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By Richard J. Pera

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Richard J. Pera is a Research Staff Member at the Institute for Defense Analyses.



The wall of a house bears the signs of fighting as Tunisian soldiers search for attackers still at large in the outskirts of Ben Gardane, southern Tunisia, Tuesday, March 8, 2016. (Source: AP Photo.)

KENYA'S POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT AHEAD OF 2017 VOTE

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In this Thursday, September 1, 2011, file photo, William Ruto sits in the courtroom of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague, Netherlands. (Source: AP Photo/Bas Czerwinski, File.)

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Why Did IS Select Ben Gardane?

Ben Gardane is close to the border with Libya, where IS has expanded. IS has a presence in Sabratha, Libya, about 60 miles from the Tunisian border, and the Ben Gardane operation likely was planned [there](#). But Ben Gardane also has a [long history of involvement in jihad](#): "The tradition of jihad is so strong in Ben Gardane that the former leader of al Qaida in Iraq, Abu Musab al Zarqawi, allegedly said, 'If Ben Gardane had been located next to Falluja, we would have liberated Iraq.'" Of the more than 6,000 Tunisians who traveled to Syria and Iraq to join IS, [15 percent](#) originated from Ben Gardane.

How Did the Battle Play Out?

IS fighters illegally entered Tunisia from Libya before the March 7 attack; they remained in safe houses where weapons were pre-positioned. [Reporting suggests](#) that the attack may have been planned for March 20, but was moved up because IS suspected the operation had been compromised in late February.

The signal to attack early on March 8 coincided with the [muezzin's call to prayer](#) from a local mosque, which had been used as a safe house. At dawn, the fighters departed in multiple cars and trucks, picking up other fighters on the way to their targets. Fighters in moving vehicles handed out weapons to other fighters on foot. IS fighters used megaphones to [chant "God is great," and reassure residents](#): "Don't worry. We are not here to target you. We are the Islamic State and we are here for the tyrants in the Army." Armed with automatic rifles, rocket-propelled grenades (RPG), suicide vests, and large amounts of ammunition, they attacked three targets: an Army barracks, National Guard post, and police station. With detailed knowledge of the battlespace, IS fighters drove to the home of the local chief of anti-terrorism forces and killed him. By late morning, IS controlled downtown Ben Gardane. By midday, Tunisian soldiers and security personnel joined the battle, supported by helicopter reconnaissance. Tunisia imposed a curfew in Ben Gardane and closed its border with Libya. Most gunfire ended by dusk, March 8.

Tunisian authorities subsequently conducted numerous raids on suspected IS locations, resulting in many arrests. They discovered several underground caches of weapons and ammunition. By March 10, [the battle had claimed](#) the lives of 46 IS fighters, 13 Tunisian military and security personnel, and seven civilians.

Why the Battle Was Different

Each of the previous four IS attacks against Tunisia involved no more than three attackers. Two were against tourist targets, and two were against security forces. Two were in Tunis, and two were in the Mediterranean resort of Sousse. Three employed automatic rifles, and one used a suicide vest. The battle of Ben Gardane was significantly different:

- **Personnel and Weapons**—Unlike previous attacks, the attack at Ben Gardane was large-scale, involving 60 or more fighters—many of whom were Ben Gardane residents. Some of the fighters may have come from as far away as Syria and Iraq, where they likely received weapons training. This was IS's first use of RPGs in Tunisia.



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- **Targets**—The battle of Ben Gardane likely reflected IS's shift in strategic focus from economic targets to the Tunisian government's military and security forces. This was IS's first attempt to strike multiple security targets simultaneously.
- **Planning and Tactics**—The battle of Ben Gardane reflected a higher degree of sophistication than previous attacks, probably including [long-term operational planning](#), multiple international border crossings for personnel and weapons, multiple safe houses, a disciplined communications plan, multiple vehicles, multiple assembly points, multiple ingresses to targets, and local leadership to ensure coordinated targeting.

Who Won?

IS capitalized on the battle via the [Internet and social media](#): “The raid on Ben Gardane was the beginning of an all-out war against Tunisia.” IS singled out Tunisian soldiers, calling on them to repent before it was too late. IS also called on Tunisians to overthrow their government and created several new hashtags, including “#terrify the tyrants of Tunisia.” [IS compared the battle](#) of Ben Gardane to the 9/11 attacks against the United States.

The government of Tunisia [stated](#) that IS was defeated in its attempt to create a new IS “wilayat” (province of the caliphate) on Tunisian soil. Prime Minister Essid claimed that the battle of Ben Gardane “boosted the morale of the army and security forces.” [He added](#), “we won a battle, but the war against terrorism. . . [continues].” Despite the “victory,” the deputy head of the province that includes Ben Gardane was [fired on March 10](#).

Because Tunisia failed to prevent the attack on Ben Gardane, the incident could be viewed as a tactical success for the government but a strategic defeat. Above all, it was an intelligence failure, especially for the Ministry of Interior (MOI). IS “won” because it made good on an early 2015 promise to continue its campaign in Tunisia—and it did so with unprecedented numbers and audacity. This was IS's first large-scale raid on Tunisian soil; it embarrassed the government and could enhance IS recruitment.

What's Next?

The pattern of previous attacks suggests that IS might strike Tunisia again in the near term. Given that major European travel agencies have [canceled holidays to Tunisia](#) through November 2016, IS may focus on military and security facilities, possibly including hit-and-run attacks against military and police outside of their garrisons. A second, though less likely, course of action would be suicide attacks against leadership targets, including high-ranking civilian or military figures. Another large-scale operation similar to that undertaken in Ben Gardane is not out of the question.

IS represents a long-term threat to Tunisia's fragile democracy. Help from Western intelligence partners is key, but not enough. Without improved intelligence and counterintelligence at the local level, it will be difficult for the Tunisian government to be successful in its battle against IS. The fact that no one came forward to report the anomalous activities in and around the mosque in Ben Gardane highlights the existing intelligence gap. Securing the cooperation of the public in an improved human-source intelligence effort will be difficult, however, especially in light of IS's brutal and [well-publicized](#) reprisals against those it accuses of aiding the government. Nevertheless, that should be a high priority for the Tunisian government.

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In this Thursday, September 1, 2011, file photo, William Ruto sits in the courtroom of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague, Netherlands. (Source: AP Photo/Bas Czerwinski, File.)

Background: Elections in Kenya

While Kenya has a long [history](#) of violent elections and political conflict centered along ethnic lines, the country's electoral crisis and ensuing communal violence in 2007–2008 were the most severe to date and brought Kenya to the edge of collapse. Over [1,200](#) were killed and more than 600,000 displaced. A power-sharing agreement brokered by Kofi Annan, former Secretary-General of the United Nations, restored stability after months of violence. A unity government, headed by former President Mwai Kibaki and Odinga, who served as prime minister, was stood up in March 2008. After decades of delays, the adoption of a new constitution in 2010 was a major accomplishment of the power-sharing government. The unity government remained in office until fresh elections were held in 2013. While far from perfect, the tight 2013 elections, narrowly won by Kenyatta and Ruto (both of whom at that time faced ICC charges of crimes against humanity) were much [less](#) violent than the previous election cycle.

Run-up to 2017 Elections

Once in office, [cracks](#) began to show within the Kenyatta and Ruto camps of the Jubilee Alliance. The two were strange bedfellows from the outset. Kenyatta, the son of Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta, comes from the Kikuyu ethnic group, and Ruto, formerly aligned with Odinga's ODM party, is from the Kalenjin group. Clashes between the Kikuyu and the Kalenjin communities accounted for most of the communal post-election violence in 2008, and the ICC accused Kenyatta and Ruto of helping to orchestrate this violence from opposite sides of the conflict. After the Kenyatta administration [frustrated](#) the ICC at every turn, in December 2014 the court [dropped](#) charges against Kenyatta but proceeded with its case against Ruto.

With the ICC charges still hanging over Ruto, some observers during the past year viewed him as a lame duck and predicted that Kenyatta would [drop](#) him before the next election. [Others](#) worried about renewed violence between the Kalenjin and Kikuyu communities if Ruto was convicted. With the ICC charges now vacated against Ruto, it appears that the Kenyatta-Ruto alliance will remain intact for now. Kenyatta [applauded](#) this week's ruling by the ICC: "I welcome the aforementioned [April 5] decision, which reaffirms my strong conviction from the beginning about the innocence of my Deputy President." On the opposition side, CORD leader Odinga also [congratulated](#) Ruto: "It has always been our position that ODM, to which Hon Ruto was a key member in 2007, planned no violence against other Kenyans."

CORD's efforts to amend the constitution allowed Odinga and the opposition to essentially begin campaigning for the 2017 elections ahead of schedule. They gathered nearly a [million](#) signatures in support of changing the constitution to allow increased funding to local governments. Other [demands](#) included land sector reforms and the elevation of the anti-corruption agency to the level of a constitutional commission (corruption remains a major problem and salient issue

in Kenya, as [highlighted](#) in the November 19, 2015 issue of *Africa Watch*). Despite its efforts, last month CORD [lost](#) its major push to amend the country's constitution.

Odinga is [likely](#) to again be the leading opposition candidate in the 2017 polls, even though he has lost three of the last four presidential elections in Kenya, and despite current [tensions](#) within CORD over who will eventually lead the ticket. On April 2, Odinga brought on a slew of new prominent [advisors](#) to help guide him during the coming campaign season.

Conclusion

Do Odinga and the CORD opposition stand a chance of unseating Kenyatta and the Jubilee Alliance in 2017? Evidence on the power of incumbency in Africa suggests this will be an uphill battle. As argued by scholar Nic Cheeseman, "since the reintroduction of multi-party elections in Africa, sitting [presidents](#) have won 85 percent of the elections they have contested." Repressive legislation passed by the Kenyatta administration that [cracks](#) down on the media and civil society groups will further hurt the opposition's chances. Despite a new constitution and other institutional reforms achieved during the period of power-sharing, the possibility of an election [rigged](#) by the government exists. In spite of these obstacles, Cheeseman [argues](#) that Odinga may be able to prevail at the polls if CORD is able to maintain support in the coastal region and capitalize on his party's incumbency advantage at the local level to help mobilize supporters. At the local level, ODM holds 16 governorships, double the number of Kenyatta's party, and the highest number of county assembly members, with 377.

There is no question that this week's ICC ruling in favor of Ruto strengthens the Jubilee Alliance. Kenyatta would struggle to win the Rift Valley's Kalenjin vote without Ruto, so this development increases the prospects of a second term for Kenyatta. In the short term, the ICC ruling decreases the chances of large-scale election violence in 2017 between the Kikuyu and Kalenjin, as seen in 2008. At the same time, however, the ruling helps to perpetuate the long-standing culture of impunity in Kenya, which may ultimately threaten the long-term stability of the country.

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