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# THE GEOGRAPHIC TRAJECTORY OF CONFLICT AND MILITANCY IN TUNISIA

Anouar Boukhars

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## About the Author

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## Summary

More than six years after the revolution that ousted President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, Tunisia's border regions remain hotbeds of social discontent and agitation. Aggrieved youth increasingly express their anger through fiery protests, street violence, and in some cases violent extremism. In response to this ongoing social unrest and terrorism, the Tunisian government has developed hard-line security policies, whose effects often exacerbate social tensions, political violence, and militancy. Breaking this vicious cycle requires Tunisia's government to rethink its approach to the border regions.

### The State of Tunisia's Fragile Borders

- Many youth in Tunisia's border regions have lost confidence in the democratic transition and have developed feelings of deep frustration, anger, and hostility toward state authority.
- Years of protests are hardening into demands for a new social contract that would produce a more equitable redistribution of state resources as well as a transparent and inclusive process to manage Tunisia's natural resources.
- The state's inability or unwillingness to reform its modes of governance—as well as its tendency to attack and stigmatize protesters as troublemakers, smugglers and terrorists—has contributed to the growing politicization and radicalization of youth.
- The prolonged disconnect between the state and Tunisia's marginalized regions is dangerous, threatening to plunge the country into violence that could see the country slide back into repressive authoritarianism.

### Recommendations for Tunisian Authorities and the International Community

- Acknowledge the border regions' decades-long experiences of socio-economic discrimination and political abuse and validate their historical figures, symbols, and contributions to Tunisia. If accompanied by a genuine regional development program, such gestures can contribute to reconciliation between the aggrieved periphery and the dominant eastern Mediterranean coast.
- Support strategies that increase agricultural competitiveness, reform landownership, and improve the management of natural resources.

The investment of a fair portion of the profits from local resources into local projects can improve the livelihoods of local communities.

- Reform the internal security apparatus and criminal justice sector, and design rehabilitation and reintegration programs for the hundreds of Tunisian fighters returning from foreign theaters of conflict.
- Support and empower the work of the National Authority for the Fight Against Corruption (INLUCC) and the Truth and Dignity Commission. Reducing corruption, restoring justice, and providing compensation to victims of repression will bolster lasting and sustainable stability.

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## Introduction

Social inequality and regional asymmetries are deepening the chasm between Tunisia's restless periphery and its eastern Mediterranean coast, with the potential to undermine the country's democratic transition. Tunisian coastal elites fear and misunderstand the bitter resentment in the border communities, making it harder to secure the country from continuing terrorist threats. The violent extremist groups based in these communities feed on a deep well of disillusionment with the democratic transition and prey on the growing sense of emasculation, disempowerment, and helplessness among Tunisian youth. The Tunisian government's narrow focus on combating extremist ideology is distracting from addressing the real drivers of radicalization. Studies show that the lure of violent extremist groups, such as the self-proclaimed Islamic State, has more to do with the promise of empowerment and restored dignity than with ideology or religious conviction.<sup>1</sup> Since the 2011 revolution, Tunisia has experienced an evolving array of security threats, particularly along the country's fragile borders. This paper will evaluate Tunisia's security-based approaches to border control and provide recommendations for addressing the dangerous divide between the youth in Tunisia's border regions and the state.

## Dynamic Threat of Militancy

Since the end of former president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali's authoritarian rule in January 2011, the Tunisian government has been playing catch up against a continually shifting terror threat. The Tunisian revolution greatly disrupted the security landscape, initially marked by political disorientation and regional upheaval. The postrevolutionary period provided disparate Salafi groups with a sudden opportunity to sow the seeds of another revolutionary movement in the soil of poor neighborhoods and allowed them to take advantage of the widespread disillusionment among the youth, particularly in the border regions. Salafists of every stripe came to the fore, but it was the so-called Salafi jihadists who most took advantage of the political transition. Powered by the release of hundreds of Salafists from prison and the return of several prominent sheikhs to Tunisia from their sanctuaries in Western Europe, they began spreading their roots in the poor and marginalized areas where state authority was lacking.<sup>2</sup>

One of the challenges that faced the Salafists was how to transform the heterogeneous Salafi-jihadi networks into a fixed structure with a central authority and identified leadership. Many radical Salafists coalesced around the hardline

group Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST), founded in late April 2011 by former prisoner Seifallah Ben Hassine, known as Abu Ayadh. Abu Ayadh prioritized central control over the growth of Salafi jihadism, fearing counterproductive actions might hurt the movement.<sup>3</sup> These concerns were quickly realized when the movement became mired in controversies over vigilante violence against art shows, mausoleums, and liquor stores.<sup>4</sup> Despite claims by Abu Ayadh that Tunisia was no longer a land of jihad, Salafi proselytizing and violent discourse became increasingly combative toward other Tunisians whose lifestyles the Salafists rejected.

The rise of this violence reached its culmination in September 2012 when raging mobs set fire to the U.S. embassy and the American Cooperative School of Tunis. Salafi vigilantism proved destructive to the movement as Tunisia's main Islamist party, Ennahda, which led a governing coalition from October 2011 to January 2014, hardened its security approach, targeting AST's structures, grassroots organizations, and social activities. The tougher approach prompted the Salafi jihadists to shift their focus away from aggressive, sometimes violent, proselytizing to directly challenging state authority and attacking its key institutions. By doing so, the Salafi jihadists hoped to weaken the credibility of the state security forces by proving to disgruntled Tunisians that their government was unable to stop the Salafi-jihadi attacks.

This attrition strategy escalated in 2013, with a vicious cycle of provocation, retaliation, and repression. Tunisia's then prime minister, an Islamist named Ali Larayedh, blamed AST militants for the assassinations of two Tunisian political figures and the killings of several members of the security forces.<sup>5</sup> Nationwide reprisal operations against suspected militants' hideouts and safe houses revealed weapon caches for future attacks. In the midst of this escalating war between the state and AST, small and violent militant groups connected to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) were upping the ante in the western regions bordering Algeria. After the classification of AST as a terrorist organization in August 2013 and the resultant massive security crackdown on the movement and its sympathizers, groups such as the Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade (an AQIM affiliate) positioned themselves as a rampart against the state's policy of criminalization of Salafism and suppression of dissent. They did this especially in the most disenfranchised neighborhoods and regions of the country.

The defeat of AST accelerated the fragmentation of the Tunisian militant landscape. Under the assault of state forces, AST ceased to exist by late 2014. This left behind an ideological void and a large, disgruntled constituency, whose members either went dormant, operated underground by integrating smuggling networks and building social linkages in Ben Guerdane close to the border with Libya, or joined the Syrian or Libyan theaters of war.<sup>6</sup> Other Salafists continued the fight against the government's "tyranny" by linking up with the Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade near the Algerian border.

Up until AST's defeat, the focus of the Salafi-jihadi movement was on destabilizing state institutions while mobilizing the legions of Tunisians dissatisfied with the democratic transition. The failure of this political strategy led to a dramatic shift in approach that embraced hitting civilian as well as military targets.<sup>7</sup> This new strategy was amplified by the deepening reach of the Islamic State franchise into Libya. In 2015 alone, three major attacks in Tunisia were claimed by the Islamic State—at the Bardo National Museum in the capital of Tunis (twenty-two deaths), a beach resort at Sousse (thirty-eight deaths), and on a Tunisian presidential guard bus in downtown Tunis (twelve deaths). And in March 2016, dozens of Islamic State-trained sleeper cells staged a dramatic assault on Tunisian security forces in Ben Guerdane.

The Tunisian security forces successfully repelled this attempt to seize Ben Guerdane and to inflame a rebellious populace into open revolt. However, the scale of the attempt and the collusion of some Ben Guerdane residents illustrate that militant groups have the potential to expand in Tunisia's border regions. Such an evolution requires the Tunisian government to adopt a new approach that is not limited to law enforcement and military actions. The key is to analyze the risks of militancy in the political, social, and economic context in which they occur. In Tunisia, socioeconomic triggers (alienation, discrimination, and stigmatization) and regional asymmetries are important predictors of youth violence and radicalization, particularly in the border regions.<sup>8</sup>

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## Underpinnings of Radicalization

The current government's approach to terrorism has the potential to fuel further radicalization.

President Beji Caid Essebsi likes to dismiss violent militancy as something induced by alien fanatic barbarism.<sup>9</sup> Such an ideology-focused approach ignores the underlying drivers of militancy. It also limits the government's ability to assess the threat in a systematic way. Government actions that ignore the social, economic, and regional underpinnings of militancy will influence the trajectories of terrorism in Tunisia.<sup>10</sup>

A dispassionate assessment of Tunisia's problem with militancy points more toward socioeconomic and regional factors than it does to religious fundamentalism. The rare sociological studies conducted on militancy in Tunisia show that the young Tunisians most sympathetic to AST hailed from the poorest neighborhoods and were the least religiously observant.<sup>11</sup> Aggrieved youth sympathize with jihadists because they tend to share the same underprivileged socioeconomic backgrounds and inhabit the same blighted neighborhoods.<sup>12</sup>

Radical ideologies might be influenced by regional context and geopolitical grievances, but they are an expression of their local environs. This is

especially true for the latest generation of Tunisian militants who were not around for the first wave of battles in Afghanistan in the 1980s and were too young for the second round of major fights, which began after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States and intensified with the 2003

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**Today, the youth who become militant tend to be better educated than their average countrymen, but unemployed or underemployed.**

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U.S. invasion of Iraq. This third generation of militants, who came of age with the 2010–2011 Tunisian revolution, is best exemplified by the perpetrators of the dramatic terrorist attacks that hit Tunisia in 2015. They were born in the 1990s, had a taste of repressive authoritarianism, and then stumbled into the politics of revolt that put an end to the repressive rule of Ben Ali. They were disappointed by the inability of the postrevolutionary government to deliver for them, and the revolutionary thrill quickly gave way to the embrace of Salafi jihadism as the primary vehicle of resistance.<sup>13</sup>

Today, the youth who become militant tend to be better educated than their average countrymen, but unemployed or underemployed.<sup>14</sup> They are between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four.<sup>15</sup> Many, including the three perpetrators of the Bardo and Sousse attacks, hail from impoverished backgrounds and marginalized regions.<sup>16</sup> Intense feelings of insignificance in the Tunis suburbs or the poor outskirts of Kasserine Governorate allows radical groups that combine social and preaching activities to make inroads at the expense of the state.<sup>17</sup> Before AST's defeat, joining the group was tantamount to joining a revolutionary movement capable of rupturing the generational and institutional order.<sup>18</sup> The movement was a welcome home for those on the margins of society looking for a way to vent their frustrations with the democratic transition and their dashed hopes.

The failure of the democratic transition to improve the economic conditions for young Tunisians has led many to feel that the system is rigged against them. A 2014 World Bank report on removing hurdles to youth inclusion found that 68 percent of urban and 91 percent of rural youth have no trust in the political system.<sup>19</sup> Political leaders remain largely older, Francophone, and middle class while the majority of Tunisians are young, Arabic-speaking, and disempowered.

Coping with disappointing outcomes differs from one individual to the next. But the Tunisian experience shows that anger at the persistence of social exclusion and regional disparities, combined with exposure to radical Salafi preachers, are important factors in understanding youth radicalization. As frustration grows, some individuals become more prone to nihilism, as the high rates of suicide and self-immolation in the most impoverished neighborhoods and regions demonstrate.<sup>20</sup> Others become susceptible to the heroic charms of jihadi warriors on the battlefields of Syria, Libya, or Kasserine's Mount Chaambi, which is near the Algerian border.<sup>21</sup>

The challenge for Tunisian government officials is to understand this youth revolt. Viewing Islamic fundamentalism as the main driver of radicalism misdiagnoses the problem. Anytime there is a terrorist attack, the state cracks down on suspected radicals. Salafists complain of degrading treatment, unlawful raids, arbitrary arrests, and judicial harassment. Families of suspects and fighters who have returned home to Tunisia also complain of persecution and systematic police abuse. In the absence of a deradicalization program or a policy of social reinsertion, such a heavy-handed security approach is counterproductive. Worse, it is “pushing people to terrorism,” says Ridha Raddaoui, a lawyer and co-author of a recent report on terrorism in Tunisia published by the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights.<sup>22</sup> The same concerns have been raised by international rights groups who warn that abuse in the name of security only compounds the security threats the country faces.<sup>23</sup>

Tunisian prisons—notorious for overcrowding, poor sanitation, and torture—are becoming perfect settings for radicalization. This was brought into stark relief by the dramatic transformation of a twenty-five-year-old Tunisian from rapper to Islamic State fighter. Maurouane Douiri, known as Emino, was a womanizing singer who liked to post photographs of himself in front of a sports car with scantily clad women.<sup>24</sup> But after an eight-month stint in prison for hashish possession, he underwent a rapid and dramatic lifestyle change. In one year, he abandoned rap, changed his attire, and announced his allegiance to the Islamic State in a Facebook post in March 2015.<sup>25</sup> Before his radicalization in prison, he had criticized police violence against Tunisia’s youth. It is this police repression, argues his former lawyer Me Ghazi Mrabet, that is responsible for Emino’s conversion to radical Salafism.<sup>26</sup>

The persistent stigmatization of impoverished communities and the trauma associated with aggressive and intrusive policing instill in young people profound feelings of humiliation by and bitterness toward state authority. This frustration is often expressed in protests, street violence, and violent extremism, especially in the long-neglected border regions that bear the brunt of the government’s ironfisted security policy.

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## **A Region in Turmoil: Tunisia’s Southeast Border**

The fact that Tunisia’s southeast border is seething with pervasive discontent and antigovernment hostility is not new. The region has always been hounded by exclusion and deprivation. From colonial rule to the reign of Ben Ali, the southern periphery was marginalized and stigmatized as a zone of tribalism, dereliction, and unruliness. The French imposition of arbitrary borders and

the confiscation of land and forced sedentarization of nomads in a region with weak agricultural potential disrupted the pastoral livelihood of the region's population.<sup>27</sup> The reaffirmation of this asymmetrical squeeze by Tunisia's first president after independence, Habib Bourguiba, generated an enduring sense of injustice and rebellion toward the center.

The first act of defiance came on the heels of independence in 1956 when the southern regions sided with Bourguiba's political nemesis, Salah Ben Youssef, a southern nationalist leader who contested the dominance of the state apparatus and resources by elites from Tunis and the north-east coast.<sup>28</sup> The same political antagonisms were revived in the 2014 presidential election when the impoverished south voted massively against then presidential candidate Essebsi, a central fixture of the hegemonic power structures that have ruled Tunisia since independence.

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In both cases, the populations of the south were expressing discontent at the prevailing economic paradigm that has failed them. From Bourguiba's authoritarian statism to Ben Ali's crony economic liberalism, the southern regions found themselves at the losing end of an extremely lopsided economy.

Aside from the few jobs in the army and local government that the state doled out as political patronage, the southern populations had to fend for themselves through work in the underground economy. Families in the border region with Libya eked out a precarious existence mostly through occasional day labor in informal cross-border trade and trafficking. Tunisia's rocky relations with deposed Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi, killed by rebel forces in October 2011, accelerated the informalization of cross-border trade. The occasional border closures and expulsion of Tunisian workers from Libya opened the door for tribal cartels to develop lucrative cross-border services. The Twazin tribe of Ben Guerdane and their allies in the Nwayel tribes in Libya developed vast informal markets in currency trading, human trafficking, and smuggling of a range of subsidized Libyan goods from fuel to flour and sugar. The 1993 imposition of United Nations sanctions on Libya pushed people on both sides of the Tunisia-Libya border to rely on smuggling for their livelihoods.<sup>29</sup>

The Ben Ali regime had tolerated, if not encouraged, the growth of such illicit centers of commercialization as safety valves, relieving societal pressures that might have otherwise exploded into civil unrest or massive migration into the more developed eastern coastal cities. There were, however, two significant caveats to this informal agreement. The tribal cartels forswore engagement in drug and arms trafficking and committed to help the government protect the border from infiltration by drug and arms dealers. When the government broke the principles of the tacit agreement, the border region sank into civil unrest. In the summer of 2010, informal cross-border traders and smugglers revolted against both the closure of the Ras Jedir border crossing into Libya

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and attempts by Ben Ali's notorious in-laws to impose an exit tax on Tunisians crossing the border. The rioting and violence ceased only when the president canceled the tax and ordered the opening of the border crossing. The same scenario occurred in early 2015 after the Tunisian government imposed a \$15 export tax on foreigners, causing Libyan authorities to retaliate in kind.<sup>30</sup> Deadly protests forced the authorities to suspend that border tax as well.

The fall of the Ben Ali regime disrupted cross-border markets, trade networks, and standards of behavior. It also upset the traditional internal and external hierarchies of tribal power. The dominant tribal elites and smuggling cartels were rivaled by once-peripheral tribes and young adventurous actors. Taking advantage of the disorientation of the security services and disorganization of the border economy, the new actors expanded trading to previously prohibited goods such as alcohol and drugs. The introduction of violent extremists into the mix further muddles the black market landscape and makes it crucial to distinguish between innocuous informal networks of cross-border traders and entrepreneurs of organized crime and violence. Unfortunately, Tunisian authorities and the media increasingly tend to lump all kinds of illicit trafficking together as endangering the state's security. This tendency to criminalize the shadow economy alienates the local populations and the economic actors the government needs to help manage the border. It also aggravates the social crisis brewing in the south.

The rash of terrorist attacks in Tunisia and the Islamic State's determined push into the country's southern territory empowers the government's security-first approach in the border areas. The March 2016 attack in Ben Guerdane increased border militarization to deter terrorism and stem the mushrooming smuggling trade. The government accelerated the building of a 125-mile antiterror barrier along its border with Libya. The barrier, which Tunisia calls a "system of obstacles," is made of sand banks and water-filled trenches to prevent vehicles and people carrying contraband from crossing the border. To keep militants from entering Tunisia through Libya, the wall will be equipped with an electronic sensor system and fortified by observation towers and drones.<sup>31</sup>

This militarization of the border, however, is not likely to be very effective until the government becomes serious about tackling the root causes of insecurity in the south. The building of a wall will neither stop terrorism nor stem the flow of smuggling contraband into the country. Indeed, recent history suggests that closing off the southeastern border only encouraged the smuggling business. In the 1980s, Ben Guerdane became a major smuggling hub precisely when the border with Libya was closed. Border militarization will affect only the most vulnerable people who are dependent on trade in contraband and who lack the means and networks to circumvent border checks. The most powerful and well-resourced smuggling rings use the main roads and benefit from the connivance of Tunisian border patrol agents and other security officials.<sup>32</sup>

Conventional wisdom in Tunisia blames Libya for the country's security woes. Many Tunisian officials believe the threats are primarily external and hence require a primarily security-based response.<sup>33</sup> This approach prioritizes reinforcing border surveillance and developing the capacities of the intelligence agencies and security services to better detect and prevent the cross-border movements of militants and traffickers from Libya. The Tunisian authorities' focus on border reinforcement and increased checks over the Libyan frontier is important, but it risks deflecting attention from the root causes of insecurity.

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As a result, the socioeconomic problems that fuel political discontent, social unrest, and violent extremism have so far received only lip service from the state.

The traditional approach to counterterrorism has become a fixture of Tunisia's policy toward its southeastern periphery. In 2014, Essebsi successfully ran for president as the candidate most capable of restoring stability and security to Tunisia. For many in the south who rejected his candi-

didacy, Essebsi's tenure as president is equated with punitiveness and territorial stigmatization. Essebsi's denigration of the south—he called his opponent, a southerner named Moncef Marzouki, “the candidate of jihadists” during the 2014 presidential election—confirms the suspicion of many that the political elite is deliberately allowing their regions to rot.<sup>34</sup> Essebsi had already courted controversy in September 2011 when he spoke of the civilized regions of the littoral, implying that those of the south were uncivilized.

The result is that Essebsi's promises of tackling lawlessness along the borders have collided with the harsh reality of communities whose livelihoods depend on the free movement of people and goods. The transborder dimension of social and tribal relations between Tunisia's southeast and Libya's west makes any disruptions to cross-border trade an explosive affair. The communities in Tunisia's southeast have solid family, economic, and cultural ties with western Libya. It should not be surprising that blocking those interactions often leads to protests and rioting. Most southerners believe that the political system is controlled by the northeastern elite whose aim is to perpetuate their structural marginalization and exclusion. Instead of addressing the conditions of uneven regional development, the government is seen as impeding the only source of revenue available to border communities. The violence is therefore less about opposing state control of its frontiers and more about the lack of a viable alternative to illicit trade.

The successive postrevolutionary governments have failed to make even the slightest dent in the southeast's woeful lack of basic infrastructure services. With the exception of the island of Djerba, a tourist haven located at the southern end of the Gulf of Gabès, much of the southeast is beleaguered by low levels of development. For example, the governorate of Tataouine, which has become a flashpoint for protests against marginalization, has one of the highest

numbers of unemployed graduates in the country (58 percent).<sup>35</sup> Despite the vastness of its territory (25 percent of Tunisia) and its oil fields, which account for 40 percent of Tunisian production, the region is held back by poor physical assets such as roads, hospitals, and schools. This deficit stifles economic activity and social services delivery even in areas that have experienced significant industrialization. In the governorate of Gabès, which lies along the southeastern coast and boasts one of the largest industrial zones in Tunisia, the rate of unemployment and illiteracy is much higher than the national average. Worse, in a region choked by industrial pollution and unsafe working conditions, the lack of access to hospitals and healthcare speaks volumes about the degree of marginalization experienced by local communities.<sup>36</sup> “*Al-sha’b yureed al-bii’a-esselima*” (the people want a clean environment), has become a common refrain during protests over pollution by the phosphate industry.<sup>37</sup> Locals complain about rising infertility, frequent miscarriages, and high rates of cancer and respiratory and cardiovascular disease.<sup>38</sup> They also blame the phosphate mines and refineries for depleting local water sources, damaging seaside palm oases, and harming the livelihoods of farmers.<sup>39</sup>

To the dismay of the poorest regions, the successive postrevolutionary governments proved incapable of correcting these deficiencies.<sup>40</sup> The Islamists, in particular, who suffered repression under the old authoritarian regime, were expected to break with the policies that favored the littoral. In its two-year stint in power, Ennahda increased the public funds destined for the poorest regions by 30 percent. But extensive delays with the infrastructure projects—due to both structural and political causes—derailed the government’s plans. The result is that the amounts spent were less than their prerevolutionary levels.<sup>41</sup>

Conflicts between the central government, local representatives, and governorate authorities also slowed the pace of investments and capital expenditures. At the central level, a lack of organizational unity led to inconsistency and incoherence in designing and implementing development projects in the most marginalized regions. The lack of coordination between the Ministry of Regional Development and the Ministries of Industry, Finance, Economy, Employment, Agriculture and Environment, and Equipment fragmented economic policies and led to each ministry pursuing its own narrow interests and protecting its turf. In an unstable political environment, the governors appointed by the Islamist-led government faced dogged resistance from the local elite, unions, and regional administrations. The fact that most governors were associated with Ennahda and lacked administrative and economic experience generated more distrust and tension.<sup>42</sup> The same fate befell the promised free-trade zone between Ben Guerdane and Ras Jedir and a gas transport canal between Gabès and Libya.<sup>43</sup>

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Since his appointment in August 2016, Prime Minister Youssef Chahed has been under pressure to reactivate and accelerate the implementation of suspended investment projects. The establishment of free-trade zones and industrial areas in the border regions are a test of the government's intentions. Good intentions, however, are not sufficient. For example, the proposed free-trade zone is to be modelled on Morocco's special economic enclaves and industrial parks in Tangier. But Tangier's recent transformation into a major manufacturing hub and commercial gateway required significant investments in ports, roads, railways, air transportation, water supply, and a range of other measures to attract private sector investors and to train workers for manufacturing in the automotive and aerospace sectors.<sup>44</sup> The success in implementing these initiatives is also attributed to the strong political will standing behind them. As with everything else in Morocco, projects that are ordained by the king move faster. Those that are not get bogged down in staggering bureaucracy, political squabbling, and cost overruns. Clearly there is no equivalency with Tunisia's democratic political system.

There is no doubt that Chahed has his work cut out for him. With poor infrastructure, dwindling populations, and less-qualified workers than the regions along Tunisia's eastern Mediterranean coast, the southern regions are naturally less attractive for investment. Bureaucratic hurdles and corruption also get in the way of business development. Rising security threats compound these difficulties by scaring away potential foreign direct investment. These staggering challenges are not confined to the southeastern border. Tunisia's western border is equally bedeviled by problems of extreme poverty, severe inequality, mass unemployment, and rising extremist activity.

So far, Chahed's national unity government has failed to summon the political will and funding to spur economic development in the lagging border regions. The most striking aspect has been the lack of any real integrated action plans for the social and economic inclusion of border communities. This dearth of economic progress creates a seething cauldron of anger that increasingly expresses itself in protests, street violence, and violent extremism.

## Corridor of Violence: Tunisia's Western Border

Tunisia's western border is home to some of the most disenfranchised citizens of the country, with 30 percent of the country's total population, but 55 percent of the country's impoverished population.<sup>45</sup> The governorate of Kasserine, which was thrust into the international spotlight in 2012 after its mountainous areas bordering Algeria became a hideout for al-Qaeda-linked militants, best exemplifies the effects of the sharp inequalities and brutal asymmetries that separate Tunisia's more developed northeastern coastal areas and its interior and western regions. The governorate, home to half a million people, has the worst socioeconomic indicators in the country.<sup>46</sup>

This sad state of affairs is due to a history of economic development skewed in favor of the northeastern littoral regions. The people of Kasserine attribute this economic asymmetry to a deliberate policy pursued by the political and economic elite to punish their region for its recalcitrance. Kasserine and the other western regions have a long history of opposition to central authorities dating back to the colonial era. Ferocious resistance to French control came from the tribes in the west. After independence, these regions resented the dominance of the state apparatus by elites from the coastal areas. One significant moment in the story of the deliberate dispossession and oppression of the periphery by the northeastern coastal elite came in 1963, when Lazhar Chraïti, a native of Gafsa in southwest Tunisia and charismatic leader of the anti-French insurgency, was executed for plotting to assassinate Bourguiba.

Tunisians who do not espouse extreme cynicism about the state's intentions will instead blame the neoliberal policies first adopted by Bourguiba rather than any political vendetta against the western periphery. Bourguiba's promotion of export-led growth and tourism created serious economic and regional imbalances. National critical infrastructure sectors were constructed essentially as enablers of economic growth in the capital and coastal regions of the east. Major investments in transport infrastructure were directed to connect the center-east with the greatest metropolitan area around grand Tunis, where high-value-added industries such as textile and tourism are concentrated.<sup>47</sup> The preferential treatment of these areas contributed to stark regional divides. The coastal economic belt has become the lifeline of the Tunisian economy, contributing more than 85 percent to the GDP of the country. Fifty-six percent of the population and 92 percent of industrial firms are based less than an hour's drive from the biggest cities of Tunis, Sfax, and Sousse.<sup>48</sup>

The western regions, meanwhile, were left to languish in a state of poverty and underdevelopment. Thus, it is not surprising that in Tunisia's modern history, resistance and revolt have emanated from the west. The events of the 1980 Gafsa guerrilla attack by Tunisian Youssefites (those inspired by Salah Ben Youssef) and Libyans supported by Qaddafi to destabilize the Bourguiba regime are still supported by many in the region as the only means of resisting state neglect and discrimination.<sup>49</sup> In the years since, a tradition of social agitation and violent protests took root, beginning in 1984 with deadly food riots and peaking in 2008 with the revolt at the Gafsa Mining Basin.<sup>50</sup> In the fall of 2010, the disadvantaged governorates of Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine propelled the uprising that brought an end to the despised Ben Ali era. Six years after the revolution, however, majorities of youth in these two marginalized regions remain excluded from jobs, health insurance, social security, and public facilities.

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**So far, the same overcentralized economic model that marginalized and disempowered Tunisians for years after the revolution are still in force.**

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So far, the same overcentralized economic model that marginalized and disempowered Tunisians for years after the revolution are still in force. Efforts to address regional disparities elicit suspicion and even hostility from actors invested in the status quo. The urban and coastal elite still exercise a substantial and disproportionate amount of influence in Tunisian economics and politics. This explains the constraints that hinder the implementation of the decentralization reforms stipulated in the 2014 constitution. Strengthening local and regional authorities threatens the existing political and economic fault lines in the country, so this prospect invites blockages rather than support from the political elite. For example, the Ministry of Interior, entrusted with overseeing the organization and implementation of decentralization, sets up administrative roadblocks to slow or dilute the reforms. The result is that the laws promulgating decentralization are still bogged down in political debates over redrawing municipal and regional lines and the transfer and assignment of competencies to municipalities and regional councils. Municipal and regional elections have also been postponed several times due to political disagreements, but are scheduled to take place on December 17, 2017, as of this writing.

This slow pace of change has exacerbated frustrations, driving a deeper wedge between the people of the periphery and their political leaders. Protests by the unemployed often denounce the centralized nature of the state and the unresponsive attitude of the local and regional administration. The wave of protests that gripped the western regions in early 2016 targeted local authorities who often seem dismissive and uncaring about the needs and demands of protesters. The governors and other local officials have frequently refused to even engage in dialogue with protesters. To be sure, the majority of municipalities lack the financial capacities or a clear mandate to address the demands. They also lack the qualified human resources necessary to plan and design inclusive development strategies. Local economic development councils are understaffed and operate with insufficient resources to be able to develop any real integrated action plans for the social and economic inclusion of youth.

With little money for social services and social welfare programs, local authorities run a handful of public assistance programs to contain social disorder among the alienated destitute. During the Ben Ali regime, social programs such as the National Solidarity Fund, the National Employment Fund, and the Tunisian Solidarity Bank were designed specifically to alleviate poverty and regional asymmetries.<sup>51</sup> *Les Chantiers* (the public works program) was conceived under Bourguiba and developed under Ben Ali as a critical source of employment in the most impoverished areas of the country. The program provided short-term jobs in road maintenance, sewer cleaning and installation, removal of wastewater, soil conservation, and forestry activities. But local authorities used the funds to consolidate their clientelistic networks and uphold their ability to exercise social control and political domination.<sup>52</sup> Higher officials in the local administration had political quotas to redistribute jobs to their families or sell them to other patron-client networks.

This partisan and clientelistic system continued after the revolution. In the absence of a serious reflection on the limits of the economic model, the successive postrevolutionary governments resorted to the same old superficial approaches and palliative stop-gap solutions. For example, all Tunisian administrations have used the Chantiers system to build networks of support and to assuage rising social tensions.<sup>53</sup> The continuing manipulation of these sources of income transfer, which sometimes constitute the only means to buy social peace, create a seething cauldron of anger that increasingly expresses itself in protests and street violence. The turmoil in turn hampers desperately needed economic growth as well as the consolidation of democratic reforms.

Additionally, the economic plight of the western border regions has worsened as a number of al-Qaeda-linked militants have taken hold in the rugged areas of Mount Chaambi and Semmama, near the Algerian border. The attacks on security forces by the Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade and the pro-Islamic State group Jund al-Khilafah (Soldiers of the Caliphate) in al-Qayrawan, Tunisia, have been met with an intensification of airstrikes on the territories controlled by these groups as well as new deployments of weaponry and personnel. The stepping up of surveillance along the Algerian border has had negative social ramifications on people whose livelihoods depend on informal cross-border trade, much like along the Libyan border.

The disruption of the informal economy deepens people's feelings of economic marginalization and social exclusion. This breeds bitterness among locals who believe that the government security measures come at the expense of their well-being. Many complain that they are caught in the crossfire between security forces and terrorist groups.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, the escalation of artillery fire and airstrikes has rendered life difficult in several villages, at times destroying farms and other agricultural areas.<sup>55</sup> In the process, there has been a growing backlash against a counterterrorist paradigm that relegates economic development and job creation to the back burner. For example, the uptick in social contestation has often coincided with the hardening of the counterterror measures ordered by Essebsi. The buildup to the violent unrest in January 2016 gained momentum precisely during the imposition of the state of emergency two months prior.

As a result, both the government and the border regions are trapped in this vicious cycle of violence. Terrorism legitimizes hardline counterterrorism approaches, whose effects often result in more social tension and political violence. For example, the asphyxiation of the informal economy drives people who have no other options and who have historically relied on smuggling and contraband as sources of daily subsistence to the brink. The incentives to exit this conflict trap are lacking, because the threat of terrorism remains high and the political actors capable of making commitments to promote sustainable

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**Disruption of the informal economy deepens people's feelings of economic marginalization and social exclusion.**

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development goals and addressing the root causes that contribute to radicalization are not credible. The western border region is therefore doubly affected by the rise of militancy and the corresponding harsh counterterrorism measures. Terrorism exacerbates underdevelopment and inequality while heavy-handed antiterror approaches polarize communities and worsen growing youth disillusionment.

Extremist groups exploit peoples' estrangement from the political system to chip away at the authority of the government.<sup>56</sup> In the poor border regions that bear the brunt of the government's ironfisted security policy, hatred of the police and security services is high.<sup>57</sup> This distrust and antagonism clearly hampers the fight against terrorism and also create an environment that is conducive to extremist recruitment. It is therefore hardly surprising that some young people have joined the violent militant groups holed up in the Mount Chaambi region or lurking in the shadows of Kasserine's poor outskirts such as Cite Ennour, from which one of the two perpetrators of the Bardo National Museum attack came.<sup>58</sup>

## Recommendations

The persistence of youth radicalization and the unyielding protest cycle challenge the government's security-first approach, and make it crucial to dig deeper into the sources of tensions and insecurity in the border regions. To

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**The government should officially recognize the border regions' decades-long experiences of socioeconomic discrimination and political abuse.**

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break this cycle, the government should officially recognize the border regions' decades-long experiences of socioeconomic discrimination and political abuse. The government should develop an initiative to validate their historical figures, symbols, and contributions to Tunisia in history textbooks, statutes, memorials, and exhibitions.<sup>59</sup> Tunisia's historic narratives have been manipulated to downplay the border regions' significance in the intellectual and resistance movement against French colonialism. This instrumentalization of history and the coastal elite's reproduction of a stigmatizing national discourse toward Tunisia's border regions only deepen this divide.

The Tunisian authorities should also consider enacting positive discrimination policies that prioritize investment in social programs and public policy in the border regions.<sup>60</sup> Programs that invest in the regions' competitive strengths can have a direct impact on the livelihoods of local communities, helping to counter extremist recruitment. Such a program requires the development of an inclusive agricultural plan that seeks the technological modernization of the sector through innovative financial mechanisms that channel resources for vocational education and training and land reform. The improvement in the management of natural resources and the investment of a fair portion of the

profits from local resources into local projects are also key to addressing the needs and demands of the people.

Tunisia's allies have a role to play in helping Tunisia establish equilibrium between security, liberty, and development. The United States, the European Union, and other donor countries and agencies should condition foreign assistance on the enactment of anticorruption and transparency reforms. They should also better target their aid and resources to benefit the broader public and ease the dire social situation in Tunisia's border regions. Aid that is not smartly programmed will reduce the incentives for the ruling coalition to adopt rule of law reforms and the adequate protection of civil liberties.<sup>61</sup> Already, human rights associations have documented a worrying rise in abuses such as harassment of the families of terrorism suspects, excessive use of force during home raids and searches, and arbitrary restrictions on the movement of individuals inside Tunisia.<sup>62</sup>

To address the hardline security approach that is causing, not alleviating, the security threat in Tunisia, the United States and its allies should prod the Tunisian government to seriously commit to reforming the internal security apparatus and criminal justice sector as well as improving governance and empowering both the work of the National Authority for the Fight Against Corruption (INLUCC) and the Truth and Dignity Commission. Reducing corruption, restoring justice, and controlling police abuse will help relieve mounting social pressure in the border regions. The international community should also help the government design and finance rehabilitation and reintegration programs for returning Tunisian fighters that are based on the social and cultural context that enabled violent radicalization and recruitment into terrorism. This, combined with more effective efforts to narrow the socioeconomic divide between the coastal regions and the hinterlands, is Tunisia's best bet for lasting and sustainable stability.

## Conclusion

The security threats in Tunisia's border regions are real and are recognized by the Tunisian government. Unfortunately, the response from the successive postrevolutionary governments has been misguided and failed to address the root causes that are inherently political and socioeconomic. By overreacting to the security threats through heavy-handed measures, the Tunisian government mistakenly relegates economic development and job creation to the back burner, further isolating the young people who live in the border regions.

The war on terrorism necessarily forces an adjustment in the balance between the Tunisian people's hard-won liberties and the state's security imperatives. Tunisia faces the complex challenge of dealing with the return of hundreds of people who traveled to fight in conflicts in Iraq, Libya, and Syria. The fear is

that these returnees will destabilize the country by bolstering domestic extremist networks or committing lone-wolf terror attacks. For some Tunisians, such a prospect conjures up the specter of the decade-long armed insurgency against the Algerian government in the 1990s, where the return of Algerian veterans from the 1980s war in Afghanistan contributed to the violence.<sup>63</sup> Given

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**The need to adopt tough security measures can have its advantages, but it should not lead to grave violations of human rights.**

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such fears, the government and its security services have adopted a system of harsh policies of criminalization and intensive security monitoring of suspect communities.

The need to adopt tough security measures can have its advantages, but it should not lead to grave violations of human rights. Police continue to abuse and torture—both major features of Ben Ali’s regime<sup>64</sup>—instilling in young

people profound feelings of humiliation and bitterness toward state authority. These police tactics are also the best recruiting tools for terrorist groups. Tunisian authorities need to adopt comprehensive strategies that not only improve intelligence and counterterrorism capabilities but also tackle the conditions that fueled radicalization if they are to successfully stop the threat of violent extremism.<sup>65</sup> In the absence of such measures, the government’s militarization of the border and the clamping down on cross-border trade can only exacerbate the insecurity that plagues Tunisia’s periphery.

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