

6. Tunisia: Reporting terrorism

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The 18th of May 2011 was the day that marked the first terrorist act, which happened in Rohia in North-Eastern Tunisia. Two military personnel and two terrorists were killed.

It was a shock for Tunisians, but above all, it uncovered a set of challenges that journalists should prepare themselves to face. There was a contrast between the government's statements and the media coverage, since everything related to the incident was narrated in different ways. The official story and the media reports did not agree on the number of terrorists involved, their specific targets, how they neither crossed the borders nor managed to accomplish what they had accomplished. The result was conflicting stories and a huge level of misinformation.

Since that moment, being journalists, we have paid due interest to how we can face challenges related to covering terrorist acts, including challenges that a reporter can face by being physically present after or during a terrorist operation, and challenges related to journalistic ethics. More precisely, this relates to what should and should not be reported, what could be served to the public to satisfy their needs for clear and accurate information, and what belongs to national security dossiers, or even worse: serves as a propaganda report for terrorists. However, the ultimate challenge is who can decide and on what basis.

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Terrorism and news: a complicated relationship

After the revolution, the state was looking for a new identity, typically distancing itself against the previous regime. The rulers in 2011 wanted to do anything but replicate older regime practices, especially towards Islamists. The Ennahda Party was part of the ruling Troika, and has an Islamist background and obviously Islamist oriented voters. Thus, labelling people as terrorists was complicated. However, according to some critics, Ennahda did actually take it easy with extremists and terrorists who had left ex-President Ben Ali's prisons in 2011. By 2012, they had enough time to reorganise, recruit new members and prepare for attacks.

As the Rohia incident was the first of its kind in a post-revolutionary Tunisia, I was one of only two reporters on the scene. My first and only instinct as a journalist was to fully report the event. If the Rohia terror had happened today, my reporting would be very different, I would perhaps not have taken photos of the scene, but mainly double-checked the stories provided by the witnesses.

Five years on, Tunisia has witnessed several other terrorist incidents. With every attack or clash between the army and different terrorist organisations (Ansar Achariaa Tunisia, AQIM, and some terrorists affiliated with ISIS or Al Qaeda), whether I had to report it myself or follow the news provided by other colleagues, I have become aware that all journalistic coverage has its impact in terms of security in the country, and also on how people would behave on a daily basis.

After the collapse of Ben Ali's (the second dictator, who ruled for 23 years) regime in 2011, the walls of blackout and dictatorship vanished, and a democratic transition process has started. Tunisia held elections in 2011, Ennahda won the most number of seats in the constituent assembly, a coalition government was formed out of three parties: Ennahda; the Congress for the Republic or El Mottamar, a centre-left secular political party; and the Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties, or Ettakatol, a social democratic political party. The alliance between the three parties was unofficially known as the Troika. Regardless of the winners, or the actual parties ruling the country, it was the first democratic election in Tunisia.

From January 14, 2011 onwards, journalists, bloggers, citizens, as well as everybody else, could speak and were enthusiastic to practice

freedom. In the early months following the revolution and the first elections, any attempt to regulate how the media dealt with terrorism, would be considered as a blackout or censorship. Or this is how we journalists thought.

There was a burning desire among journalists to do their job after decades of a media blackout. Stories about terrorist acts answered every possible criteria of worthy coverage for Tunisian journalists, “it bleeds so it leads”. This field is complicated, as it involves movement of terrorists and weapons between Tunisia and neighbouring countries. Besides, it is vital for audiences. Since security forces and citizens were threatened, no media house in Tunisia would neglect them. Eventually everything was reported with no reflection or background, sometimes even with no fact checking. Our coverage would serve the government’s public relations strategies or the terrorist propaganda. Terrorist activities in Tunisia grew from a so-called peaceful and charitable work, to engaging against the state that, according to them, did not apply Islamic rule even though the ruling party had an Islamist background.

Three players, three games

Slowly, journalists started to question their coverage. It is our mission to inform the public accurately, but new questions, our own questions, occurred. The main question was actually how to inform the public accurately without serving the terrorism agenda, without fuelling their propaganda. Should we abstain from publishing certain information or should we just inform the public, no matter how?

When it comes to news about terrorism, there are three major parties that are considered as sources: the government (the interior and the defence ministry) the terrorist organisations, and the media. Those are the main ones communicating information to the public, but they do not exclude other sources such as eyewitnesses, social media platforms, foreign countries’ statements, etc.

On April 11, 2002, a natural gas truck filled with explosives was detonated in front of the ancient El Ghriba synagogue on the island of Djerba, killing 14 German tourists, three Tunisians and two French citizens. More than 30 were wounded. It was the first terrorist attack in Tunisia after the September 11, 2001 attacks in the US. It happened during the dictatorship of the president Zine el Abidine Ben Ali. At that

time, the government used to deny all kinds of terrorist threats. Little information was provided, journalists were accused of exaggeration, and terrorism was considered as an issue of political conflict between the government and the opposition. For a majority of the media houses, there was no real coverage of terrorist acts, just brief news with no details. It was true that those acts were rare compared to the post-revolutionary era, but media blackout was the norm.

Subsequently, overcoming the legacy of decades under the Ben Ali regime could not be achieved overnight. Media in Tunisia were among the most oppressed in Africa and the Arab world. Therefore, journalists were obliged to report in a certain way. They could not contradict the government, criticise policies or even avoid publishing or broadcasting news of the president's or the ministers' activities. For these reasons, in 2010, Tunisia was classified as number 164 among 180 countries across the world when it came to freedom of expression (RSF, 2010). In 2018, it was ranked 72, which must be considered a big leap forward (RSF, 2019).

In late 2010, protests had spread throughout the country, but one single event changed everything, when ex-president Zine Al Abidine Ben Ali allegedly fled to Saudi Arabia. Tunisia started its journey of transition to democracy. In fact, freedom of expression instantly became the new order and journalists became able to express themselves and report freely.

At the same time, even if the regime had changed, there was no trust in government, and politicians as official sources were not considered reliable or trustworthy. Journalists who were finally feeling liberated, witnessed national security classified issues being raised in the media in a different manner. Both critique of the government and security issues had been subject to censorship. Previously, critique was misused by the regime in order to quell freedom of expression. That may explain why the Tunisian media did not really trust officials as sources for terrorism news in the country. At the same time, they were keen to publish news of this phenomenon looking for scoops and even contradicting the government.

The era of speaking up without reflecting on the consequences had begun. Tensions between the authorities and the media were obvious after the elections in 2011. The Troika government was not trusted as a

source of information. In some cases, the relationship between the government and the media was influenced by the political conflicts between the new regime and the opposition. The situation became even more complicated, as the government was accused of being responsible for the rise of terrorism in Tunisia. The tension was underlined in political TV shows. The media was divided into two or three groups reflecting the political points of view. This explains why part of the media, then, did not consider officials as a reliable source in their coverage.

Neither enemy nor ally

With a temporary government (2014) and an elected government in place (2015), relationships between official sources and the Tunisian media have somehow reached an undeclared consensus: The government is neither the enemy nor the ally. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that there was another problem related to the government as a source for journalists: Official statements and conferences usually come late. Official statements provided by the Ministries of Defence or Interior are important, but the problem is that they always need time to deliver further information. Haunted by the instinct of publishing instantly what they have as information, can be more tempting for journalists than waiting for officials to deliver statements or organize a press conference.

Being obliged to report as soon as possible and being already in the field, journalists might find themselves pushed to deliver the information that they have obtained, without fact checking and without further details. Until now, no government has been able to provide information instantly, and this has compelled journalists to rely on other sources.

One example is the mass shooting that occurred at the tourist resort at Port El Kantaoui, about ten kilometres north of the city of Sousse, known as “the Sousse attack” on June 26, 2015, where the name of the gunman was declared by the terrorist organisation and not by the Ministry of Interior.

It is always important for professionals to question official sources, but the government is indeed a source of information related to the operation it conducts against terrorists, who use violence and intimidation against innocent people to achieve political aims by creating fear among the population. The role of a journalist remains crucial in fact checking and rendering the government accountable for its promises.

The terrorist organisations

Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia was a famous terrorist organisation in Tunisia, a Salafi Jihadist group founded by Seifallah Ben Hassine known as Abou Ayyad, who was released from jail in a general amnesty after the collapse of the Ben Ali regime. However, some people in Tunisia claim that the regime did not collapse, as many regime figures are still active in political and public life until now.

The terrorist group quickly established a media branch, *al Quairawan* Media Foundation, and developed different media outlets, including a blog, a Facebook page and a website. Members of the organisation have been suspected of involvement in a number of violent incidents. The government accused the group of masterminding the 2013 wave of political assassinations, for example of Chokri bel Aid and Mohamed Brahmi who were the two leaders of the opposition political party Front National.¹ The group was classified as a terrorist organisation by the Tunisian government in August 2013.

At that time, journalists in Tunisia had little experience in dealing with terrorism news. That is why statements from terrorist organisations plus video statements and social media updates were considered news. However, that was a dangerous road to take, as publishing these organisations' statements, put the Tunisian media in the position of contributing to terrorist propaganda.

In their coverage, journalists in many cases refer to terrorists' photos and videos and even to their songs when they are repeating some of their specific mottos. Most likely, the intention is to demonstrate the brutality of their crimes, especially when a terrorist act has taken place. Even though the intentions are positive, the outcome is not. During the last five years, Tunisian media outlets were competing for coverage of terrorist activities, stories and backgrounds. In this regard, they would post and publish stories based on terrorists' social media accounts. However, that accomplished nothing except providing terrorists with notoriety and enabled them to be perceived as strong in the eyes of the public. People started to know terrorists by name and learned more on how they operated and how strong and organised they were.

Meanwhile, terrorist organisations can benefit from what the media broadcast in order to have an idea about the army movements and operations in mountainous areas or elsewhere in the country. This

is another problematic issue related to the freedom of press and the citizens' right to know, while simultaneously protecting the country's security. Thus, media faces a huge dilemma: balancing between freedom of expression and the trap of serving terrorist organisations or endangering national security.

These dilemmas have made the journalist's professional work hard in so many ways. This was felt especially during the time they had to cover the operations in the mountains of *El Kef* carried out by the Tunisian army against terrorists hiding in the area. It was a hard job for us as journalists to gather information, which was not always readily available. Again, professionals were left with a narrow space for broadcasting or filing information and news without fact checking or without being sure of what happened. This is the second dilemma: Not having enough information, not knowing all aspects of a story can result in misinformation and rumours. Furthermore, it can leave the journalist in a complicated situation having sometimes to explain and justify in his own terms, publishing a multitude of half-true stories without being completely concrete or precise.

Journalism: Mission impossible?

Producing accurate and convincing stories while avoiding becoming a communicator of terrorist propaganda or the official state version that always comes late, is what the journalist is supposed to accomplish. It is a delicate mission indeed, sometimes hard and other times dangerous.

Between December 1, 2015 and January 31, 2016, the Ethics Observatory in the Syndicate of Tunisian journalists (SNJT) counted 1,740 mistakes in coverage of terrorism issues by the print media, 119 by electronic newspapers and 66 by radio and TV websites (SNJT 2016). Shortcomings included republishing terrorist statements, without analysis or a journalist editing, showing pictures of terrorists where they look strong even while those pictures do not have any news value.

For many observers, not least the ones responsible for the Ethics Observatory, this might be explained by the lack of training of journalists, especially young ones, who have no experience in covering similar issues. Thus, training and educating journalists is very essential. In addition, it remains critical to establish professional charters for dealing with terrorist events. If journalists continue to make mistakes

when covering terrorist events, this could affect journalism in Tunisia in two different ways:

First, the journalist's credibility is on the line. The public may not blame terrorists or any other source, they would blame the journalist who did not perform the job in a professional way, and blame him/her for not double-checking the news or the classified information. As such, journalists might be accused of manipulation.

Second, dilemmas covering violent events are organically related to freedom of expression and to the public perception of freedom of expression. That is to say, when journalists commit several professional errors, they risk being brought to court and thus become victims of the authorities' harassment; as authorities always intend to benefit from journalists for propaganda purposes.

Tunisian journalists have worked on producing a code of conduct and editing, elaborating norms for covering terrorist events. One of the recommendations, for instance, is that instead of reporting the whole statement of a terrorist organisation, reporters should rather deliver information that is newsworthy without replicating threats and incitement to violence. It is recommended also to avoid reporting witnesses that are under shock and victims' families or relatives.

Tunisian journalists' perceptions of how terrorist events should be covered have varied through time and have benefitted from the growing experiences. The questions raised in this article could be considered universal. Many journalists across the world have during their coverage of terrorism-related issues, struggled with similar challenges. After all, dealing with those issues is a daily challenge in many parts of the world. The questions that a journalist is able to ask are endless. Many are closely related to drawing the line between freedom of expression and the public's right to know on one hand, and on the other avoiding falling into the trap of propaganda or serving the agenda of official sources concerning their performance in the fight against terrorism. However, finding a common ground by agreeing on stronger ethical guidelines, would help journalists in their daily work and ultimately provide the public with manipulation-free, or misinformation-free news.

Note

1. Mohamed Brahmi, the leader of the opposition Popular Movement party, was gunned down outside his home in July 25, 2013. Chokri bel Aid, an opposition leader, was killed on February 6, 2013. Both were considered opponents of Ennahda Party. Many political leaders are still accusing the Ennahda Party for both assassinations.

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