

THE GEOGRAPHIC TRAJECTORY OF CONFLICT AND MILITANCY IN TUNISIA

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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 hardline 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 socioeconomic 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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