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# IMPOSSIBLE “REFORM” OF THE TUNISIAN SECURITY SECTOR?

## THE ROLE OF UNIONS, INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS, AND ACTIVIST GROUPS IN POLICING

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photo cover: Police intervention during a demonstration against the referendum to be held on July 25 for the new constitution, in front of the Ministry of the Interior. Tunis, Tunisia, 22 July 2022

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### 3 Impossible “Reform” of the Tunisian Security Sector?

On 29 August 2022, then Tunisian Minister of the Interior Taoufik Charfeddine issued an internal memorandum suspending contributions to all security sector unions; a few days later in a press conference, he declared that deducting union membership dues (estimated at 40 million dinars annually, about US\$12 million), from police salaries was illegal. These statements indicate a turning point in the relationship between the political branch and police unions, which had been co-operative. However, they also raise issues of control and accountability in policing.

## Security Sector Reform and the Creation of Police Unions

By torturing opponents, repressing social movements, and monitoring dissident political voices, the security sector played a major role in maintaining the Ben Ali regime. The need for change in the security forces became a public issue: the masses have demanded the dissolution of political police since January 2011. “Security sector reform” has become a recurrent theme in public discourse, featured in official and institutional speeches and promoted by international organizations. Rather than a clearly defined concept, however, security sector reform is more of a vague slogan associated with sometimes contradictory initiatives, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) community policing programs, attempts to adopt a code of conduct (unsuccessfully), and the police’s demand for their right to unionize. In an attempt to elude political control, police unions have leaned into a “republican security” (*amn jomhouri*) rhetoric, proclaiming their allegiance to the Republic of Tunisia instead of to the political regime. Additionally, they have promoted an image of security forces as counterterrorism by portraying police officers that have fallen in the line of duty as martyrs. Police unions have systematically mobilized this rhetoric during controversies about police actions. Despite the clamorous calls for reform, many of the hoped-for changes to police practices remain unrealized. This article examines actions carried out in the name of change within the security institutions, while highlighting the power relations among the different stakeholders.

## Police Unions and an Autonomous Security Sector

The first police calls to unionize date back to 15 January 2011, the day after President Ben Ali fled.<sup>1</sup> The Ministry of the Interior (MOI), then led by the army, ordered the turnover of police weapons to the military at a time when police officers were being targeted by the people. In response, Internal Security Forces (ISF) officers from various departments gathered in Sfax and decided to unionize and hold elections to choose representatives. The movement then spread to several regions and to the capital. With their superiors absent, on 17 January 2011 in Tunis, male and female public security officers organized and rallied in front of the MOI.<sup>2</sup>

In February 2011, union representative elections were held in the regions of Sfax, Gafsa, and Gabes; regional unions have steering committees consisting of nine officers. Negotiations for the legalization of police unions began to take place while the unions were simultaneously drafting their first set of demands. The newly elected or appointed representatives – mostly non-commissioned officers or peacekeepers – convened and negotiated their union rights with the Directors General of the MOI. The unions were established during and in spite of a clash with the security forces administration, which has since developed several strategies to try to control these organizations, including co-opting union ideas and members, promoting division between the unions, and prosecuting police union representatives.

There are two primary police unions in Tunisia, in addition to a number of small, force-specific unions. The first major union to be established in April 2011 was the National Union of Internal Security Forces (SNFSI); its existence was later legalized when the ISF statutes were amended on 25 May 2011.<sup>3</sup> The SNFSI was created to bring together and represent

1 The following descriptive content is based on approximately 30 interviews we conducted with police unionists from the two major unions, the SNFSI and the SFDGUI, in Tunis, Sfax, and Gafsa between October 2017 and June 2020.



2 This report adopts the norms of inclusive writing, from which it deviates, however, in the case of very strongly masculinized groups. The distinction is important because, although women are present in police unions and even at the forefront of certain mobilizations, they do not hold major decision-making positions.

3 This decree followed an internal communiqué by Farhat Rajhi on 24 February 2011 that authorized union activity pending a more formal amendment of the ISF statutes. This authorization was granted after intense conflicts between ministerial elites and police officers who had been mobilized to push for union creation. Decree-Law No. 2011-42 of 25 May 2011, amending and completing Law No. 82-70 of 6 August 1982, on the General Statute of the Internal Security Forces, is available at <https://legislation-securite.tn/fr/law/43565>

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members from different security forces: the Tunisian National Guard, the police, Civil Protection, and prison guards. Later, officers from the Brigades of Intervention Units (a sub-directorate of the MOI in charge of public order policing, protection of diplomatic sites, special forces and anti-terrorist brigades, canine police, and prison security) were the first group to withdraw from. On 3 July 2011, they created

the second major police union: the National Union of the Officials of the Directorate-General of Intervention Units (SFDGUI) and held elections for an executive committee. In the end, each security force established its own union; these were in addition to the SNFSI, which was meant to represent all of the security forces except for the army and customs officials (the SNFSI mainly represents members

Summary of Primary Police Unions					
Union Name/ Acronym	Model	Claimed Members	Date of Est.	Relationship with political branch and administration	Logo/slogan
National Union of Internal Security Forces (SNFSI) a.k.a.: El Wataniya	Assembly of all security force bodies (National Guard, Police, Civil Protection, Prisons)	62,000 (according to statements by trade unionists in 2021)	4 June 2011	Combative, especially in 2012-2014. Anti-Islamist stance of some of its representatives (Ennahdha Movement then Karama Coalition) reported in the media.	 <p><i>Karama, Watania, Istiqlalia</i> (Dignity, Patriotism, Independence)</p>
National Union of the Officials of the Directorate-General of Intervention Units (SFDGUI) AKA: El Bop	Corporatist model; initiated an alliance with other corporatist unions (called the Union Front of Security Forces Unions)	Approximately 36,000	3 July 2011	Co-management model, more co-operation with the administration (drafted reform projects for statutes, signed five-year salary increase plans in 2016, etc.); limitations include stalled negotiations leading to member demonstrations.	 <p><i>Nidhal, Istiqlalia, 'amal</i> (Struggle, Independence, Work) <i>Masarna thabet</i> (Our Path Is Set)</p>

from civil bodies, in contrast to the SFDGUI). As early as 2012, the SFDGUI began forming alliances with other unions: first with the National Guard Union and then expanding to others, including the prison guards, customs agents (though this alliance had a short duration), public security, border police, and the traffic police (from July 2020). Since March 2018 they have dubbed themselves *jabha naqabia*, the Union Front. The SFDGUI claims to have approximately 36,000 members, a far smaller membership to that claimed by its rival the SNFSI, which claims 62,000 members. These figures have come from statements made by the police union members themselves; however, given the lack of transparency regarding union membership in various security force unions, these numbers

should be considered with care.<sup>4</sup>

In function, these unions have tended to operate more like works councils, providing services such as negotiating for reduced prices for a variety of services ranging from phone plans to pilgrimage to tutoring for children. Under Ben Ali, police were subject to particularly low salaries and difficult working conditions. Male and female officers, especially the lower ranks, have welcomed the emergence of unions, whose

<sup>4</sup> We believe, however, that the stated figures are reliable: we consulted their membership records in June 2020, which at the time showed 30,342 male and female union members. A campaign to regulate membership is currently ongoing through December 2022, and is expected to bring more transparency to unionization rates in the police and the National Guard.

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functions include negotiating for better work hours, salary increases, transfer requests, and promotions. Following agreements made between the unions and the government, known as career path adjustments, about 13,000 non-commissioned officers rose several ranks between 2013 and 2015.<sup>5</sup>

Union representatives primarily act as mediators between their membership base and the political hierarchy:

*Unions strike a balance. Security policy is their specialty. They provide the balance. The leader and the security official should always work with the union. It is not possible anymore to take power and do whatever you please... Look, to become a unionist, you have to know how to talk, you have to strike a balance between the administration and the members. When members approach you, you have to be as fair as possible, listen to both sides, and strike a balance.<sup>6</sup>*

There are benefits to being a union representative. While they have sometimes leaned towards subverting the administration, their role as the intermediary between the security forces and the administration has also enabled some representatives to secure privileged positions for themselves. They have on occasion experienced spectacular career growth without attending training courses or taking the competitive examinations for achieving higher ranks.

The weak legislative framework of police unions lies at the heart of the current controversy and conflicts between unions and the ministry, and dates back to when the unions were established. The 25 May decree allows unions to address the media, and they’ve used this prerogative to publicly push their agendas and promote the idea that they stand separate from political authorities.<sup>7</sup> Although the decree amending the statutes is limiting in that it mandates that security force unions be independent from other union confederations, file their statutes with the MOI, and denies them the right to strike, it is silent on the function of unions, the framework for their relations with the administration, how they choose their representatives, or the procedures for collecting dues from

5 Interview with a National Guard officer, Tunis, April 2019. See also Decree No. 2014-3632 of 30 September 2014 approving the promotion lists provided according to the criteria for regularizing professional career advancement of officers in the National Security and National Police, the National Guard, and the Civil Protection. Available at: <https://legislation-securite.tn/fr/law/44772>

6 Interview with a SFDGUI executive committee member in Sfax, February 2020.

7 Some police officers are particularly well-known in the media and have been critical of government action. Police unions have become more adept in public relations, creating communication and media relations units. Communication professionals manage the unions’ Facebook pages and create multimedia content.

members. The unions’ operations are set in their bylaws, subject to a vote at union meetings. Several attempts were made to regulate police union activity; but in vain.<sup>8</sup>

## The Security Officer Protection Law: Protection for Armed Forces or a Blank Cheque for the Security Agencies?

In November 2017, two on-duty police officers were stabbed, resulting in the death of one of them. The police unions called for the adoption of a draft law also known as the “Security Officer Protection Law.”<sup>9</sup> This law, originally drafted in 2015, is particularly controversial.<sup>10</sup> It was prepared by the legal affairs department of the MOI under Minister Ali Larayedh (affiliated with the Ennahdha Movement), and has been criticized by several human rights organizations and associations for its liberticidal language.<sup>11</sup> It extends the scope of use of force to protect public buildings and institutions by guaranteeing the non-prosecution of officers, and condemns “aggressions and threats” against officers and their families. While the draft was being reviewed by the Assembly of the Representatives of the People, the SFDGUI issued a statement – also signed by the Public Security and National Guard unions – urging the Assembly to consider the law and additionally threatening to call on police units to withdraw protection for political staff.<sup>12</sup> As a result of the risk of “police anger,” the draft was re-added to the Assembly’s agenda; it was later withdrawn, but with a promise from Lotfi Brahem, the Minister of the Interior, to submit an amended version.<sup>13</sup>

In March 2020, a revised draft was sent to the Assembly’s Committee on General Legislation for review. The members

8 In one example, an unpublished circular from 4 June 2012 regulated unions by stipulating, among other things, mandatory attendance at work, specific administrative and accounting procedures, and a prohibition against using the Republic’s seal.

9 <https://www.turess.com/assabah/1143797>

10 The draft law is available at the following link: <https://legislation-securite.tn/fr/node/54196>

11 For a recap of the potentially oppressive provisions of the draft, and those who oppose or support the bill, refer to <https://inkyfada.com/fr/2015/06/09/projet-de-loi-repression-des-atteintes-aux-forces-armees/>

12 Press release available at: <https://www.businessnews.com.tn/les-syndicats-securitaires-menacent-les-deputes.520.75799.3>

13 Jobard, Fabien, “Colères policières” (Police Anger), *Esprit*, vol. -a, no. 3-4, 2016, pp. 64-73.

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of parliament have since interviewed several members of police unions and representatives of human rights organizations. Members of the SFDGUI were interviewed in May 2020, including one of the union’s spokespeople who defended the need for officer protection while also gently criticizing the proposed law. His remarks were also aligned with the statement of the SNFSI representative interviewed in March 2020: that the unions were barely consulted during the drafting of a law that they had been calling for, and that this law was doomed to fail as long as it contained articles that violate rights and freedoms guaranteed by the 2014 Constitution.<sup>14</sup> An amended version was eventually approved by the Committee on General Legislation, and submitted for discussion and vote in the plenary session starting 6 October 2020.<sup>15</sup> This amended draft was backed by all of the police unions, who increased their public campaigns urging its ratification in the media and on social networks. They argued that, due to their the fight against terrorism, this law was necessary to “protect” officers (in their words).

This media campaign was coupled with a more aggressive and illegal strategy: targeting the opposition on social networks. Photos and personal details of activists were shared on public pages affiliated with police unions and on the private pages of police unionists. The local SNFSI branch in Sfax filed a complaint against one female activist for a status posted on Facebook and eight other activists – affiliated with left-wing parties, feminist associations, human rights groups, and LGBTQI+ groups – who participated in demonstrations against the law. These activists were summoned to a police station following complaints filed by the Public Security Union and the Bardo Security Sector Management.<sup>16</sup> This same regional branch organized a protest in March 2021 during which its general secretary accused activists against police violence of apostasy and threatened them with reprisals.<sup>17</sup> This strategy has allowed the police to drop citizen’s complaints

14 Some trade unionists interviewed believe that it’s the intention of the political authorities to include oppressive articles so that the draft law does not pass. They also criticize the name of the draft law, specifically the choice of the term “repression” (*zajr*) instead of their preferred “protection” (*himaya*). Interviews with union members of SFDGUI and SNFSI, Tunis, 2019-2020.

15 These amendments only slightly modify the scope of the text. They relate specifically to Article 18 of Law 25/2015 on the non-liability of an officer who injures someone in the course of duty, and adds a “proportionality” requirement.

16 “Nouveau face à face judiciaire entre jeunes activistes et syndicats sécuritaires”, *Le Temps*, 11 October 2022, <https://www.letemps.news/2022/10/11/nouveau-face-a-face-judiciaire-entre-jeunes-activistes-et-syndicats-securitaires/>

17 His exact words were: “you communists, infidels, agents of the Americans”, “atheists, homosexuals, enemies of God, dogs, we have come for you”, “leftist, scum, the men are coming after you”. Video excerpts of the event are available at: <http://kapitalis.com/tunisie/2021/02/01/grave-derapage-du-syndicat-de-police-a-sfax-les-agents-insultent-les-militants-de-gauche-et-les-qualifient-de-koffar-video/>

against them, and even to in turn condemn these citizens, thus inverting the positions of accused and victim. To this end, they have been increasingly enforcing Article 125 of the Penal Code, dating back to 1913 (the colonial period), which punishes the act of “insulting” a public official with one year of imprisonment and a 120-dinar fine (about US\$38).<sup>18</sup>

In addition to using the law, police unions have also used less legal methods to defend their members involved in violence. Their intimidation techniques increased in February 2018, when members of the Union of Officials of the General Directorate of Public Security held an armed protest in front of the Ben Arous courthouse and ultimately stormed the courthouse in response to arrest warrants being issued for three of their colleagues accused of torturing a detainee. The detainee reported to the National Authority for the Prevention of Torture that he had been violated, sprayed with teargas, and left naked in the rain. In cases such as these, the unions have resorted to a well-established rhetoric often mirroring the official stance of the MOI, which aims to criminalize the victim in the media by portraying him or her as violent and guilty of terrorist acts.<sup>19</sup> The SFDGUI issued a press release calling on officers to boycott their court security duties for as long as their colleagues were under arrest, and additionally to refuse to appear in court in cases relating to their police duties.

## Movements Against Police Violence: The Fight Against Impunity

In response to intimidation and pressure by police unions, citizen groups have assembled against police impunity in cases of murders committed by police officers. Launched on social networks in late 2015 by groups of feminists and human rights activists, the *hasebhom* (hold them accountable) campaign primarily aims to oppose Law 25/2015. The collective has regularly called for action against the passage of the law as currently written, and was especially active

18 In the vast majority of cases, citizens were fined no more than 120 dinars. However, their complaints filed against the officers were also deemed invalid, and since 2021, several judgments rendered have resulted in harsher penalties against activists ranging from three to six months in prison.

19 In case of the victim’s death, the Ministry’s official statement traditionally refers to an overdose by the victim who had ingested their drugs. These strategies of criminalizing victims in the media are quite systematic in cases of police violence, in Tunisia as elsewhere, as shown by Codaccioni, Vanessa. “La légitime défense. Homicides sécuritaires, crimes racistes et violences policières” (Legitimate Defense. Security killings, racist crimes, and police violence), Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2018.

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between 2015 and October 2020 when the text was being studied by deputies under pressure from police unions. Similar groups coalesced around victims’ families. Lawyers have played a major role in these groups by denouncing the violations of the judiciary in these cases, particularly through the media.<sup>20</sup> The Omar Laabidi case led to a coalition of several civil society actors standing together to fight against police violence and impunity.<sup>21</sup> On 17 January 2022, the *taalem oum* campaign welcomed organizations such as the Tunisian League of Human Rights (LTDH) at the headquarters of the journalists’ union, with the aim of ensuring that justice is served for Omar, but also more generally to work against police violence. A protest was organized in front of the court on the day of the Laabidi trial, bringing together groups of supporters and members of civil society associations, primarily from the LTDH, the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights, and the National Union of Tunisian Journalists.

The fight against police violence has also taken the form of providing legal support for people in police custody, notably from Lawyers without Borders and the LTDH, both of which provide lawyers to those arrested.<sup>22</sup> These two organizations are also involved in raising awareness of Law 5/2016, which guarantees the presence of a lawyer during detention and limits the duration of police custody to 48 hours, among other rights. The SANAD program created by the World Organization Against Torture in 2013, also provides victims of torture and their families with legal, psychological, and medical assistance.<sup>23</sup> There are also more focused initiatives such as that of a Tunisian group founded by Maryem Mnaouar, which covers legal fees for the families of victims of police violence. An additional issue related to the legal prosecution of police violence is that while by law, judicial police officers should

report to the public prosecutor, in reality the MOI interferes in many investigations. Activists against police violence have demanded that judicial police officers operate instead under the supervision of the Ministry of Justice, while a report by the Truth and Dignity Commission has suggested other measures to strengthen prosecutors’ oversight over judicial police officers.

Ultimately, all of these efforts are challenged by the difficulty of documenting and assessing both the nature and extent of police violence.<sup>24</sup> There are a number of obstacles. First, the disconnectedness of the many movements, associations, and organizations dealing with the issue of police violence complicates the sharing of data related to the excessive use of police force. Second, it is almost impossible to obtain data from the MOI; the Inspectorate General of the MOI does not provide data on its administrative investigations into police violence, and systematically rejects all attempts to obtain information on such investigations or any actions taken as a result. This poses a major obstacle to documenting both police actions in general and their violations. Related to this, identifying the specific officers guilty of excessive use of force is a key challenge. Finally, not one of the approximately 60 arrest warrants issued against security officials has resulted in an arrest.<sup>25</sup> However, the recurrent injuries and deaths caused by police action lead us to believe that this is a societal phenomenon of systemic violence. Despite the police and administration’s rhetoric about the “rotten apple” – that one bad actor should not be used to judge police actions as a whole – it is increasingly necessary to develop a statistical tool for tracking police violence.

## The Role of International Organizations in Security Sector Reform

Ministerial stakeholders have expressed hesitation with regard to reform programs presented as a “democratization package for security forces.” These packages combine aspects of this democratization with more technical

20 These lawyers are often also involved with the LTDH or the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women.

21 Omar Laabidi, a supporter of the Tunisian soccer club, died attempting to escape a clash with the police after a match at Rades Stadium. Surrounded by police at the edge of a river, he told the officers that he didn’t know how to swim, to which one of them replied, according to witnesses, “*taalem oum*” (learn to swim). Omar jumped into the river and his body was found the next day. Fourteen officers have been charged with unintentional murder and failure to assist a person in danger.

22 Over the past two years, approximately one hundred cases have received legal aid based on the “Protéger les droits des personnes gardées à vue” (Protecting Rights of People in Police Custody) program. Source: Livre blanc “renforcer l’implication de la société civile” (Strengthening Civil Society Involvement), “l’Alternative” project (ASF, ATL MST SIDA).

23 From 2013 to 2021, the SANAD program assisted 410 direct victims of torture. A report issued by the World Organisation Against Torture shows that the vast majority of the abuses committed were carried out by police and National Guard officers. Source: SANAD Annual Report, World Organisation Against Torture, 2022.

24 Inkyfada, an online newspaper, was the first to attempt to document these incidents; since 2011, it has been tracking people killed by the police and the legal outcomes of their cases: <https://inkyfada.com/fr/webdoc/tue%C2%B7es-par-la-police-depuis-2011-les-violences-policieres-en-chiffres/>

25 Interview with a lawyer, former vice-director at the Truth and Dignity Commission.

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support through training and equipment donations.<sup>26</sup> The Support Security Sector Reform and Modernisation in the Republic of Tunisia Program is an agreement signed in 2015 between the MOI, the Office of the Prime Minister, and the European Commission, for 23 million euros.<sup>27</sup> It has three key objectives: technical support for border control, legal reform of the intelligence sector, and the alignment of police action with international human rights standards, especially in accountability. Unsurprisingly, the third objective was the one that generated the most reluctance and obstacles to its implementation. It intended, among other things, to establish an ethics committee whose activities would be supported by a code of conduct for the ISF. The agreement also referred to the participation of civil society organizations and the possibility for the committee, which would be independent from the MOI, to deal with citizen complaints. It has been eight years after the agreement was signed, and while the more technical aspects of the support program have been implemented, neither the commission nor the code of conduct have been created. Obstacles have been erected from outside the security institution through unions, as well as by ministerial officials themselves. The position of the MOI has been particularly volatile and fragile since 2011, which makes it even more likely to prevent initiatives aimed at reforming the structures and practices of internal security.

The UNDP-led community policing program also failed to include a component on ethics. Following discussions between the MOI and UNDP that began in 2011, the community policing project was officially launched in 2013. With funds from Norway, Belgium, Japan, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States bringing the total budget to over US\$14 million from May 2013 to 2022, it is the second-largest democratization project for security forces in terms of funding.<sup>28</sup> According to booklets distributed by the UNDP and the MOI, the project is supposed to “respond to the need to contribute to the rise of a police force that is resolutely closer to citizens, respectful of the rule of law and democratic

26 By “democratization,” international organizations mean embedding oversight processes for policing, ISF training to respect human rights, and promoting transparency within security institutions (such as providing open access to data and increased visibility on security agencies’ structures and organizations).

27 The main part of this budget (about 15 million euros) was dedicated to the rehabilitation of border command centers for the purchase of equipment, training, infrastructure work, etc. Over 1.5 million euros were spent on the ethics committee project. The project was concluded at the end of 2020 and a program renewal is under discussion.

28 Source: UNDP booklet about the project. Most of the expenses concerned have gone to the logistics of security sector reform training (i.e., paying for hotels and consultants), the renovation of police stations (i.e., purchasing computer equipment and vehicles), and hiring outside companies to perform audits. The community policing program was renewed in 2020 and is ongoing.

values, and accountable for its actions.”<sup>29</sup>

However, of these many goals, only the desire to bring together police and citizens seems to have been made a priority by public authorities. The program has been working as follows: designated police stations have their administrative duties – issuing criminal records, identity papers, etc. – which are separated from the judicial sector. Officers have received training in communicating with citizens, and local security councils have been established. These councils bring together police officers, representatives of local authorities, and representatives of organizations such as Red Crescent or local development organizations. Notably, none of the changes implemented by the program address police violence, and instead tend to focus on improving the image of the police via awareness campaigns against issues such as drug use, violence against women, and road safety. Once again, the components aimed at introducing actual changes to police activities and accountability for police violations have been bypassed. A code of conduct was developed by the project team after several roundtables with ministerial officials and police unionists, and was opened to the public for comment.<sup>30</sup> The code was finalized as a draft in early 2017, but was never implemented.

## 25 July 2021: A Turning Point in Political Control over Security Forces?

To say that Kais Saied’s rise to power was initially welcomed in police union circles would be an understatement. At the heart of their excitement was the dismissal of several security officials with suspected connections to the Ennahdha Movement. Among them was Lazhar Loungou, a former intelligence official who was criticized in union circles.<sup>31</sup>

29 *Projet d’appui à la prévention, à la préparation et à la réponse aux crises en Tunisie* <https://www.undp.org/fr/tunisia/projets/projet-dappui-la-prevention-la-preparation-et-la-reponse-aux-crises-en-tunisie>

30 Interview with a UNDP project officer, January 2018. The code is available at the following link: <https://legislation-securite.tn/fr/law/54718>

31 These are unverifiable allegations, let us simply note that this affair was quite publicized in the summer of 2022; Loungou was placed under house arrest, and later had a warrant issued for his arrest after he escaped to Algeria. Loungou’s appointment was at the heart of the political conflict between Kais Saied and former Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi. The latter had dismissed Taoufik Charfeddine in January 2021, after Saied’s decision to dismiss Loungou (then security attaché in Paris). Hichem Mechichi, who had become interim Minister of the Interior, appointed Loungou as Director General of Intelligence a few months later.

The executive branch’s control of the justice system was also well-received by some police unionists who had been critical of what they deemed leniency on the judiciary’s part.<sup>32</sup> More surprisingly, the police unions’ public response to President Saïed’s announcements did not reflect opposition to his plans concerning the future unification of the various police unions; instead, the presidential plan reignited the competition between the SFDGUI and the SNFSI, as each union began presenting itself as the more legitimate option for representing police interests. Disagreements arose between the unions and the MOI in May 2022, when the MOI ignored the unions’ demands for some of their members to move up in rank.<sup>33</sup> These conflicts, which had remained behind the scenes, were put on display in August 2022 during Lotfi Abdelli’s comedy show, when some officers went on stage after some comments mocked the police. Members of the SNFSI then called for a boycott of providing security services for the comedian’s shows.<sup>34</sup> This move prompted a response from the MOI and President Saïed, who reminded the police of the ban on the ISF right to strike and opened administrative and criminal investigations.

However, a recent significant notable shift may have occurred: while the two primary police unions have historically been competitive with each other, particularly in terms of membership, they have for the first time presented a united front. On 23 September 2022, a military court arrested eight SNFSI members in Sfax, accusing them of undermining public security. These SNFSI members had set up tents and organized sit-ins as a response to the MOI’s announcement about salary deductions being suspended. Police forces intervened to remove the tents of their fellow unionists, resulting in clashes and the use of teargas. On 28 September 2022, hundreds of members of the SFDGUI and SNFSI protested together in front of the security district in Sfax, a first since 2011. In retaliation against the unions, a large security unit was deployed to carry out the court order for the eviction of the SNFSI from its headquarters.<sup>35</sup> The SNFSI had been in conflict with the landlord since 2012, and court orders for the union to vacate the space were issued in 2014, according to the landlord’s attorney. However, the timing of the MOI’s decision to execute the order leaves little doubt that it is being used as a tool in the current conflict between the administration and the unions.

## The Path Forward for Security Sector Reform Remains Unclear

The political authorities’ control over police unions will likely disrupt the current balance of power, where the unions have held a favourable position. While it is too early to judge the effects of these attempts to tame the unions, we can be assured that they have created a schism in the relationship between police unions and the political power. In the initiatives promoted in the name of security sector reform, the improvement of popular perception of the security sector has been often prioritized at the expense of actual reforms to the legal framework governing police activity and unionization, to the detriment of a genuinely open and transparent security institution and the penalizing of acts of police violence. One of the challenges impeding both the end of impunity and the improvement of relations between citizens and officers is the lack of transparency in how the police operate. In many ways, the MOI still operates as a black box: the organizational chart and activities are largely kept secret, and access to detention centres by outside authorities is not guaranteed. For victims of police violence, the lynchpin is the relationship between the police and the judiciary, especially the former’s endorsement of the latter. Another major difficulty is the current lack of parliament, as some committees could exercise parliamentary oversight and control over the security sector through hearings. Uncertainties about the makeup of the future parliament – including its budget and prerogatives – the increasing number of activists being prosecuted, the control of the presidency over the High Judicial Council, and the imbalance of power in favor of the executive branch are all obstacles hindering citizen engagement in issues of security and police impunity.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with a SNFSI trade unionist, Tunis, February 2022.

<sup>33</sup> The SFDGUI advocates in particular for recognizing university diplomas in the awarding of degrees. SFDGUI press release, 18 May 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Unions regularly make the threat of public security forces not reporting for duty, especially in cultural events. In July 2013, they had also called for not providing security for the shows of the rapper Weld el 15, as the latter had written the song “*boulicia kleb*” (the police are dogs).

<sup>35</sup> This space was occupied by the services of the MOI until 2011, then handed over to the unions in February 2011. Interviews with SNFSI members, Tunis, March 2019.

## Avocats Sans Frontières

Avocats Sans Frontières (ASF), founded in 1992 in Brussels, is an international NGO specialising in promoting access to justice and the defence of human rights. The organisation fights against injustices in our societies and promotes the principle of the rule of law based on human rights.

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## Arab Reform Initiative

L'Arab Reform Initiative est un groupe de réflexion arabe indépendant qui travaille avec des partenaires experts au Moyen-Orient et en Afrique du Nord et au-delà pour articuler un programme national de changement démocratique et de justice sociale. Il mène des recherches et des analyses politiques et fournit une plate-forme pour des voix inspirantes basées sur les principes de diversité, d'impartialité, et d'égalité des sexes.

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