upon how, or if, provider states should continue to engage with Tunisian policymakers and security forces (Yerkes, 2022).

However, focusing on the post July 25 period risks obscuring systemic violent and coercive practices which defined Tunisia's security sector under Ben Ali, and which have failed to disappear despite Tunisia's supposed

transition to democracy. Such practices intensified in the post 2015 security environment long before Kais Saied's power grab (Ben Mbarek, 2021; Jrad, 2020), raising questions regarding the potential role significant amounts of SA might have played in such processes. Notwithstanding the persistence of police brutality and misuse of coercive state power, from colonial security governance (Thomas, 2012) to contemporary practices, we are witnessing more overt (mis)use of the security apparatuses of the state under Saied than that which we had previously seen in the post 2011 context (Boussen, 2021; Jrad, 2020). Scholars and journalists alike have documented repressive security policies and practices in the context of Tunisian domestic politics (Ben Mbarek, 2021; Boussen, 2021). However, few place such discussions within the context of international interventions and more specifically, SA. Similarly, because of the persistence of disciplinary silos indicative to international relations scholarship (Weldes &Wynne Hughes, 2017), it is rare for interventions to bring together security studies and political economy in analysis of the *reordering* impacts of SA on Tunisia's political landscape and security sector as I do here. Indeed, I argue that we can only fully understand the reordering impacts of external actors' interventions in Tunisia's security sector when engaging with their interventions in other aspects of Tunisian politics.

Thus, in this article, I analyse the way in which SA has *interacted* with domestic political developments in Tunisia to reorder and reshape power relations within Tunisia's security sector. In doing so, I argue that that SA has *interacted* with political developments in Tunisia to reconfigure Tunisia's volatile political landscape in two substantial ways. Firstly, SA programmes have acted to reinforce the coercive capacities of the security forces *vis-à-vis* the general population. This has become more problematic since the authoritarian turn linked to the Presidency of Kais Saied despite not being *the* cause of this democratic backsliding. Secondly, vertical SA practices have contributed to the reconfiguration of power dynamics between different actors in Tunisia's security sector, consolidating power in the increasingly repressive hands of the executive at the expense of civilian oversight. In the final section of this article, I explore the role of socio-economic issues in reconfiguring Tunisia's political landscape. Here I demonstrate that although these other explanatory factors might seem disconnected to SA, they are, in fact, indicative of the entanglements of security co-operation and the economic objectives of provider states. Thus, I argue, the case of SA to Tunisia since 2011 is particularly significant for those theorizing the reordering impacts of SA in the Mediterranean and beyond.

Theorizing SA

I contend that SA is an international practice, which is 'centred on mutually constitutive reordering dynamics' (Tholens & Al-Jabassini, 2023). Within this framework, there are two mains sets of practices. The first are vertical

practices, including negotiation, co-operation, contestation, and dialogue between recipient and provider. Horizontal practices, in contrast, refer to the way in which SA is shaped by interactions between SA providers both within a recipient state and other states where SA programmes are being conducted (Tholens & Al-Jabassini, 2023). While the Tunisian case provides pertinent examples of horizontal practices[9], in this article I focus my investigation on the impacts and implications of vertical practices. These include knowledge production, generation and transfer; material practices; the agency of weapons and equipment; and network making (Ibid).

Furthermore, inspired by the work of scholars calling for a 'recoupling' of security studies and International Political Economy (IPE) (Best, 2017; Elias, 2015), I explore the complex entanglements between SA and provider state's economic objectives in Tunisia. The role of economic concerns in Tunisia's authoritarian drift, as well as the recourse to police brutality, might seem entirely disconnected from SA. However, Tunisia's security co-operation with external actors, has long been, and continues to be, connected to maintaining the model of extractive economic relations, from imperial, (see Thomas, 2012) to neoliberal, and punishing dissent that does emerge. By engaging with the framework of vertical SA practices and their entanglement with economic questions, I explore the reordering impacts of SA on Tunisia's fragile transition, thus contributing to a broader understanding of SA in transitional contexts.

This article is based on data collected in interviews conducted between July 2019 and May 2022 with Tunisian and foreign journalists, activists, political elites, NGO workers, researchers and securocrats as well as diplomats[10]. Drawing on this interview data, existing research, documentary analysis of secondary sources and adopting a practice-based theoretical approach, I analyse SA programmes to Tunisia's security forces.

The role of SA in reinforcing the coercive capacities of the state

SA has interacted with political developments in Tunisia to contribute to the reconfiguration of its fragile transition, not least by reinforcing the coercive capacities of the state. In this section, I explore vertical SA practices arguing they have reinforced the coercive capacities of the state in two ways; shifting emphasis from reform to capacity building and contributing to police militarization.

Changing priorities: SSR to SA

With growing political violence and several terrorist attacks between 2011–14, priorities appeared to be shifting away from SSR and towards capacity building. Then, in 2015, terrorist attacks at Bardo and Sousse acted as a major

'shock' in Tunisian politics and its external relations (Santini, 2018, p. 96). The speed and extent of reforms of the ISF, as well as the decades of marginalization of the armed forces, were perceived to have undermined the efficiency of the security forces, leaving Tunisia vulnerable to both internal and external security threats (Wehrey, 2020). Simultaneously, regional instability and the transnational threat of ISIS, meant SA providers were keen to ensure that Tunisia did not become the 'weak link' of the MENA region[11]. Moreover, the so-called European migration crisis of 2015–6 meant that Tunisia's relations with its European partners were dominated by migration control and border management (Kaunert et al., 2020). Thus, by the end of 2015 there was a general sense that both provider states and domestic actors had turned their back on the SSR agenda, favouring SA aimed at capacity building in terms of counterterrorism and border management.

This change in priorities was reflected in the changing nature of SA offered by providers. In 2015, the United States tripled its military spending to Tunisia (Faleg, 2017). The same year, the G7+ launched a mechanism designed to coordinate SA to avoid duplication and fragmentation. The G7+ working group format has been accredited by many security experts and scholars with the relative success of SA to Tunisia since 2015, particularly in terms of increasing the effectiveness of the ISF and the Tunisian military forces[12] (Cimini & Santini, 2021; Santini, 2018). Indeed, some claim that SA is the main reason ISIS, when at the height of its operations, was unable to gain a foothold in Tunisia (Dworkin & El Malki, 2021b, p. 10). Nonetheless, it was demonstrative of a broader step away from the normative agenda of SSR as 'reform agendas got eaten up in the technical train and equip focus of the working groups'[13] and emphasis shifted towards performance and capacity building.

At times, this focus on capacity building and performance meant reinforcing the coercive capacities of the state. The security imperative from 2015 led to greater engagement with Tunisia's more controversial ISF, who, because of their central role in the former regime's authoritarian governance, had been overarchingly kept at arm's length from SA programmes between 2011–15 with provider states initially emphasizing the need for reform rather than capacity building (Kartas, 2014; . Santini, 2018). From 2015, various aspects of the G7+ working group system were run between the relevant provider state authorities, the MoI and ISF (see Santini, 2018). The US, for example, trained 5000 Tunisian security personnel, including ISF, between 2009 and 2019[14]. In 2012, the US administration requested $8bn worth of funding for police and judicial assistance in Tunisia for the the following financial year (Arieff, 2012). By 2021, the congressional allocation through this same mechanism was worth $75 m (Binder, 2021). Providers such as France, have focussed on developing rapid response police units and training rank and file police officers to increase their ability respond to unfolding

terrorist attacks (Santini, 2018, p. 100). Meanwhile Germany, along with the US, has worked closely with the ISF on issues of border management (Stahl & Treffler, 2019, p. 32). Thus, through the level of training and funding they have provided to both the armed forces, and the more historically problematic ISF since 2015, SA providers have reinforced the coercive capacities of the state while simultaneously shifting emphasis away from reform agendas.

Police militarization

SA programmes, through training and equipping Tunisia's ISF, often alongside Tunisia's armed forces, have contributed to a certain militarization of Tunisia's police force. Police militarization can refer to 'police acquisition of military grade weaponry and equipment, the creation of special police units organized along military lines, or a police culture that increasingly views the use of force as appropriate in a wide range of circumstances' (De Bruin, 2021, p. 104). The Tunisian ISF, with its traditional paramilitary-like national guard, its specialist militarized units such as the Anti-Terrorism Brigade (Bruin & Karabatak, 2022), access to militarized equipment through SA programmes and incidents of police brutality fulfils various aspects of these criteria. Although beating protestors is not a high-tech military-grade practice, it is well established that militarized 'police forces will be more repressive than their civilian counterparts' (De Bruin, 2021: 108)

> *Access to military-grade weaponry and training provides police forces with greater capacity for violence. It can also shape the culture of police organizations in a way that increases the willingness of officers to engage to high-risk situations. At the same time, there is little evidence that militarization policing makes police officers safer or decreases crime or civilian victimization (Bruin & Karabatak, 2022, p. 96).*

Tunisia's ISF have, at times, adopted a more militarized approach when dealing with civilian populations both in Tunisia's borderlands (Meddeb, 2021) as well as protests in urban centres (Ben Mbarek, 2021). Importantly, in Tunisia, as with many states across the Mediterranean (Karim, 2021), SA programmes have played a part in this militarization be it through training programmes or equipment. Even before the shift in priorities of the 2015 'shock', the US provided 10 tonnes of military grade equipment anti-terror equipment to Tunisia's security services including the police (Nkala, 2022). Of course, in the post 2015 context, the 'train' and 'equip' element of SA programmes to Tunisia's ISF only continued further down the logic of militarization. For example, in SA training programmes, which proliferated after 2015, Tunisian ISF are often trained by foreign military officers and alongside Tunisian armed forces. Research conducted with police forces globally suggests that this 'cross-training' homogenizes both tactics and forces, and therefore encourages police to think and act more militaristically by emphasizing the

use of force or perceiving civilians – particularly protesters – as threats' (Karim, 2021). This homogenization of tactics and forces, I argue, can be seen in analysis of Tunisian ISF working to secure Tunisia's borderlands who often train and carry out missions in conjunction with the armed forces[15]. On various occasions Tunisian forces have conducted highly secretive joint exercises with US military personnel (Blaise et al., 2019; Mekhennet & Ryan, 2016). Following one such joint mission in Gafsa in March 2015, when several combatants were killed, the MoI proudly published photos of deceased individuals (Mekhennent & Ryan, 2016). Officials stated (off the record) that the intention had never been to take these individuals in alive (Ibid). Such practices clearly go beyond the scope of civilian policing.

Unintended consequence or vertical SA practice?

Thus, as we have seen studies have shown that external actors equipping foreign police forces with military grade equipment and training contributes to repressive practices (Bruin & Karabatak, 2022; De Bruin, 2021). This, I argue, is linked to vertical SA practices of knowledge sharing involved in SA training programmes (Tholens & Al-Jabassini, 2023) rather than being an 'unintended consequence' of SA. Cases of police brutality and the violent consequences of the militarization of the American police, as well as other provider states such as France, are numerous and well researched (Karim, 2021; Metheven, 2021). In interviews, it was suggested that the tactics of the Tunisian police in dealing with the recent rounds of near-continuous protests were not dissimilar to those seen in provider states. One example is the use of armoured vehicles with water cannons by the Tunisian police to dispel peaceful protestors in January 2022 as well as the use of tear gas, as used in police responses to the Black Lives Matter movement in the US or that to the *gilet jaune* in France. Official US documents recognize SA programmes with police forces in Tunisia have focused on 'crowd control techniques'[16] (US Department of Defence, n.d). Furthermore, in SA training programmes, it is claimed, Tunisian police officers have been taken aback at the practices advised by their foreign trainers when dealing with protests and social unrest[17]. It is, nonetheless, hard to verify such claims given that SA programmes, including those with the police, operate in secrecy. It does, however, indicate the incongruence at the heart of contemporary 'at arm's length' interventions in the Mediterranean – training and equipping the apparatuses of coercive state power to achieve peace.

Similarly, studies of international police assistance (Friesendorf, 2016) and military training, including those with Tunisian security personal (Grewal, 2022), have shown that foreign trainers often impart knowledge far beyond the scope of the curriculum. US police assistance, for example, it has been shown can lead to violent policing of racialized communities (Bruin &

Karabatak, 2022) as well as an increased recourse to use of force compared to other provider states such as Germany (Freisendorf, 2016) or UN policing interventions (Mailhot et al., 2022). While certain repressive practices are not formal aspects of SA programmes, such tendencies can result from the interaction between the organizational cultures of provider and recipient (Ibid). Knowledge generation and transfer are in constant renegotiation even after training programmes have ended (Tholens & Al-Jabassini, 2023). This is particularly the case in SA 'training the trainers' scenarios when training programmes are being constantly reproduced and subtly, perhaps even invertedly, adapted. Thus, training and equipping the police forces has, at times, undermined the Tunisian transition in terms of SSR, as acknowledged by SA providers, 'the prioritization of performance in the US – Tunisian security partnership has undercut efforts towards security sector reform' (Yousif, 2020, pp. 3–4).

Turning a blind eye?

By reinforcing the coercive capacities of the state, SA providers have left themselves open to criticism in the context of high-profile security force abuses such as in the policing of political protests and social movements. Since 2011, Tunisia's ISF have responded to protests with the use of water cannons, tear gas, and more violent tactics against protesters across Tunisia (Al-Monitor, 2022; Jazeera, 2021). However, in recent years, it is clear the resources at the MoI's disposal to police such protests movements have significantly increased under SA programmes. One Tunisian academic tweeting on the 14th January of 2022 said 'a huge thank you to all the funding bodies who have given the MoI so many resources that the police were able to lockdown central Tunis in 25 mins' (Myriam, 2022). Furthermore, while marginalized communities, such as young men from deprived urban neighbourhoods, have long faced violent interactions with the police (Al-Monitor, 2022; Ben Mbarek, 2021; Jazeera, 2021) since 2021, we have seen far more overt cases of ISF violence and harassment of journalists and political elites who had previously enjoyed relative freedom during the post transition period.

Significantly, SA providers are aware of the role their assistance is playing in reinforcing the coercive capacities of the state and are reflecting upon how to respond to political developments within Tunisia. For example, there is recognition that Germany is 'increasingly cooperating with security forces that repeatedly violate human rights principles and other international principles' (Stahl & Treffler, 2019, p. 39). However, it seems SA providers are willing to turn a blind eye in return for co-operation in dealing with terrorism and migration implying that provider states' security objectives outweigh moral considerations.

Reconfiguring political power in the security sector

SA has interacted with political developments in Tunisia to further shift the balance of power in security matters towards the executive, MoI and the MoD at the expense of parliamentary oversight and decentralization. This is because, SA relies on vertical practices of *network making* –the interactions between a plethora of actors within SA interventions which contribute to the eventual evolution and renegotiation of SA (ITholens & Al-Jabassini, 2023).

Access by any means necessary

Post-2015, security politics became another area of domestic politics that was characterized by the so-called Tunisian consensus[18]. Consequently, there was very little contestation of the security imperative nor of the need for supposedly extraordinary measures. The President's constitutionally defined powers and creative interpretation of exceptional powers granted through the state of emergency, enabled him to centralize decision-making in a political environment where security had become the ultimate political priority (Abbes, 2017). In contrast, parliamentary oversight of the security sector was further impeded by chronic lack of funding (Yerkes & Ben Yahmed, 2019).

Vertical SA practices contributed to this reconfiguration of political power in matters of national security. Evidence of this was demonstrated in the reordering impacts of the interactions between providers and recipients in the G7 format including the executive committee. During the Presidency of Beji Caid Essebsi, G7+ meetings were chaired by the former Tunisian national security advisor, Kamel Akrout, regarded by international actors as a highly efficient political heavyweight. While the G7+ format was designed to limit the leverage of Tunisian political elites by making it harder from them to play providers off one another, scholars have noted the agency of Akrout in reconfiguring the balance of power in matters of national security (see Santini, 2018, p. 90). The shrewd politics of Akrout, while no longer in position, contributed to the reconfiguration of the balance of power in matters of security, including negotiation of SA packages, towards the executive. This recalibration paved the way for some troublesome manifestations of increased power in the period that has followed.

SA providers have sought to gain privileged access to the MoI and MoD for intelligence and general influence. They believed providing training and equipment is the best way to achieve this goal and several SA providers now have units stationed within both ministries[19]. The political imperative to gain access by any means necessary has, at times, undermined the coherence of SA programmes, led to competition between providers, and consolidated the Ministry's monopoly of power in the security sector (Aliaga & O'farell,

2017)[20]. Officials within the MoI and MoD are acutely aware that provider governments seek privileged access to intelligence and apply pressure to their teams on the ground to deliver on their strategic objectives to control migration and fight terrorism. Notwithstanding the recruitment of new personnel in the last decade, it has been well documented that despite the transition, many of the old guard of the former Tunisian regime remained in prominent positions or have subsequently reintegrated back into the MoI[21] (Goldberg, 2015). The continuity of high-ranking personnel in the MoI, 'efficient, but not clearly committed to reform' (Dworkin & El Malki, 2021b, p. 12) is particularly significant in the context of SA. During the rule of Ben Ali, officials within the MoI were well-versed in engaging with providers to ensure that Tunisia got the best deal – maximizing the emphasis on training, equipment and funding and minimizing SSR[22]. MoI officials, including those associated with the former regime, adopt this same shopping list mentality when engaging with SA providers[23]. Provider states continued engagement with the MoI and the Tunisian ISF despite attempts of factions within the MoI to resist reform agendas as well as the return of repressive practices indicates that provider states' counterterrorism and migration control objectives are their ultimate priority.

Politization of the forces of state security

Perceived improvements in the effectiveness, performance, professionalism and legitimacy of the security forces are due, in no small part, to the extensive training and equipment provided by external actors. This supposed rise in the performance and legitimacy of Tunisia's security forces has been evidenced through various opinion polls (ArabBarometer, 2019). Surveys have consistently found that Tunisians are less concerned about the threat of terrorism then they were in 2015 when providers shifted their focus to increasing capacities and performance.[24]. Many of those interviewed for this article emphasized that this was due, in no small part, to the SA provided by external actors. Vitally, studies suggest 'individual citizens do not seem to distinguish professionalization or anticorruption policies from those that increase the material capabilities of police forces' (Bruin & Karabatak, 2022, p. 103). This indicates perceptions of performance or legitimacy are not necessarily the result of objective improvements but rather a sense of increased capacities. These are provided through SA programmes. Indeed, while levels of trust in many government institutions such as the Judiciary and Parliament have been falling since 2014, trust in the police and armed forces has remained comparatively high (ArabBarometer, 2019, p. 7). It has long been argued that security has played a significant role in the Tunisian social contract (Hibou, 2006). But in the post 2011 context, lack of trust in political parties and institutions coupled with comparatively high levels of trust among the

security services, has helped facilitate a certain politization of the security forces. Indeed, a recent study based on both their own as well as Arab barometer survey data, Albretch, Brufano & Koehler found that 'amid political uncertainty and economic crisis in Tunisia's transition to democracy, growing anti-system sentiments largely fuel popular support for military role expansion' (2022: 334).

It is for this reason that political elites attempt to performatively associate themselves with these institutions. For example, Kais Saied seeks to construct his claims to legitimacy based on his self-proclaimed role as the head of the security state (Cordall, 2021). In February 2022, he announced the dissolution of the Supreme Judicial Council, the nation's top judicial watchdog, surrounded by the commanders of the ISF and the Tunisian military forces. The symbolic significance of MoI, ISF and military personnel at Saied's announcement was not missed by Tunisian political commentators[25]. Furthermore, on 25 July 2021, President Kais Saied 'suspended' the Tunisian Parliament using a creative interpretation of Article 80 of the Constitution of 2014. The Tunisian military enforced this presidential degree stationing tanks and soldiers outside the Parliament to prevent Members of Parliament from entering Parliament and military personnel closed the offices of Prime Minister and several other government officials. Masmoudi (2021) describes these actions as a violation of Article 18 of the Tunisian Constitution of 2014 which demands the political neutrality of the armed forces. However, others have suggested that the armed forces carrying out the orders of the Commander-in-Chief is not a political act but an attempt to withdraw from embroiling themselves as deciding actors in political disputes (Guerfali, 2022 cited in Bajec, 2022).

Regardless of the position one takes on the events of July 25, the armed forces in Tunisia today are far more well-resourced, effective and political than they were at the point of departure of Ben Ali in 2011. SA programmes have played a significant role in this process. In 2010, Tunisia spent 1.4 per cent of its GDP on the military (Brooks & White, 2021, p. 135). However, by 2016, this had risen to 2.32 per cent (Bonhomme, 2018). While the amount Tunisian policymakers allocated to the military increased greatly in this period, the level of training and equipment provided to Tunisia through SA programmes has skyrocketed. In 2010, the Tunisian military received $20.8 m of security assistance. By, 2017, this had risen to $141 m (securityassistance.org[26]). SA has transformed the armed forces from a chronically underfunded, small and apolitical force into a modernized, effective and well-regarded military who are, however, increasingly politized and implicated in articulations of repressive state power[27].

While SA programmes have contributed to a politization of the forces of state security through elevating their status and legitimacy, research also suggests that SA programmes contribute to changing political attitudes

among armed forces personnel (Gill, 2004; Grewal, 2022). Grewal (2022) has found that Tunisian military personnel trained in the US, for example, tend to have more favourable attitudes towards military personnel voting and entering politics, whereas training in France leads to less favourable attitudes towards this. Given that large numbers of high ranking and lower ranking Tunisian military personnel have studied alongside US trainers and in the US since 2011, logic follows that military attitudes towards the military's involvement in politics have shifted. Further research on this is required. However, it is notable that it is ISF and armed forces personnel who have carried out the orders to close Parliament, the Supreme Judicial Council, raid journalists offices and arrest Saied's political opponents. Furthermore, the draft constitution which was approved on by a highly questionable referendum in July 2022 provides 'no provisions on the subordination of armed and security forces to legally constituted civilian authorities; no parliamentary oversight over them' (Benarbia, 2022) representing a radical overhaul of civilian-military relations. It is hard to tell, at this stage, what the impact of these constitutional changes will be, but it is clear that they will further impede transparency and oversight of the security sector as well as reinforcing Presidential powers in virtually all domains – including security.

Nonetheless, Saied's reliance on these increasingly politized security services could also be a source of his weakness. While the security forces have often been presented as homogenous monolithic organizations, they are complex organizations shaped by the various parties and ministers that have led them since the revolution as well as the recruitment of personnel and their interactions with SA providers in the years following 2011. Furthermore, recent research on the role of Tunisian military both in the final days of Ben Ali's rule and in the post transition period portrays a far more interventionist and politicized image of the military than more traditional accounts (Brooks & White, 2021; Grewal, 2016). Therefore, while security forces may be currently playing along in this 'unholy marriage of convenience' (Cordall, 2021) with the President, it is contingent upon the marriage continuing to meet their needs. There have been signs of discontent within the security sector including increasingly powerful ISF unions going on strike and openly critiquing the MoI and government (Clare-Brown, 2015). There have even been rumours of a military takeover should the armed forces feel that Kais Saied has become a political liability[28] particularly if continued co-operation with Saied is deemed to threaten the legitimacy and popularity that the security forces currently enjoy.

Reordering Tunisia's transition: SA, economic failings, or both?

Throughout this article, I have argued that SA has *interacted* with political developments to further impact Tunisia's political landscape. In this third

section, I explore the role of socio-economic questions in this process. While initially such questions may seem entirely disconnected from SA, here I illuminate the entanglements between SA programmes, Tunisian political economy and the economic objectives of provider states.

The return of the social

Rather than representing a radical overhaul of economic policy in Tunisia, the Tunisian transition led to a continuation the process of neoliberalization and the role of external actors in pursuing it through financial assistance packages (Ben Gahda, 2022; Mossallem, 2015). The failure of neoliberal economic policies to achieve their desired impacts, falling levels of tourism related to high profile terrorist attacks, the economic consequences of the coronavirus pandemic and crippling levels of government debt have taken their toll on the Tunisian economy causing declining standards of living for many Tunisians since 2011 (Amara & Mcdowall, 2022). This, through a sense that democracy has not delivered on its economic promises, has contributed to a fall in support for parliamentary democracy and the rise Kais Saied's unique brand of populism[29]. Simultaneously, devoid of trust in political parties and democratic institutions, frequent protests, riots, and mass gatherings have become the so-called street politics through which Tunisians contest the neoliberal austerity agenda of external donors[30]. Having to deal with this near constant rounds of protests, coupled with a sense of impunity, have contributed to rising rates of police brutality as discussed above.

There is a growing sense that the executive has given Tunisia's security forces a carte blanche to repress any contestation of the increasingly authoritarian regime and its unpopular economic reforms. This can be seen, for example, in Kais Saied's very public declarations of support for the ISF and performative instrumentalization of MoI and MoD buildings and personnel surrounding his political communications.

SA providers and the donor cartel[31]

Significantly, for our understanding of SA, we cannot entirely separate SA from these economic concerns. External actors, through financial assistance packages with conditionality in all but name, have pursued this economic reform agenda which has reinforced socio-economic turmoil in contemporary Tunisia, while simultaneously equipping Tunisian security forces with the tools and training to repress contestation of these highly unpopular policies. Indeed, the Deauville Partnership of the G7+, for example, was the mechanism of co-ordination of financial assistance packages to post transition Tunisia long before the extension of this format to SA in 2015 (Santini, 2018). By coordinating their financial assistance many of the very same provider states

that would be involved in the G7+ SA format in the following years (Ibid), were able to further leverage their assistance to illicit the neoliberal reforms they desired. Loan packages came with mechanisms of discipline and surveillance, such as audits, monitoring and rounds of disbursements (Aliriza, 2020; Sotiris, 2017). This meant that on occasions when external actors feel Tunisian policymakers have not achieved the desired reforms, lenders are able to delay the next disbursement of finance (ArabWeekly, 2020). This places significant constraints on the economic and budgetary policy of Tunisian policy makers who are stuck between the demands of the funders and the socio-economic demands of their own people creating disillusionment with the democratic system. Each new round of reforms, austerity, subsidy reduction and price increases are met with protests and even riots. Each round of protests is met with an increasingly heavy-handed police response as those seen in January of 2018 against a controversial finance law resulting in over 200 arrests (Gallien, 2018; Hamouchene, 2018).

Scholars of neoliberalism have long argued that the roll back of the state in certain areas associated with neoliberalism necessitates the roll out of the state in other areas such as policing, incarceration and border regimes (Tansel, 2017; Axster et al., 2021). Essentially, the negative social and economic consequences of neoliberal policies for certain populations mean that the state must resort to intensified recourse to coercive state power to quell dissent (Hall et al., 1978). In the post transition period, we have seen extensive measures, often demanded by donors, designed to roll back the state in areas such as food subsidies andpublic sector employment (Ben Gadha, 2022, p.12; République Tunisienne Présidence du Gouvernement, 2021). Simultaneously, we have seen the roll out of the apparatuses of state security to police and repress those contesting neoliberal reforms (Hamouchene, 2018). In the words of Tansel (2017: 2) this compromises the 'spectrum of strategies' that seek to insulate neoliberalism from contestation. Fundamentally, the rollout of the coercive apparatuses of the Tunisian state – which at the time of writing has an external debt of over 90 of GDP[32] – would simply not be possible were it not for external actors. The role of external actors in financing the apparatuses of coercive state power becomes even more problematic when considering their role in seeking to impose austerity in other areas such education, health and civil service employment as per the neoliberal terms of their loan agreements (République Tunisienne Présidence du Gouvernement, 2021). The apparatuses of coercive state power have not been faced with these same budgetary pressures (Ben Gahda, 2022). Indeed, the wage bill of the security forces has continued to grow since 2011 while other ministries have faced pressures to reduce theirs as per donor demands[33] (Ben Gahda, 2022).

In May 2022, against a backdrop of authoritarian drift, the EU disbursed €300 m as part of the next tranche of its Macro Financial Assistance to Tunisia

(EUPressRoom, 2022)– in return for continued co-operation in its migration control objectives and compliance with the economic reform agenda of the 'donor cartel'[34]. Thus, it seems external actors are willing to do business with Tunisia, be it in terms of economic reforms, counterterrorism or migration control, despite the rise of the so-called Tunisian security state. 'As long as Tunisia does not stop security co-operation or make geopolitical or economic alignment away from Western dependence, it's unlikely there will be serious changes in these relations' (Aliriza cited in RFI, 2022). Evidence of this was shown when the US AFRICOM spokesperson said 'our military commitments have not changed … The United States is committed to supporting the Tunisian people and Tunisia's democratic and economic development, as well as our military and security co-operation' in September 2021 (Volkmann, 2021) alluding to a 10-year US SA package to Tunisia's security forces announced in early 2021. Given that certain SA providers such as the US have formal procedures which prevent disbursement of SA when democratically elected governments are overthrown by in a coup (Todman, 2021), it is telling that provider states have made a concerted decision not to call Saied's power grab a coup despite many Tunisian political commentators labelling it as such. There is a sense among US and EU policymakers that if they are seen to push the democracy and human rights agenda too hard that they may lose one of their most trusted partners in the region thus pushing Tunisian policymakers towards new partners such as the Gulf States, Russia and Turkey, who do not come to the table with the same normative demands[35]. This suggests that SA programmes will not be drastically impacted by political developments in Tunisia regardless of certain provider states more recent and vocal criticism of Saied's authoritarian power grabs (Al Dahni, 2021).

Conclusion

SA – although not the decisive factor in Tunisia's current political turmoil, has had an important impact on Tunisia's fragile transition. It has interacted with political developments to reinforce the coercive capacities of the increasingly repressive state and recalibrate the balance of power in the Tunisian security sector towards the executive and the security forces at the expense of oversight, transparency and respect for human rights. SA providers lost sight of the significance of reforming the security sector in the context of Tunisia's transition. While in recent years economic reform has been often cited as the biggest obstacle facing Tunisia's transition, it could be claimed that in a former police state such as Tunisia, transparency, democratic governance of the security sector is a somewhat unvalued prerequisite of the transition upon which other significant reform agendas could be constructed. SA providers in Tunisia, in their desire to reinforce the capacities of the

Tunisian security sector to respond to very real and pressing threats, have contributed to the rise of a Tunisian security state that increasingly serves the personal political agenda of the President. Given Kais Saied's increasingly isolated position and his seemingly flimsy coalition of support with the ISF and armed forces, the increased resources, power and politicization of Tunisia's emboldened security forces will continue to be at the heart of political developments in the future.

While the Tunisian case is significant, this special issue seeks to reflect on SA as an international practice and its reordering impacts in the Mediterranean. The Tunisian case teaches us that SA is simultaneously shaped by and acts to shape political developments. This is particularly significant in fragile and transitional political contexts. While provider states, in a post-interventionist age, seek to pursue their security interests from afar both in the Mediterranean and beyond, they lose their control over the implementation of projects, (mis)use of these resources and renegotiation of their objectives on the ground. Providing significant resources, training and equipment to the apparatuses of state power, in the context of austerity in other areas of state services and chronic underperformance of other state institutions, acts to contribute politization of state security forces and a reliance on coercive state power to quell inevitable dissent. The entanglements between security assistance and the economic objectives of provider states are important and merit further research. Very rarely do provider states offer security assistance without engaging or intervening in another states' domestic affairs in other areas. These entanglements must be considered when engaging with the reordering impacts of SA particularly in transitional political contexts.

Notes

1. In 2010, the budget of the MoI's National Guard was 50 per cent larger than that of all three-armed forces put together (Brooks & White, 2021, p. 136).
2. Tunisian security forces can be divided into the Tunisian armed forces, who are under the control of the Ministry of Defence and include the navy, air force and army and the Internal Security Forces who are under the control of the Ministry of the Interior and include the police, police, the National Guard, the Judicial Police, the Intervention Forces and the Presidential Guard Forces (Hanlon, 2012, pp. 12–3).
3. Full data set available at: https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?datasetcode=TABLE2A.
4. See https://securityassistance.org/security-sector-assistance/ to see SA to Tunisia since the turn of the millennium.
5. The United Nations defines SSR as aiming 'at improving safety through enhancing the effectiveness and accountability of security institutions controlled by civilians and operating according to human rights and the rule of law' (United Nations, n.d).

6. This contrasts with full scale conflict settings where SA provision can feel like 'throwing money in a bottomless pit' (Interview with head of security sector reform NGO, Tunis, January 2020) or in very fragile states where SA can lead to 'Faberge egg' security forces – expensive to build and yet easy to crack (see Reno, 2018).
7. Interview with head of security sector reform NGO, Tunis, January 2020.
8. On the 25th of July 2021, President Kais Saied suspended the Tunisian parliament. The period which been defined by a period of democratic backsliding.
9. These include how SA in Tunisia is shaped by SA programmes and broader geopolitical interests in Libya.
10. The names of the participants have been anonymized in line with the recommendations of the relevant ethics committee. This is for the safety of the participants who are operating in a political environment that is increasingly dangerous for those that speak openly about the political regime and the security forces.
11. Interview with EU official, October 2021.
12. Interview with Head of Security Sector NGO, Tunis, January 2020.
13. Interview with Security Sector NGO worker, January 2020.
14. Interview with US diplomat, January 2022.
15. Interview with researcher specializing in Tunisia's borderlands, May 2021.
16. between 2013–2015, the United States Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs 'trained 1,000 officers and 200 commanders of the National Police and National Guard on proper crowd control techniques, in addition to certifying 28 Tunisian trainers who have gone on to train over 700 additional officers to provide professional civilian security' (US Department of State, n.d).
17. Interview conducted with security sector reform expert, February 2022.
18. Interview with Head of Security Sector NGO, January 2020.
19. Interview with Tunisian securocrat, December 2021.
20. This is not withstanding the various factions that have emerged within the Ministry itself in the last ten years due to social and political changes as well as the experience of several governments comprised of a plethora of different political parties as discussed in interview with journalist, February 2020.
21. Interview with EU official, October 2021.
22. Interview with EU official, January 2021.
23. Interview with Security Sector concerned NGO worker, January 2020.
24. See https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy/iri.org/wysiwyg/final_-_012019_iri_tunisia_poll.pdf for full data set.
25. Interview with Tunisian security sector expert, February 2022.
26. https://securityassistance.org/security-sector-assistance/.
27. However, more recent accounts of the final days of Ben Ali's regime suggest that the military played a far more significant role in the downfall of the dictator than original accounts (Brooks & White, 2021).
28. Interview with Tunisian journalist, February 2022.
29. Interview with head of media outlet, May 2021.
30. Interview with Tunisian political scientist, January 2021.
31. The term donor cartel used by Chandoul (2015) refers to external actors involved in Tunisia's economic policy. Chandoul, J. (2015) 'Le Partenariat de Deauville, à l'origine des politiques économiques en Tunisia' (The Deauville Partnership, at the origins of economic policies in Tunisia), Tunisian Observatory of Economy.

32. Estimates vary but organisations such as CEIC suggest government debt in 2022 external debt represented more than 93 per cent of GDP with some estimates even higher
33. Other than the health sector in 2020 and 2021 to respond to the COVID pandemic, however, its wage bill shrunk again in 2022 (Ben Gadha, 2022).
34. Interview with EU official, June 2022.
35. Interview with EU official, October 2021.

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