The Potential Jihadi Windfall from the Militarization of Tunisia’s Border Region with Libya

By Anouar Boukhars

Tunisia has increasingly relied on the military to bring security to its border region with Libya in response to a growth of jihadism in the region and the rise of new forms of trafficking in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution. But the current approach risks worsening the security situation and playing into the hands of jihadis. In the absence of a concerted program to lift Tunisia’s southeast out of poverty, crackdowns on small-time, cross-border traffickers have hurt the traditional economy, creating an even deeper sense of marginalization at a time when a significant number of Tunisian foreign fighters who fought in Iraq, Syria, and Libya are returning to the country.

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Tunisia has made laudable democratic progress since the popular uprising that toppled longtime strongman Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011. But economic instability and persistent social tensions, particularly along the country’s fragile borders where smuggling and contraband with Algeria in the west and Libya in the east is often the only means of employment, pose significant challenges to the country’s nascent democracy. With the decline of the Islamic State in several theaters of conflict, Tunisia faces the additional complex challenge of dealing with the return of hundreds of foreign fighters who traveled to join jihadi groups in Iraq, Syria, and Libya.\(^a\) The fear is that these returnees will destabilize the country by bolstering domestic extremist networks. Such a prospect conjures up the specter of the decade-long armed insurgency against the Algerian government in the 1990s, when the return of Algerian veterans from the Afghan jihad contributed to the violence.

The response from the Tunisian government has so far relied to a significant degree on a mixture of heavy-handed security approaches and nothing more than palliative economic measures, which has further polarized communities and worsened growing youth disillusionment. The recurrent protests in Tunisia’s southern regions highlight the deep discontent that residents in these areas have with the ruling elite. At a time when the government is playing catch-up against a continually shifting terror threat and with the menace of returning Tunisian foreign fighters looming, the prolonged disconnection between the state and its marginalized regions is dangerous, threatening to plunge Tunisia into a vicious cycle of violence. Such deterioration creates an environment that is conducive to extremist recruitment, organized criminality, and other illicit activities. Breaking this cycle requires the government to rethink its approach to its peripheral regions.

Destabilization of the Border Economy

The fall of Ben Ali created a security vacuum in Tunisia’s southeast border and disrupted cross-border markets and trade networks. Taking advantage of the disorientation of the security services and disorganization of the border economy, new actors expanded trading to prohibited goods such as alcohol and drugs. The Ben Ali regime had tolerated the growth of contraband as long as the traders did not engage in alcohol, drug, and arms trafficking and committed to helping the government protect the border from infiltration by arms and drug dealers.\(^b\) The intelligence services also monitored the contraband and smuggling trade through placement of informants within these networks.\(^c\) This was seen as a win-win approach to managing Tunisia’s impoverished and historically rebellious periphery without assuming the financial costs and security risks of interdictions. In the absence of other options, the informal economy that developed provided people who had historically relied on smuggling and contraband a source of daily subsistence.\(^d\) It also allowed the border police and customs service agents to supplement their low salaries by taking bribes in exchange for lax border oversight.

The 2011 revolution’s destabilization of the contraband market, however, allowed for the creation of new opportunistic groups unknown to security officials and more willing to trade in drugs and firearms. The entry of new products and traffickers created a competitive underground labor market that made winners and losers. For example, the transformation of Tunisia into a transit point for the traffic of cannabis, stimulant drugs, and alcohol between Algeria and Libya affected the old contrabandists of legal commodities who saw a significant decrease in profits. The squeeze pushed some into the criminal marketplace to avoid financial insolvency.\(^e\)

The proliferation of armed groups on the Libyan side of the Tunisia-Libya border has further exacerbated competition between rival traffickers (both tribal and militia-based) over access to border

\(^a\) According to official figures, around 3,000 Tunisian foreign fighters traveled to Syria, Iraq, and Libya, but according to a report by the Soufan Group, the actual number may be more than double that figure. By late 2016, Tunisian officials believed that at least 800 Tunisian foreign fighters who had departed in the previous decade had returned from the frontlines. Richard Barrett, “Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees,” Soufan Group, October 2017; “Tunisia says 800 returning jihadis tracked and 800 in custody,” Agence France-Presse, December 31, 2016.

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resources. The Tunisian government estimates the number of Libyan armed groups operating on its border at 15. Their competing economic agendas and political loyalties contribute to increased tensions and at times violent clashes over the cross-border economy. For example, in the Dehiba–Wazin border crossing situated near Nalut in the Nafusa Mountains, groups from the western town of Zintan have been trying to contest the dominance of armed Berber militias from the Nalut area. Fearing the domination of Berbers over all major border crossings between Libya and Tunisia, Zintan militias have been supporting groups like the Si‘an, which collaborated with the Qaddafi regime to monitor the border, before being displaced by the Nalut military council after the 2011 revolution.

This kind of tribal and ethnic competition over border resources has affected the livelihood of Tunisians across the border. In Dehiba, a small town located less than two miles from the Libyan border in the governorate of Tataouine, Tunisians have had to adapt to the reconfiguration of cross-border markets and changing power structures across the border. In the past, locals could rely on trans-border tribal relations and social solidarity to smooth the passage of people and goods through the border. The unstable political and security situation in Libya has created economic disruption and security concerns for traders who fear being kidnapped or arrested by armed groups.

The same dynamic can be seen in the protracted dispute over the control of the strategic border crossing of Ras Jedir, a coastal town that leads to Ben Gardane. After the violent overthrow of Qaddafi, Ras Jedir came under the control of armed militias from the nearby Berber-majority town Zuwara, which has seen control of the border crossing as vital to secure Zuwara’s position as an important economic and military hub. Zuwara’s control of Ras Jedir is contested by the brigade Tarek al-Ghayeb from the town of Zawiya 40 miles east of Zuwara along the coast. This brigade is affiliated with the Madkhali movement, which is named after the Saudi Sheikh Rabi al-Madkhali and follows a strain of salafism characterized by doctrinal rigidity, hostility to political Islam and jihadism, and unquestioned obedience to those in power. The movement has had a significant impact in Libya ever since the mid-2000s when Qaddafi invited Saudi salafi Madkhali clerics to help rehabilitate jihadists from the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), founded in the early 1990s by Libyans who had fought against the Soviets. Qaddafi did this in order to brandish his religious credentials and counter rival groups attempting to derive legitimacy from religion. Since his death, Madkhali groups have become critical actors in the political and military conflicts that still engulf Libya.

Madkhalists have formed their own separate militias and fought alongside different groups. The ties of the various strands of the Madkhali movement to the different major players in Libya are reflective of a complex set of loyalties, including their primary tribal allegiances and religious loyalty to their sheikhs, particularly the fatwas that Sheikh Rabi al-Madkhali issues regarding the conflict in Libya.

Authorities in Tunis are worried about the strengthening of Madkhali forces on Tunisia’s borders and the significant potential for Madkhalists to feed on a deep well of anger in the border region at the persistence of social exclusion and regional disparities. With the exception of the island of Djerba, a tourist haven located at the southern end of the Gulf of Gabès, much of Tunisia’s border region with Libya is beleaguered by low levels of development and a woeful lack of basic infrastructure services. For example, the governorate of Tataouine, which has become a flashpoint for demonstrations against marginalization, has one of the highest numbers of unemployed university graduates in the country (58 percent). Despite the large size of the governorate (25 percent of Tunisia) and its oil fields, which account for 40 percent of Tunisian production, the region is held back by a lack of development on roads, hospitals, and schools.

Similar problems afflict the governorate of Gabès, a coastal region bordering Libya that boasts one of the largest industrial zones in Tunisia. The region is choked by industrial pollution and plagued by unsafe working conditions, and the lack of access to hospitals and healthcare speaks volumes about the degree of marginalization experienced by local communities. “Al-sha’b yured al-bi‘a-esselima” (“the people want a clean environment”) has become a common refrain during protests over pollution by the phosphate industry.

With poor infrastructure and less-qualified workers than the regions along Tunisia’s eastern Mediterranean coast, Tunisia’s southeast has attracted less investment. Bureauocratic hurdles and poor government transparency also hurt business development.

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b The Madkhali movement emerged in the 1990s in Saudi Arabia as a reaction to the Awakening Movement, a Muslim Brotherhood-cum-salafi grouping of clerics, professors, and Islamic students who denounced the stagnancy and corruption of Saudi Arabia. Shaykh Rabi al-Madkhali mobilized his disciples to vilify the Sahwa clerics as heretical. Today, Madkhali and his followers remain staunch opponents of political Islamists and jihadi groups. See Frederic Wehrey, “Quiet No More?” Diwan (blog), Carnegie Middle East Center, October 13, 2016.

c There are a number of militia groups in Libya that are part of the Madkhali movement. In Benghazi, Madkhalists have created their own militia—the al-Tawhid Brigades—which is allied with Field Marshal Haftar, a fierce ideological foe of Islamists and jihadis. In Tripoli, Abdelraouf Kara leads the Rada Special Deterrence Force that backs Libyan Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj. A third Madkhali militia is the 604th Infantry Battalion of Misrata. Ahmed Salah Ali, “Libya’s Warring Parties Play a Dangerous Game Working with Madkhalis,” Atlantic Council blog, November 3, 2017.

d For example, in its two-year stint in power, Ennahda increased the public funds destined for the poorest regions by 30 percent. But extensive delays with infrastructure projects—due to both structural and political causes—derailed the government’s plans. The result is that the amounts spent were less than pre-revolutionary levels. Conflicts between the central government, local representatives, and governorate authorities slowed the pace of investments and capital expenditures. 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 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. Anouar Boukhars, “The Geographical Trajectory of Conflict and Militancy in Tunisia,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 20, 2017. See also Irene Bon, Béatrice Hibou, Hamza Meddeb, and Mohamed Tozy, L’Etat d’injustice au Maghreb: Maroc et Tunisie (Paris: Karthala, 2015).
sistent rumors of hidden oil reserves and government collusion on corrupt deals with foreign multinational corporations led to weeks of protests in 2017 in Tataouine province that disrupted production and forced some foreign companies to close oil and gas fields and remove their "staff as a precaution." The demonstrators demanded a more equitable redistribution of state resources as well as a transparent and inclusive process to manage Tunisia's natural resources. Tunisia produces only 55,000 barrels of oil per day, but a history of mismanagement and secrecy has given fodder to serious suspicions that the hegemonic elite and powerful lobbies of the coastal Sahel region are hiding the country's natural wealth and funneling oil revenue to their allies through the patronage system.

The pro-transparency movement called “Winou el Petrole” (Arabic for “Where is the Oil?”) that first emerged in 2015 quickly gained popularity with the youth, thanks to its use of social media, highlighting the deep distrust and sense of abandonment that the southern and interior regions have toward the ruling elite and its heartland, the coastal Sahel region.

Rising security threats have compounded these difficulties by exacerbating underdevelopment. The March 2016 attack by Islamic State militants in Ben Gardane resulted in an increase in border militarization to deter terrorism and stem the mushrooming smuggling trade. The government accelerated the construction of a 125-mile anti-terror 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. While the Tunisian authorities’ focus on border reinforcement was understandable, it has deflected attention away from the socioeconomic problems in the region that fuel political discontent and social unrest. The result, so far, is that border residents whose livelihoods depend on informal cross-border trade and the free movement of people and goods tend to see the government as impeding the main source of revenue available to them.

Many of those living in the southeast are convinced that the political system, which is controlled by the northeastern elite, is designed to perpetuate their structural marginalization and exclusion. This has especially been the case since the ascent of President

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e The south of Tunisia has always been hounded by political exclusion and economic deprivation. From French colonial rule to that of deposed Tunisian president Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, the southern periphery was marginalized and stigmatized as a zone of tribalism 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. The reaffirmation of this asymmetrical squeeze by Tunisia’s post-independence presidents generated an enduring sense of injustice. From President Habib Ben Ali Bourguiba’s authoritarian statism to President Ben Ali’s crony economic liberalism, the southern regions found themselves at the losing end of an extremely lopsided economy. Boukhars.
Mohamed Beji Caid Essebsi, whom the impoverished south voted massively against in the 2014 presidential election.23

**Counterterrorism Pitfalls**

It is common for political elites in Tunisia to blame Libya for the country’s security woes. After all, the perpetrators of the major attacks that hit Tunisia in 2015—the Bardo National Museum in Tunis in March (22 deaths) and a beach resort in Sousse in June (38 deaths)—were Tunisians who received training in Islamic State camps in the vicinity of Sabratha, a Libya town near the Tunisian border.24 There was also a Sabratha connection to the March 2016 attack in which dozens of Islamic State-trained Tunisians staged a dramatic assault on Tunisian security forces in Ben Gardane.25 The deep connections between Libyan and Tunisian militants are further illustrated by the involvement of Tunisians in several attacks in Libya, including against the diplomatic facilities of both Tunisia and the United States.6 In January 2015, Tunisian fighters participated in the attack against the Corinthia Hotel in Tripoli.8

The recent dislodging of the Islamic State from coastal areas in Libya has, in the short term, increased the risk that Tunisians who joined the group there will return home. One concern is they will seek to tap into the anger of communities in Tunisia’s southeast for recruitment purposes. One study of the dozens of Islamic State-trained insurgents who staged the assault in Ben Gardane found that a number of the assailants were from the R’bay’a tribe, whose interests in the border economy and land claims have historically been marginalized by the Twazine tribe, which dominated the local economy and cross-border contraband networks.26 Negatively affected by the turmoil in Libya and Tunisia’s limitations on the cross-border trade area around Ben Gardane, R’bay’a contrabandists and traffickers found in the lure of violent extremism the opportunity to chip away at both the authority of the government and the town’s established tribe of Twazine.27 As the rivalries between tribes and smuggling networks expand, there is a risk that loose alliances among jihadis, traffickers, and opportunistic tribal youths are becoming a reality. Tunisian security forces successfully repelled the attempt by Islamic State militants to seize Ben Gardane and inflame a disgruntled populace into open revolt.28 However, the scale of the attempt and the collusion of some Ben Gardane residents who did not belong to the Twazine tribe illustrate that militant groups have the potential to exploit localized tensions, economic hardship, and locals’ estrangement from the political system.

The government’s current prioritization of building walls, re-inforcing border surveillance, and developing the capacities of the intelligence agencies and security services is not likely to be very effective if it is not accompanied by a genuine regional development program and reform of the internal security apparatus and criminal justice sector. Border militarization has disproportionately affected the most vulnerable people who are dependent on trade in contraband and who lack the means and networks to circumvent border checks.29 The most powerful and well-resourced smuggling rings now use the main roads, having secured the connivance of Tunisian border patrol agents and other security officials.

The rising militarization of the border has had the opposite of the intended effect. Instead of curbing criminal activity and the trafficking of harmful substances, it has created more openings for corruption. For example, the expansion of the role of the Tunisian army in securing the frontier regions has resulted in the armed forces not only shouldering the responsibility for fighting organized crime and stemming the arms and drugs trade along Tunisia’s porous borders with Libya and Algeria, but also becoming responsible for the regulation of the cross-border illicit economy. The resulting increase in corruption in the armed forces risks tainting the image of one of the few state institutions that still enjoys credibility and popular acceptance. It has also increased competition and distrust between the different services in charge of monitoring the borders.30

**Conclusion**

The collapse of order in Libya has complicated the security and social situation in Tunisia’s southeastern border region. The successive changes in the balance of power among Libyan tribal militias have upset the established order of the traditional cartelts that controlled trafficking routes and border posts on the Libyan side. This has subsequently disrupted cross-border markets and trade networks. It also upset the traditional internal and external hierarchies

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f A study by the Tunisian Center for Research and Studies on Terrorism (CTRET) concluded “that 69% of Tunisian jihadis received military training in Libya, and 21% in Syria and a significant number of those who traveled to Syria first underwent training in Libya.” Ahmed Nadif, “New Study Explores Tunisia’s Jihadi Movement in Numbers,” Al Monitor, November 8, 2016.

g Tunisians were involved in the attack against their country’s embassy and consulate in Libya in 2012. A Tunisian, Ali Ani al-Harzi, was “one of the ringleaders of the infamous Benghazi US Consulate attack in September 2012.” Aaron Zelin, “The Tunisian-Libyan Jihadi Connection,” ICSR Insight, July 6, 2015.

h The individual and organizational ties between Libyans and Tunisian jihadis go back to the 1980s Afghan jihad when “Libyans alongside Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, the Afghan leader of Ittihad-e-Islami, attempted to help the Libyans create their own military camp and organization.” In the 2000s, jihadi groups from both countries collaborated to plan attacks and provide logistics to fighters willing to execute attacks in the Sahel, Iraq, and Europe.

i After the 2015 terrorist attacks in Tunis and Sousse, Tunisia tightened its border security, making smuggling more challenging and riskier. In May 2017, Prime Minister Youssef Chahed launched his “war on corruption,” which targeted the informal financial sector in the southeast, especially Ben Gardane, which serves as a major marketplace for currency exchange and supply of funds for informal trade. As noted by Matt Herbert and Max Gallien, the result is that this “security response to a complex economic issue, has not been tied to the formalization of the informal monetary system, but to the contraction of its capital base, further depressing the region’s economy.” The summer of 2017 also saw cross-border gasoline trade come to a halt, driving smugglers out of work as well as tripling the price of gasoline. Matt Herbert and Max Gallien, “Out of the Streets and Into the Boats: Tunisia’s Irregular Migration Surge,” Atlantic Council, November 27, 2017.

j Ben Gardane, writes Olfa Lamhloum “is part of those spaces which are at the bottom of the hierarchy of places, to the point of being called on to prove their national allegiance.” In a survey of 700 hundred people from Ben Gardane and Dhehiba, Lamhloum found “that feelings of marginalisation (tañmîch) now shape the self-image of people in Ben Guerdane and Dhehiba, with almost 90% and 98% of inhabitants, respectively, reporting a strong sense of exclusion.” She adds, “echoes a history of marginalisation of Tunisia’s southern regions and from the colonial period to the present day, resulting in a bitter sense of injustice, voiced by many of the inhabitants.” Olfa Lamhloum, “Marginalisation, Insecurity and Uncertainty on the Tunisian–Libyan Border; Ben Guerdane and Dhehiba From the Perspective of Their Inhabitants,” International Alert, December 2016.
of tribal power. Some of the dominant tribal elites and smuggling cartels have lost out to once-peripheral tribes and young adventurous actors who expanded trading to include previously prohibited goods such as alcohol and drugs.

The emergence of terrorism as a top national security concern has further muddled the black-market landscape, making it ever more crucial to distinguish between innocuous informal networks of cross-border traders and entrepreneurs of organized crime and violence. Tunisian authorities and the media, however, increasingly tend to lump all kinds of illicit trafficking together as endangering state security. In the absence of a concerted effort in Tunis to address the political and economic marginalization of the southeast, this tendency to criminalize the shadow economy is alienating the local populations and economic actors that the government needs in order to help manage the border. It is also aggravating the social crisis brewing in the south. The turmoil, in turn, is hampering desperately needed economic growth as well as the consolidation of democratic reforms. At a time when Tunisian foreign fighters are returning home, these realities are also playing into the hands of the jihadists. CTC

Citations

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