

Debating terrorism in a political transition: journalism and democracy in Tunisia

Keywords: Journalism, newspapers, political violence, television, terrorism, transition, Tunisia

Abstract

In March 2015, in the midst of a political transition, Tunisia was rocked by a terrorist attack at the Bardo museum in downtown Tunis in which 21 people were killed. How did Tunisian journalists manage the tension between a heightened sense of insecurity and the country's uncertain democratic development? This article analyses journalistic commentary on the causes and implications of terrorism four years into the transition sparked by the Arab uprisings. It provides an empirically nuanced perspective on the role of journalism in political transitions, focusing on journalists as arbitrators in public debate. We argue that influential Tunisian journalists fell back on interpretive schema from the Bin ʿAli era when they tried to make sense of the Bardo attack, thus facilitating the authoritarian drift of the Tunisian government at the time. They actively contributed to the non-linearity of a political transition, despite enjoying real freedom of speech.

Introduction

On 18 March 2015, three Islamist terrorists infiltrated downtown Tunis, entered the Bardo Museum and killed 19 tourists, one Tunisian citizen and one policeman. The attack was the first large-scale terrorism incident in Tunisia after the 2011 revolution, and it happened in the midst of a political transition process fraught with crises. The Tunisian media sector itself was in the throes of change, as journalists and other media professionals were trying to come to terms with unprecedented freedom of expression and urgent questions of professional identity and political role. How did Tunisian journalists manage the tension between a heightened sense of insecurity and the country's uncertain democratic development after the Bardo attacks? This article analyses journalistic commentary on the causes and implications of terrorism four years

into the transition sparked by the Arab uprisings, providing an empirically nuanced perspective on the role of journalism in political transitions. We make the argument that influential Tunisian journalists fell back on interpretive schema from the Ben Ali era when they tried to make sense of the Bardo attack, thus facilitating the authoritarian drift of the Tunisian government at the time. In this way, they actively contributed to the non-linearity of a political transition, despite enjoying real freedom of speech.

The Bardo attack proved to be a turning point in Tunisia's transition, as tentative democratization gave way to securitization and elite machination. Shortly after the attack, president al-Baji Qaid al-Sabsi made a call for 'national reconciliation' and introduced a draft anti-terror bill. In hindsight, both initiatives have proven to impede Tunisia's path towards an open and inclusive society. The "administrative reconciliation law" voted in September 2017 contradicted the ongoing process of transitional justice by letting corrupt business people and state officials from the Bin 'Ali era off the hook. The anti-terror law, introduced a week after the attack and adopted by the national assembly in October 2015, has led to increased monitoring of the media and has stifled public debate and expressions of dissent. Analysts agree that the country's democratic transition is threatened. An unwritten elite agreement between the gerontocratic president and the aging Islamist leader Rashid al-Ghannushi works to the detriment of progressive reform (Boubekeur, 2015).

At the same time, there is widespread agreement that Tunisia's perhaps most important gain from the revolution was freedom of expression. Journalists were given unprecedented space to act as interpreters of current affairs and arbitrators in public debate. We ask how they made use of these roles in the aftermath of the terror attacks, which was a sensitive and potentially

polarizing period in the transitional process. Did they pose a counter-balance to the elite's authoritarian drift? Did they critically reflect on the acute social and political tensions that made Tunisia so vulnerable to attempts at political destabilization? In the following, we place the Tunisian case within the literature on media and terrorism in transitional contexts. We then provide an overview of the political conflicts that formed the backdrop of the attack and the position of media and journalists in Tunisia in 2015. The subsequent analysis is a detailed study of the journalistic discourse in newspapers and TV programs. It focuses on how journalists approached the problem of terrorism, how they interpreted its causes, how they appraised the response of Tunisia's political establishment, and what their proposed ways of confronting terrorism were. We end by assessing whether journalists offered a corrective to the political elite or applauded its strategy for dealing with political insecurity.

Terrorism, democratization, and the media

Terrorism is a threat to democracy and even more to processes of democratization. The sense of insecurity it produces may stoke social tensions, spark economic recession, fuel anti-democratic discourses and be used to legitimate repressive counter-terror legislation. Countries transitioning from an authoritarian order are particularly vulnerable because the institutional and normative foundations of democracy have not been consolidated. Moreover, their media institutions and journalistic practices are in flux. It may have a deleterious effect on public debate, encouraging polarization along political, ethnic or religious lines. The dangers of a polarization dynamic fueled by the media are apparent if we look to Tunisia's twin sister in transition, Egypt. Individual journalists and entire media organizations contributed to a deeply

entrenched and deadlocked conflict between secularists and Islamists, paving the way for a publicly celebrated military coup in 2013 that completely derailed the transition to democracy.

Journalism in the wake of the Bardo attack is important to Tunisia's political development as a *mediatized disaster*— an exceptional phenomenon that serves to sustain or mobilize collective sentiments and solidarities, often in ways that disrupt the political process. In a crisis or disaster that catches the government off-guard, the media typically assumes a position of enhanced importance as the public seeks reassurance (Cottle, 2006b: 421). In such a situation, journalism becomes an important point of reference to make sense of what is going on; journalists become interpreters on behalf of collectivities. Journalists' ways of explaining the issue and informing public debate 'variously sustain a subjunctive orientation to the 'social good' (of how society could or should be)' (Cottle, 2006a). In transitional contexts, where there is uncertainty about the shape of the emerging political order, a mediatized disaster such as a terrorist attack may raise fundamental questions about the social good and the national interest. When revolution throws society into chaos and upsets people's habitual interpretive frameworks the media's ability to shape public consciousness increases (Voltmer and Rawnsley, 2009: 234–235).

However, existing research about terrorism and the media has little to say about transitional contexts in general and the Middle East and North Africa in particular, and those that do treat it tend to focus on structural properties of the media/politics nexus (Eickelman, 2004). Most of the media and terrorism literature is informed by international terrorism and Western countries' response to it, 9/11 being the defining case. One core concern in this literature is that corporate media with close ties to governments become 'cheerleaders' for a 'war on

terrorism' or uncritical transmitters of various policies couched in such terms (Hess and Kalb, 2003: 10–13; Nichols, 2005; Lewis and Reese, 2009; Kellner, 2015: 65). Analyzing the coverage of terrorism in a transitional context opens our view to the potential agency of journalists more than the critical research about Western media allows for. The media system is typically less defined in transitional periods and the power of corporations over it less strong. As Voltmer notes, individual journalistic agency is important at such times: what is needed, but rarely available, in such processes is moral leadership by media actors who can influence political culture in ways that are conducive to peaceful deliberation (Voltmer, 2013). By focusing on the discourse of influential journalists we can assess whether they tried to assume such a role in the face of a security-oriented state apparatus.

Studies on news framing of terrorism are informed by clear-cut and analytically 'tidy' cases, such as America's war on terror post-9/11, Northern Ireland or the Israel-Palestine conflict. (For alternative views that nevertheless focus on the global war on terror, see Freedman and Thusu, 2012.) The first represents what has been called a 'one-sided' conflict, while the latter two are termed 'two-sided' conflicts (Norris et al., 2003). In one-sided conflicts media coverage will be relatively uncontroversial since the conventional news frame is likely to be very strong and broadly shared. In two-sided conflicts there will be more contestation around the news frames, since the two sides operate with very different narratives (Norris et al., 2003: 12). The context of the Bardo attack is not captured by either of these scenarios. It was quite clearly a one-sided scenario in the sense that the large majority of Tunisians felt this to be an attack on their country's safety and indeed on themselves. However, several of the perpetrators were Tunisians, so the attack was not carried out by some outside actor, and parts of the Tunisian

public – the salafi Islamic trend – shared the broad ideology (if not the political analysis and aims) of the terrorists. Even more important, the attack took place during Tunisia's transition from dictatorship, and the whole political scenario was unclear and even chaotic. Rather than representing a clear-cut, one-sided or two-sided conflict, the terrorist attack raised fundamental questions about the state of Tunisia's transition towards democracy and about the very political and social fabric of Tunisian society.

Tunisia is not a unique case as political transitions are often fraught with political instability and divided publics. In a context of political instability, strong polarization endangers the first two functions and distorts the third by resulting in extreme partisanship. Among the many flaws during the chaotic revolutionary phase in countries like Tunisia and Egypt polarization was perhaps the most fundamental, and the media has received a large share of the blame for exacerbating social and political divides (El Issawi, 2015, 2016; Lynch, 2015).

Method

This article is part of a larger research that studies the role and development of journalism in Tunisia after 2011. We interviewed 28 journalists about this topic between 2016 and 2018 but the data analyzed in this article is mainly media content. We collected media coverage of the Bardo attack between 18 March and 1 April 2015 in Tunisia's most important television channel, al-Ḥiwār al-Tūnisī (Tunisian dialogue), and in five newspapers catering to different audiences. The amount of coverage was bigger than what we could include in a qualitative analysis. We have therefore chosen to focus on political talkshows in television, and on editorials in the five newspapers. We collected all the political debates that treated the attack

on *Ḥiwār al-Tūnisī* – twelve programs all in all. The daily editorials of the newspapers were analyzed, and we added some particularly relevant opinion pieces that were not editorials, written by newspaper staff.

The timeframe of the study is limited, which is a weakness, since reverberations of the Bardo attack in the media continued for a long time. We cannot claim to have gathered an exhaustive collection of primary sources from the media channels studied. However, there was a noticeable decline in coverage of the attacks and related issues towards the end of the two-week period in all the media, so we can be confident that we have included the most important media coverage. Furthermore, these two weeks saw four notable events taking place: the anniversary of Tunisia's independence on 20 March, President al-Sabsī's announcement of a 'national reconciliation' initiative on the same date; the introduction of a draft anti-terrorism law on 25 March; and the unity march against terrorism in Tunis on 29 March. (*Foreign Policy*, 2015; Jamaoui, 2015) All these events and initiatives directly affected the course of Tunisia's transition from authoritarianism.

It is important to underline that what we analyzed is the journalistic *commentary* after Bardo and not the journalistic coverage of the event. Our aim of capturing the interpretive role of journalists led us to focus on a category known in Tunisia as the *chroniqueurs*, meaning prominent commentators who analyze and comment on programs and news. They constitute an influential segment of Tunisian journalists, which was unheard of before the 2011 revolution, but has come to fill the screen and air of especially private TV and radio stations. According to program director Insaf Boughirdi in *Ḥiwār al-Tūnisī*, "a good *chroniqueur* should comment, analyze and provide new information. He has precise information that we may not

have. He uses information to confront guests and establish the truth about a subject. The most important thing is that the chroniqueur has a clear voice, persuasive, and defends his ideas.”¹

We analyzed the data with Entman’s early frame analysis model in mind, looking for elements of *definition*, what the Bardo attack was believed to be an expression of, *diagnosis*, what was perceived to have caused the attack; *judgment*, how journalists evaluated the stance of different political actors, and *remedies*, how they envisaged treating the terrorism problem (Entman, 1993).

The attack in context

In March 2015, Tunisia was into its fourth year of transition since the downfall of the Bin ‘Alī regime. The transition process was volatile and to the extent Tunisia had become something resembling a democracy it was a very fragile one. The attack re-actualized the pre-revolutionary fear of Islamism in Tunisia. During the Bin ‘Alī years, the regime had imposed what Beatrice Hibou calls a ‘security pact’ on the Tunisia people. The state was the guarantor of a certain level of material wellbeing, a progressive social order and security. In return, it demanded that Tunisians accepted a high level of surveillance and a low level of personal and political freedom. This pact was sustained, on the one hand by reference to nationalism and unity of the social body; and on the other by the ceaseless nurturing of a ‘political culture of danger.’ The danger here was the purported chaos that would ensue from an uncontrolled social situation, rebellion stirred by the dissatisfaction of the most underprivileged strata - and Islamism.

The regime-induced fear and mistrust of Islamism among many Tunisians survived Bin ‘Alī. al-Nahḍa’s victory in the 2011 elections and its attempted reversal of certain secularist and

gender-progressive laws and policies did nothing to dissipate the skepticism, and when two socialist leaders that were outspoken critics of Islamism were murdered in 2013 many blamed al-Nahḍa for having indirect or even direct responsibility for their deaths. The mistrust continued after al-Nahḍa agreed to political compromises and relinquished power peacefully when they lost the 2014 elections. Conversely, the brutal oppression of Islamists during the Bin ʿAlī regime and the social stigma of being branded an Islamist had radicalized many young members of the movement. Anne Wolf draws a causal line between this experience of isolation and the growth of Islamist radicalism in Tunisia in the years preceding the revolution. (Wolf, 2017: 106?)

The revolution added new fault lines to the long-standing confrontation between authoritarian secularism and socially conservative Islamism. At the time of the Bardo attack, Charles Tripp identified four socio-political currents that competed with each other: The paternalistic idea of a strong state populated by enlightened officials, prevalent among state administrators and a political elite increasingly concerned about security; a market-friendly, individualistic liberalism embraced by businessmen who had prospered under Bin ʿAlī; an ideal of an egalitarian, secular republic, strong among the left and many ordinary people, and lastly the Islamic communitarianism of al-Nahḍa (Tripp, 2015). When al-Sabsi was sworn in as President in December 2014 it was a sign that the first current had gained the upper hand. Importantly, he was elected with the support of al-Nahḍa, after al-Sabsi and al-Nahḍa's leader Rāshid el-Ghanūshī had agreed informally to abstain from attacking each other during a meeting in August 2013 (Bobin, 2018). In effect it was a gentleman's agreement between the strong state

current and the moderate Islamist movement, leaving the egalitarian revolutionaries out in the cold.

The media was as colored by the combination of new and old elements as many other institutions in society. Its role was contested after the revolution. In research interviews Tunisian journalists would repeat that the most important gain of that event was freedom of expression. They experienced a completely new and exhilarating reality. However, this did not mean that the state refrained from meddling. As George Joffé concluded at the time:

“Government – whether the old Troika or the new technocratic administration – still see the media as a handmaiden, over which it can (and, perhaps, should) exert unilateral control.”

(Joffé, 2014: 633) Of particular relevance to this article is the fact that some media outlets, like the newspaper *al-Şahafa* was owned by a state company, Société Nouvelle d’Impression, de Presse et d’Édition, and served as a mouthpiece for the Bin ‘Alī regime. *Al-Sabah* and its French sister publication *Le Temps* were owned by Sakhr al-Matari, Bin ‘Alī’s son-in-law (Gana, 2013: 48). Both publications were placed under government control after the revolution. They have remained under government control since, where they are subject to the political pressure of whoever is in power.

Journalistic interpretation of the terrorism problem

The journalistic commenting on the problem of terrorism after Bardo reflected Tunisia’ multiple political conflicts and was very diverse. One would perhaps expect that the shocking attack made for a straightforward, nationally shared definition of the problem, focused on the

alarming rise of jihadism on Tunisian soil. In fact, different journalists offered contrasting interpretations of what the exceptional phenomenon was an expression of.

Let us start with newspaper editorials. In the eight Islamist *al-Ḍamīr* editorials that are directly related to the Bardo attack (all written by the editor-in-chief Muḥammad al-Ḥamrūnī) the problem definition almost immediately shifts focus from the attack itself to the *reactions* among Tunisian elites, including other media. For al-Ḥamrūnī, the “sacred Tunisian national unity” is threatened by vaguely defined media and political actors. al-Ḥamrūnī uses the Bardo attacks as a springboard to paint a political scene where al-Nahḍa represents the transition towards democracy, which is continually threatened by dark, counter-revolutionary forces. In other words, the problem for al-Ḥamrūnī has to do with the Islamist-secularist divide in Tunisia.

The socialist *al-Shurūq* shares *al-Ḍamīr*'s focus on Islamism and secularism, but presents a narrative that is almost diametrically opposed to that of the latter. The way they portray it, Islamism is taken for granted as a threat to the country. The problem highlighted by the Bardo attack is lack of preparedness, and this is in turn connected to a fundamental disunity in Tunisian politics. *al-Shurūq* states squarely that there is no unity in Tunisia today because “there are parties, groups and organizations that refuse to enter this struggle [against Islamist terrorism] and that continue to cover up politically (...), and there are radio channels, tv channels and newspapers and electronic news sites that (...) incite against the security and military men and portray the terrorists as victims!” (26 March).

For these two newspapers, situated at opposite ends of the secularist-Islamist spectrum, the problem is national disunity. For *al-Shurūq*, the terror attack is a symptom of the problem; for *al-Ḍamīr*, the debate about the attack is a symptom of the problem.

Like *al-Ḍamīr* and *al-Shurūq* the other major newspapers take the problem of terrorism for granted and do not spend much space discussing it. For example, *al-Ṣabāḥ*'s op-ed writer on 19 March notes that terrorism is a global problem that haunts countries far more stable and powerful than Tunisia. The writers in *al-Ṣabāḥ*, *al-Ṣaḥāfa* and *al-Ḍamīr* quickly turn to weak security policies as the main problem, given that terrorism is something Tunisia will have to contend with in any case. "We have a long way to go before we are ready for a full-scale war on terrorism, and several deficiencies stain the security work [*al-ʿamal al-amnī*]..."² These newspapers also allude to Islamism as a problem in society, but their main focus is on security policies and lack of preparedness.

Turning to TV, let us start by considering the coverage on al-Ḥiwār al-Tūnisī on the day of the attack, which is likely to have had the Tunisians' full attention. The channel ran a three-hours special broadcast on the crisis in the political talk show 24/7, led by program host Hamza Bilumi. It gathered politicians from the governing Nidā Tūnis and al-Nahḍa, the centrist-liberal Republican party, a former policeman, and two *chroniqueurs*, Luṭfī al-ʿAmārī and Sufiyān bin Ḥamīda. Luṭfī al-ʿAmārī is a hard-hitting commentator whose trademark is to go tough on the panel guests. He lashes out at politicians, addressing them as "you", with the posture of an angry layman. Dramaturgically speaking, he appears to have a mandate for turning up the heat in the talk-shows. The problem definition in al-ʿAmārī's narrative is wide. Generally, things are

bad and getting worse. Tunisia is assailed by enemies – from the inside and the outside – and is losing its reputation in the world. The politicians have ‘worn us out’ and are ‘destroying the people's morale instead of destroying terrorism’. al-ʿAmārī shoots at what he sees as the profoundly nefarious influence of the Islamist trend. He criticizes al-Nahḍa’s role in governance and accuses mainstream Islamists of sympathizing with the terrorists.

Sufiyān bin Ḥamīda is a soft-spoken analyst who shies away from heated confrontation.

Situated on the secular left, he is known to be critical of Islamism. However, in the observed special broadcast, he strikes a consensual tone. He warns against politicization of the crisis because “the state, the country and the people must stay united against terrorism”. He praises the swift reaction of the security forces, tourist guides, and others who were at the scene. Bin Ḥamīda expresses confidence in the government’s determination and ability to deal with terrorism in Tunisia and underscores that the carnage could have been far bigger. He reckons the attack will serve as a wake-up call because the problem is that Tunisians have treated terrorism as something that is far away, in the mountains, “as if we were watching a movie”.

Two journalistic narratives are in other words presented on the first day in Ḥiwār al-Tūnisī. The first explains that the country and nation are in tatters due to political mismanagement and the Islamist segment’s treasonous deviance. The second warns against internal divisions and expresses confidence in the prospect of national unity and in the organizational capacity of the state.

Blaming democracy or the revolution?

Knowing that the Bardo attack occurred against the backdrop of a recent regime change, a pertinent question is whether journalists faulted democracy or the Tunisian revolution for the flare-up of terrorism. Did the sudden instability lead journalists to throw doubt on the merits of a democratic transition or question the value of the revolution itself? In the special broadcast on *Ḥiwār al-Tūnisī* on the day of the attack, Lutfi al-ʿAmārī ventured into this terrain.

Lambasting the political class for talking without acting he stated that “what is happening, whether in Parliament or even in government, is shameful and make the Tunisians regret a thousand times that they trusted a group of activists who betrayed them with slogans that have shown themselves to be empty and which they were the first to abandon. If they don’t provide people that can govern and protect the people, what was all the fuss about?”³ In a later exchange in during the same program, host Hamza Bilumi pressed ʿImād al-Ḥamāmī, a representative of the Islamist al-Nahḍa party, on his party’s loyalty to the Tunisian nation. When al-Ḥamāmī defended the principle of human rights, the rule of law and the constitution, al-ʿAmārī intervened: “Iraq today has a constitution and democracy. See what it has brought them!”⁴ The prominent chroniqueur’s argument was that Tunisia does not yet have a nation [*waṭan*] and can therefore not introduce democracy. Sufiyān bin Ḥamīda, the other journalist commentator in the panel, strongly disagreed. “For the first time I feel that the state, in its internal composition, is in a strong position”⁵, bin Ḥamīda concluded.

None of the newspaper journalists blamed democracy or the transition as such for the instability. On the contrary, they describe terrorism as a threat against Tunisia’s “path towards democracy”, clearly judging the latter to be something positive. Given that terrorism is taken

for granted as being the problem, what do these journalists see as the main *causes* for terrorism? The editorial writers are remarkably silent on that point – most of them seem satisfied with ascribing to the terrorists a “culture of death,” which reifies the phenomenon of terrorism as something inherently evil rather than explaining its causes.

The newspapers are more explicit when it comes to the secondary question of what caused the terrorist attack to succeed. They all agree that the security sector has suffered under poor organization, and that the previous government has taken the terrorist threat too lightly. As stated in *al-Maghrib*, there has been a political “culture of forgetting” when what is needed to counter terrorism is a “culture of vigilance.” (20 March)

Divisions and ‘unity’

The attribution of blame has bearings for another question, which is the degree to which the journalists highlighted divisions or unity in terrorism-hit Tunisia. Their framing could be expected to go either way since, as explained above, the Bardo attack had elements of both a one- and two-sided conflict. As we shall see, this assumption finds support in our data. The meaning of ‘unity’ is however not straightforward. It relates to President al-Sabsī’s initiative for ‘national reconciliation’ (*muṣālaḥa waṭaniyya*), presented two days after the attack.

Part of the journalistic commenting after Bardo carried marks of polarization. The Islamist daily *al-Ḍamīr* and the secularist *al-Shurūq* quickly entered opposing trenches. In al-Ḥamrūnī’s view, certain media and political actors (*aṭrāf siyasiyya*) exploit the situation – they “trade in terror” and “invest in blood” (20 March). He connected this dynamic to the campaign against al-Nahḍa after the assassinations of Shukrī Bel‘īd and Muḥammad Brahmī in 2013. The tone grew sharper

in later editorials. On 27 March he denounced unnamed secular politicians and media people (*i'lāmiyyīn*) as mad, using expressions such as a “sick political imagination”, “bacteria” and “schizophrenia” (*marāḍ al-wiswās al-qahrī*) when talking about al-Nahḍa’s detractors.

al-Ḥamrūnī’s counterpart in the stridently secularist *al-Shurūq* was no less polarizing. In his 20 March editorial, Nūr al-Dīn Belṭayyib commented that

[T]here are radio channels, tv channels and newspapers and electronic news sites that continue to sow doubt (*tuwāṣil tashkīk*) about terrorist crimes and that incite against the security and military men and portray the terrorists as victims!”

This mudslinging was however a sideshow to the more important blaming of the entire political establishment that was found in *al-Ṣabāḥ*, *al-Maghrib* and *al-Ṣaḥāfa*. These newspapers adopted a less populist version of *chroniqueur* Lutfi al-‘Amari’s condemnation of the general state of Tunisia’s politics. They argued that terrorism is an inescapable threat, and that what caused the Bardo attackers to succeed was lack of preparedness and a weak security sector. The blame for this was not laid at the doorstep of the security forces, who were hailed as heroes – not least after they located the terror cell and attacked it, killing nine militants including the leader of the cell. The newspapers blamed Tunisia’s politicians. They had had four years to deal with this problem, but they had failed miserably, concentrating on petty squabbles at the cost of forging a strong anti-terror policy.⁶ In *al-Ṣaḥāfa*, Munawwar al-Malītī wrote that Tunisia’s politicians had “arrogantly refrained from making the struggle against terrorism a priority in their political programs to save the country, appearing for [ordinary] Tunisians as the Andalusian petty kings [in the Middle Ages] who competed with each other for a seat in the palace of the *kasbah*.”⁷ His criticism was echoed by Ghāzī al-Ghuyārīrī in *al-*

Maghrib, who exhorted the politicians to focus on national unity and leave their personal and party ambitions behind.⁸In short, the main concern in the newspapers was to blame politicians for the lack of a forceful policy against terrorism and to exhort all Tunisians to act united and forcefully against it.

On Tunisia's national day, 20 March, President al-Sabsī talked about the need for 'national reconciliation'.⁹ When program host Ilyās al-Gharbī interviewed Nidā Tūnis' Muḥsin Marzūq that evening he asked if the reconciliation was to include 'persons with a connection to terrorism (...) or that seek to explain away terrorism'. The question echoed Lutfi al-ʿAmārī comment two days previously on the 24/7 Special Broadcast that national unity required the Islamists to acknowledge their guilt in nurturing terrorist sentiments. Marzūq's reply was that anyone who had not committed murder would be part, because this was a 'big war against terrorism'. The host asked what the president meant when he said 'we are at war with terrorism?'. In Marzūq's view, "war means that the person in front of you is the enemy. Everyone who takes up arms against the state is the enemy. In such situations human rights do not apply. When it comes to terrorism there is no left and right, only with us and against us. (...) There is no time for bickering. We are not against democracy, but we have to have enough strength to take decisive decisions".¹⁰ The journalist raised no follow-up question about the implications for Tunisia's transition.

The editors of *al-Ṣaḥāfa* and *al-Ṣabāḥ* dismissed critics who feared that this new initiative would come at the cost of the already established transitional justice process. They argued that transitional justice should not be about revenge, but uniting the country. Muḥsin al-Zaghlāmī of *al-Sabah* went as far as saying that reconciliation was a "national duty" at this time.¹¹

However, civil society activists did criticize the reconciliation initiative on *Ḥiwār al-Tūnisī*. On 23 March, Amnā al-Manīf from the citizenship movement *Kullnā Tūnis* (we are all Tunisia) debated ‘national unity’ with Nidā Tūnis leader Mundhir Belḥājj ‘Ali on the talkshow *24/7*. She criticized the idea that national reconciliation could come from a law and pleaded for a deeper process based on transitional justice. Sihām bin Sidrīn, the leader of the Truth and Dignity Commission, defended her mission of investigating human rights violations committed by the Tunisian state since 1955 on *24/7* the day after. Strikingly, however, no journalist in *Ḥiwār al-Tūnisī*’s coverage criticized the reconciliation initiative because it might hamper transitional justice. Chroniqueur Muḥammad Būghallāb saved his critical comments for the civil society activists. He asked Amnā al-Manīf about the utility of ‘holding people from 1955 responsible’, criticizing the travel ban imposed on businessmen with links to Ben Ali’s regime. When al-Manif pointed out that the Truth and dignity committee was a constitutional body that should be protected, he raised his voice saying:

“‘Constitutional’, this is the ogre you always scare people with. Even the municipality is a constitutional body. Everything mentioned in the constitution is a constitutional body.
[Drowning al-Manīf’s voice] The Truth and Dignity Commission is not mentioned among the independent bodies. It is a temporary committee. Why don’t you call it a temporary body?
You always say constitutional as if it was the holy Quran!”¹²

All in all, al-Sabsī’s sidestepping of transitional justice did not run into resistance from the journalist commentators.

Debating the draft counter-terrorism law

The foremost threat that terrorism poses to democracy is in most cases indirect. Governments cut back on civil liberties at the request of security forces, which want less restraints in their pursuit of terrorism suspects. The threat is acute in transitional contexts because empowering the security forces in many cases equals strengthening the institutions and networks that the old regime was built on. One would assume that journalists, who as professional community have benefitted from the newfound liberties and were subject to pressures from the security forces in the past, are aware of this risk. It is therefore interesting to look at how journalists in our sample commented on the government's introduction of a new counter-terrorism bill on 26 March, eight days after the Bardo attack.

In the case of *al-Ṣabāḥ* and also *al-Ṣaḥāfa*, criticism of Tunisia's politicians and the call for inclusive unity was combined with praise for the government's counter-terrorism bill. The new legislation was criticized by human rights activists for bringing back capital punishment, detentions without trial, increased police surveillance and several other authoritarian elements.

¹³ However, in *al-Ṣabāḥ* it received wholehearted support. On 27 March Muḥsin al-Zaghlāmī argued that the law's controversial elements are necessary in the "war on terror" (sic) that Tunisia is entering and that it will not adversely affect ordinary people's legal rights. The editorials in *al-Ṣaḥāfa* we managed to obtain do not mention the law, but they are full of talk about the necessity for a full scale "war on terror." In effect, *al-Ṣabāḥ* and *al-Ṣaḥāfa* praise the strongman al-Sabsī, who rises above the trivial concerns of Tunisia's politicians. *al-Maghrib* is comparably nuanced and liberal: it states that the war on terror requires media that are free, critical and responsible, and abstain from rumor-peddling and incitement.

Turning to television, Ḥiwār al-Tūnisī ran a debate in the talk-show Kalām al-Nās (the talk of the town) on the night before the government introduced the new law. Program host Nawfal Wartīnī noted in his opening remark that no terrorist has been sentenced in Tunisia since 2011. “Is terrorism a crime without punishment?”, he asked. To discuss this and other questions, the program had gathered three artists¹⁴, a lawyer, Sayf al-Dīn Makhlūf, and two *chroniqueurs*, Luṭfī al-ʿAmārī and Māyā Ksūrī, herself a lawyer. The set-up was very polarizing. Makhlūf is a controversial character who has been an outspoken defender of Salafis and was stripped of his right to exercise the profession in October 2015.¹⁵ All the other participants stood against him. Yet, the point he made is that stronger prerogatives for the state to defeat terrorism should not come at the expense of the state of law:

Makhlūf: Repressing freedom is a form of terrorism. What is freedom? That we hold our authorities responsible. That we say the truth and elect our politicians in free elections. That we hold criminals responsible but don’t take freedom away from me.¹⁶

(...)

Al-ʿAmārī: Freedom, how many crimes shall be committed in your name! What you describe is chaos, no freedom. You talk about the terrorist’s freedom, but freedom is a universal value, which you have issues with.¹⁷

Al-ʿAmārī went on to accuse Makhlūf’s Islamist colleagues of murder, concluding that “you practice freedom as chaos to destroy the state. If freedom is defiling the state, then we don’t need this freedom!”¹⁸

At this point the debate descended into a shouting match. There was no informed reflection on the difficult balancing of security and democracy. Instead, the spectator got circus and acute

polarization over the islamist-secular-divide. Al-ʿAmārī and the other journalists seemed more concerned with protecting the state than the principles of the rule of law and citizen’s rights. As al-ʿAmārī explained elsewhere, the terrorists have no human rights because they are not human.¹⁹ The only voice that was critical of the idea of increasing the prerogatives of the security forces in the program was that of the Islamist lawyer.

Discussion

Journalistic commentary on the Bardo attack illustrated the newfound freedom and pluralism after the Tunisian revolution. Editorials were sharply critical towards the security sector and not least Tunisia’s elected politicians, whom they accused of neglecting security to the benefit of petty bickering and personal settling of accounts. Partisanship with currents that did not control the political scene (Islamists and socialists) was also on display; a clear sign of a vital and opinionated media.

Television is by far the most important media channel in Tunisia, and hence vulnerable to ‘capture’ by rich actors with political agendas. However, in the field of audiovisual media it seems that the Independent High Authority for Audiovisual Communication (HAICA) has had considerable impact. It monitors the diversity of views represented in all Tunisian audiovisual media and has the authority to sanction channels that fail to invite different voices.

Consequently, sharply different views were on display during political talk shows, contributing to a pluralist public sphere during a very difficult and sensitive period in Tunisia’s transition. Still, HAICA’s regulatory power does not extend to individual journalists.

Pluralism and partisanship do not equate critical journalism and a defense of civil freedoms.

Both in television and the press there were journalists that defended the importance of a liberal political order and the principles of human rights and rule of law in the struggle against terrorism. Chroniqueur Sufiyān Bin Ḥamīda was one of the few who directly criticized President Essebsi for his dehumanizing of the terrorists, while the liberal newspaper *al-Maghrib* emphasized that transparency and civil rights must not be jeopardized in the struggle against terrorism. However, the main thrust of journalistic commentary in television as well as in newspapers was rather different. Two tendencies are noteworthy in relation to the question of whether journalists provided room for critical reflection about the problem of terrorism and a counterbalance to the regime's authoritarian turn. First, there was little serious attention to the actual causes of terrorism and jihadism in Tunisia and how to deal with it. Many journalists felt content with denouncing terrorists as belonging to a 'culture of death' and contrasting it to the unity and inclusiveness of Tunisians, thus brushing aside the difficult fact that jihadism has been able to take root among Tunisian youth. Instead of using the Bardo attack as a point of departure for a critical reflection on why this is so, the incident was instrumentalized to launch attacks against ideological adversaries. While Islamist journalists were no less fierce than their secularist counterparts in this respect, the Islamist trend was clearly the weaker part in this confrontation.

Despite their newfound freedom and possibility of creating new public discourses, journalists thus chose to draw on the Bin 'Alī-era 'culture of danger,' homing in on the Islamist trend. The Bardo attack had them jump into the old trenches to reignite a war of words that did little to elucidate the terrorism problem at hand. The political situation in Tunisia at the time of the

Bardo attack was radically new, but the journalistic commenting did not reflect this. Instead, it breathed new life into a pre-revolutionary discourse.

The second point is that a notable trend among journalist commentators was to *support the President's authoritarian steps and connect them with national unity*. His 'national reconciliation' initiative would rehabilitate businessmen with close ties to the Bin 'Alī regime and the new counterterrorism law would curtail civil freedoms. Yet, prominent journalists embraced and supported them. Lutfi al-'Amārī even questioned the value of political freedom if it does not come with security guarantees. This support for al-Sabī's initiatives was connected to the theme of national unity. Journalists implicitly juxtaposed President al-Sabī's resoluteness with the paralysis of Tunisia's parliamentarians, whom they accused of neglecting the country in their pursuit of petty squabbles. Some commentators described reconciliation as a "national duty."

What is striking here is not the emphasis on national unity, nor the call for forceful political action; both are expected reactions to a terrorist attack. The surprising element is the celebration of the President's initiatives, the connection between his policies and national unity, and the willingness to jeopardize important achievements of the Tunisian revolution. In her analysis of the Bin 'Alī political order, Beatrice Hibou notes a widespread saying in Tunisia relating to the security pact: "It is the price to be paid". Corruption and the lack of freedom was the price to be paid for security against external (and Islamist) danger (Hibou, 2011: 201–202). In their reactions to the Bardo attack studied in this article, many journalists seemed to cheer on the strong leader and accept that the price to be paid for supporting him was a set-back for civil liberties, derailing of the transitional justice process and rehabilitation of cronies of Bin 'Alī.

This tendency was noted by the well-known Tunisian intellectual al-Ṣāfi Saʿīd in a recent, scathingly critical letter to the President: “In times of revolutions, upheavals and wars, fear grips nations. Consequently, the Leader as Saviour is that man who has no fear and does not allow fear to sneak upon his people. (...) But he should walk on the democratic path, not outside it or on its edges! Otherwise his legitimacy will erode, regardless whether he earned it through elections or [historical events].” (al-Saʿīd, 2017: 66, 69) What significant portions of Tunisian journalists seemed to lack during the Bardo crisis was the critical impulse evident in Saʿīd’s message to al-Sabsī.

al-Sabsī’s use of Bardo to consolidate his grip on power and the support given him by many journalists are in a sense two sides of the same coin in that they point to the survival of the old political culture in the new political order. While the system had changed, many of the same men (and some women) continued to hold powerful positions in politics as well as in the media. The journalists who cheered on the strong president and scorned the bickering parliamentarians were raised under the Bin ʿAlī regime and obtained their professional positions under that system. Many of them were apparently still beholden to the old discourse of security and the culture of danger nurtured by Tunisia’s autocrats.

For Tunisia’s transition, this “time lag” in journalistic commentary poses a problem. Bin ʿAlī’s security discourse was designed to keep Islamists and especially the Nahḍa party out of politics. But democratic progress hinges on the ability to include all parts of society and communicate across ideological divides. The basic contradiction in the commentary we have analyzed is that journalists call for national unity while continuously stressing how alien and dangerous the Islamists are. Thus, they fail to create a common ground where Tunisians of all ideological hues

can debate the sources of violence. Paradoxically, the main losers in this process proved to be liberal civil society activists and journalists themselves. After all, al-Nahḍa's leader Rāshid al-Ghannūshī had already concluded an agreement with al-Sabsī when the Bardo attackers struck, thus securing al-Nahḍa's position in the political establishment. Tunisia's journalists and civil society activists are not as a rule part of this establishment, and they soon felt the force of the illiberal policies adopted by al-Sabsī in 2015 and afterwards. In 2018, the state of emergency declared by al-Sabsī in 2015 was still in force. Among other things, it prohibits strikes and meetings that may cause disorder, and it allows for measures to assert control over the press (*leparisien.fr*, 2018). Accordingly, when social protests over austerity measures broke out in early 2018, hundreds of protesters were arrested, many mistreated by the police (*CNN Arabic*, 2018) The journalists who covered the protests were in some cases wiretapped and threatened by the police, prompting them to organize a 'Day of Rage' in early February. As the head of the Journalist Syndicate, Nājī Bghūrī, stated: "Today, they want to create a press working according to orders; they want a press that does what they want it to do." (*JeuneAfrique.com*, 2018)

Conclusion

We have zoomed in on a critical point in Tunisia's transition, a mediatized disaster where the role of journalists as sense-makers comes to the fore. The journalists commenting on the causes and consequences of the Bardo attack enjoyed unprecedented prominence and freedom of expression because of the democratic opening after the 2011 revolution. Yet they did not forcefully counter the regime's authoritarian drift in the wake of the terrorist attack. In fact, some actively contributed to it by praising strongman leadership and undermining the

respect of civil liberties. The journalists fell back on discursive habits they had acquired under Bin ‘Alī’s ‘security pact’.

As Cottle points out, journalists may play a role in the ‘democratization of violence’, that is, to facilitate and contribute to public, open deliberation about the issue of political violence. In the Tunisian case this did not happen. Journalistic commentary did not focus on the root causes of terrorism, but treated the Bardo attack merely as a springboard to call for unity and strong leadership. In a context where these exact notions were being used by a Bourguiba-era president to rehabilitate pre-revolutionary elites and fasten the grip on power, journalistic comment served to cloud the political realities instead of contributing critically to further democratization.

To democratize a formerly authoritarian system, new ideas about the nation and its governance must be conceived, and this was the path Tunisian activists and journalists set out on after Bin ‘Alī’s fall in 2011. Our findings show the brittleness of democratic progress when a country transitioning from a police state is exposed to terrorism and journalists steeped in the old regime discourse are called on to interpret the problem. Bin ‘Alī’s security discourse was designed to divert attention from the “people versus the system” conflict by focusing on supposed internal enemies: it was divide and rule. After the Bardo attack, leading journalist commentators fell back into this logic instead of protecting the fledgling liberal order in post-revolutionary Tunisia. A violent assault does not by itself change the course of a transition. But the story that is told about it might.

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¹ Interview with the authors, Tunis, 8 April 2016.

² Rafiq bin Abdallah, "Usefulness and efficacy," *al-Sabah*, 23 March, p. 3.

³ 24/7 18 March 2015, 00:22:11 – 00:22:31, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EE_MuKJj-1w (accessed 25 August 2017)

⁴ 24/7 18 March, 00:38:22-00:38:27, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DKo9Pq-XOGw> (accessed 20 July 2018)

⁵ 24/7 18 March, 00:52:11-00:52:19, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DKo9Pq-XOGw> (accessed 20 July 2018)

⁶ Hayat al-Sayib, "Reliance on Ourselves before Others," *al-Sabah*, 21 March, pp. 3-4 ; Rafiq bin 'Abdallah, "Usefulness and Efficacy," *al-Sabah*, 23 March, p. 3.

⁷ Munawwar Maliti, "Don't let 'Da'sh' shake the ground under the Tunisians' feet," *al-Sahafa*, 22 March, p. 2.

⁸ Ghazi al-Ghuyariri, "Have We now Risen to the Occasion?," *al-Maghrib*, 19 March, p. 2.

⁹ Referring to the unresolved situation for those accused of wrongdoing under Bin 'Ali, the President said: "We have to make national reconciliation. Everyone. National reconciliation does not mean leaving bandits and thieves without punishment. We have to take them to court. However, at this stage, it has been five years since the revolution. What progress has been made? For how long are we going to deprive people of the right to travel? If they are criminals, send them to jail! It is better than letting them sit with hands folded, doing nothing.", 24/7 23 March 2015 00:55:40-00:56:23, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2XWtaxv-s9Y> (accessed 25 August 2017)

¹⁰ 24/7 20 March 2015 01:31:37: - 01:32:26, <https://elhiwarettounsi.com/replays/Infos/tunis-24%7c7/replay-episode-16-2511.html#> (accessed 20 July 2018)

¹¹ Muhsin Zaghلامي, "A Historic Patriotic Duty," *al-Sabah*, 24 March 2018, pp. 1 and 4.

¹² 24/7 23 March 2015, 01:14:57-01:15:28, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2XWtaxv-s9Y> (accessed 25 August 2017)

¹³ As Human Rights Watch deplores, 'the law grants security forces broad and vague monitoring and surveillance powers, extends incommunicado detention from 6 to up to 15 days for terrorism suspects, and permits courts to close hearings to the public and allow witnesses to remain anonymous to the defendants'.

<https://www.hrw.org/print/279831>

¹⁴ Muqdad Shili, Shadia Azuz and Muhammad Kuka.

¹⁵ <https://www.espacemanager.com/les-avocats-fethi-mouldi-et-seifeddine-makhlouf-suspendus.html>

¹⁶ Kalam al-Nas 25 March 2015, 00:24:10 – 00:24:31, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x75kgypoV-s> (accessed 20 July 2018).

¹⁷ Kalam al-Nas 25 March 2015, 00:27:45 – 00:28:07, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x75kgypoV-s> (accessed 20 July 2018)

¹⁸ Kalam al-Nas 25 March 2015, 00:28:45 – 00:28:57, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x75kgypoV-s> (accessed 20 July 2018).

¹⁹ In the special broadcast on 18 March 2015, al-Amari expressed himself as follows: "If we speak about human rights, that's fine. But if the understanding is the right of terrorist beings (huquq al-insan al-irhabi) that's something else. These people know nothing about humanity." 24/7 18 March 00:18:19 – 00:18:27, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DKo9Pq-XOGw> (accessed 20 July 2018)