Tunisia

Peacebuilding in Tunisian border regions: a missing piece of the transition process

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This article traces the historical marginalisation of Tunisian populations in the regions along the Libyan–Tunisian border from the perspective of communities that live there. It further analyses the impact of changes in border governance – particularly in light of a developing national anti-terrorism discourse – on the livelihoods of borderland populations, youth aspirations and regional disparities between Tunisia’s coastline and its interior. The article is based on surveys and a range of peacebuilding interventions conducted by International Alert, an international peacebuilding non-governmental organisation, in Tunisia’s peripheries, and includes a discussion of the challenges and limitations these interventions face.

Tunisia’s impoverished hinterland is marked by exclusion. Longstanding issues of unemployment, absence of state welfare, corruption, high poverty rates, development challenges and insecurity continue seven years after the events of 2011. Though smaller than Tunisia’s almost 1000km border with Algeria, the 459km Tunisia–Libya border carries distinct importance in discussions around border security. On the Tunisian side, the border is primarily shared by the Medenine and Tataouine governorates. Characterised by vast deserts and arid land, Tataouine is the largest Tunisian governorate and is also known for its mountainous landscape and water scarcity. Medenine, on the other hand, enjoys the south-east coastal strip and hosts tourist centres. Two official border crossings operate in this region.

An exploration of Tunisia’s borderlands reveals a story of continued political marginalisation, securitisation and economic underdevelopment – highlighting the uneven effect of the country’s democratic transition on its interior and border regions.”

Illustration (opposite): Key features in the border regions of Medenine and Tataouine Governorates, Tunisia. © Jon Sack
Map 1: Medenine and Tataouine Governorates, Tunisia bordering Libya.

Map 2: Regional location of the border between Tunisia and Libya.
Border governance and its discontents

As during French colonial rule, communities are ‘managed’ through authoritarian governance. The state’s presence and modes of operation have continued to centre on security, and primarily on deterring threats from the Libyan side, with minimal concern for public welfare. Those living in the south strongly identify in terms of their ties to their Libyan neighbours and as descendants of prestigious tribes separated only by borders drawn by the Italian colonialists. This shared identity contributes to a problematic relationship with the state. Local acceptance of the border is low, with one out of three respondents describing it as an artificial barrier. This is no surprise, given that the border – as a physical barrier between states – is a relatively recent phenomenon, with the first border post only set up in 1957. Yet, the significance of the border to communities’ livelihoods should not be underestimated, especially when the state narrative presents it mainly as a source of insecurity. The border is regarded as an economic resource by the vast majority of inhabitants (90.2 per cent in Ben Guerdane and 86.9 per cent in Dehiba). In the absence of state development, peripheral communities adopted their own survival strategies, with the border representing a key financial opportunity. Even today, for many young people the border is their main source of income and employment.

The significance of the border and the economy around it is linked to the opportunities available to communities in the borderlands. Economic issues are regarded as key to people’s marginalisation: 93 per cent of respondents in Dehiba and 80.9 per cent in Ben Guerdane viewed their economic situation as either ‘bad’ or ‘very bad’. To break this down, the research looked at three indicators: modes of employment, education and the informal sector.

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Job creation was identified as the main priority for most respondents and the labour market was a key aspect in the research. In both cities, unemployment exceeds the national average, with female unemployment reaching over three times the national rate. One in five respondents in Dehiba reported unstable working conditions. The erosion of waged labour is apparent in both cities, particularly for the current generation and in the traditional agricultural sector. Formal employment opportunities offered by local government and the army have long been the sole route to social advancement. This has resulted in patron–client relations between inhabitants and local authorities.

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young men aged between 19 and 24 years is half the national rate. The lack of interest in education is the main cause of school drop-outs in Ben Guerdane (61.8 per cent), while in Dheiba, financial difficulties were seen as the main cause (51.3 per cent). A recurring view was that schooling, and education in general, are neither engines for social mobility nor a means for securing a stable job, and cross-border trade is often the route to a livelihood after school.

The local economy, according to respondents, is more dependent on trade with Libya than on the economic policies of the Tunisian state, and informal trade is key to this picture. Yet, trade has a complicated relationship with border governance. During the Ben Ali era, informal cross-border trade was implicitly tolerated as a driver of national economic growth; in fact, the border economy was a channel for Tunisian integration into the global economy via its periphery. The profitability of the border economy also made it of interest to elites. The rampant corruption of the period inevitably reached the border economy of Ben Guerdane, and from the mid-1990s the influence of the Trabelsi family (the family of Ben Ali’s wife) grew stronger. However, more established local players, with their comparative advantages (historical precedence, geographical proximity with Libya and well-established cross-border family and tribal networks), were still able to secure their share of the income generated at the border.

In allowing the relatively free flow of trade across the border, the state also sought to assert control over these border regions. The Ben Ali regime believed that border trade would ease mounting societal pressure in the absence of economic development. While these arrangements were informal, the rules for local smugglers were clear; the government tolerated trade but forbade arms and drugs trafficking and expected assistance from the smugglers in countering these.

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"Yet, engagement in informal cross-border trade carries profound stigma for many ordinary people. The communities distinguish between two kinds of smuggler: the so-called ‘barons’, the wealthy chiefs who run the smuggling networks with little local endorsement; and the ‘good smugglers’, whose work benefits their communities by making goods affordable – selling textiles, clothing, electronics and basic food commodities – and who were involved in protecting Ben Guerdane from the jihadist threat in 2016, when, according to some inhabitants, smugglers helped to drive out the militants.

Descent into dissent
This approach to the border economy allowed the state to expand into lucrative activities, control dynamics beyond its governance abilities, absorb unemployment at a lower cost and, at the same time, ward off social conflicts. But by spreading uncertainty and tolerating pillaging, this ‘model’ in fact ended up generating anger and dissent. In hindsight, indications of deteriorating stability in the region should have been evident. For example, in the summer of 2007, mounting discontent with the lack of development in Dheiba resulted in a three-day city-wide strike. Protesters left the city and marched towards the border to show their readiness to leave a country that was unable to provide them with a decent living. In 2010, the border crossing of Ras Jedir was closed by authorities. With the explicit reason still unknown, there is speculation that the Trabelsi network pressured Ben Ali to close the border to harm its competitors. Protests continued throughout the month of Ramadan, eventually forcing the central government to reopen the borders.

Since the 2011 revolution, there have been two distinct phases in the state’s border management policy. From 2011 to 2013, in response to weakened security forces and the withdrawal of the National Guard and police after the revolution, a laissez-faire approach was adopted. Official data documented an increase in the number of Tunisians crossing the border into Libya. This period witnessed a widening of border activities, including by actors previously excluded from smuggling, such as young people – some of whom became involved in cross-border drug trafficking and terrorism. They made use of disorder within the security apparatus, unprecedented threats from the Libyan side and often conflicting state policies.

This quickly shifted in 2013 with renewed securitisation of the border. At a national level, 2013 was a crucial year in which the democratic transition was under threat after two political assassinations took place, deepening tensions between Islamist and secular blocs. At the border, the army established and secured a buffer zone, reinstating state control. This militarisation did not, however, disrupt smuggling – it simply made it more expensive. According to survey respondents, the ability to cross the border became increasingly conditioned by corruption. Border officials, who often lack adequate training, are frequently complicit in smuggling networks. For those living in the border region, the state’s new security approach has further exemplified state disregard for their concerns and welfare.

The state approach: hard security
The Tunisian state’s principal interest in border security is in controlling the border militarily. The state went from establishing buffer zones to ‘hardening’ the border with physical barriers following multiple attacks by non-state armed actors, and the security forces’ budgets have increased significantly since 2013. Events in Libya have also had an impact, with the collapse of the state and the take over of the border by infighting militias significantly increasing concern about border insecurity.
According to border communities, the hard security approach has done little to produce ‘stability’. The security situation in Libya impacts on economic options and livelihoods: the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia estimated that between 10,000 and 15,000 families ceased to receive income due to the Libyan conflict. In Medenine, for example, 20 per cent of the working population is part of the informal sector, of which the vast majority reside in Ben Guerdane. Corruption among border officials increases the communities’ frustration.

The deteriorating economic situation has led to despair among youths. In 2017, 12 young people from Medenine and 14 from Tataouine died trying to reach Europe after their boats capsized. With every such death, an enraged community becomes more conscious of the absence of the state. Frustrations are exacerbated by the conflation of smuggling and terrorism by the national media and some politicians – particularly as this encourages calls to restrict border trade in those regions. The media, both national and international, have run sensationalist coverage of crises at the border – notably the 2016 Ben Guerdane battle, in which groups affiliated with Islamic State (IS) fought Tunisian forces for over 36 hours, resulting in the death of 13 security personnel, seven local residents and around 45 armed assailants. In Ben Guerdane, 82.2 per cent of survey respondents criticised media coverage of the security situation, which they said served to deepen the perception of an unruly south characterised by smuggling and terrorism. This stigmatisation overshadows the perceptions citizens have of themselves, of their communities, of their history and of the 2011 revolution and the transition that followed.

While local inhabitants were concerned about spill-over from Libya, they saw restrictions on border trade and lack of development, rather than terrorism, as the main cause of insecurity. For the inhabitants in Dheiba and Ben Guerdane, insecurity results primarily from a fear of unemployment, followed by the fear of border trade being restricted, and thirdly food insecurity and the lack of economic development. Any interruption of the income generated by the border therefore results in significant social upheaval that can be hard to contain.

The state’s hard security approach also needs to be seen in light of broader human rights violations on a national level. Amnesty International’s 2017 report on abuses in the name of security criticised the flawed ‘counter-terrorism’ legislation passed in 2015 for increasing the power of the state’s security apparatus, for extending the death penalty for certain offences, and for its broad definition of terrorism. Cases of arrests of suspected persons along with their family members are documented in the report along with other human rights violations. These practices are reminiscent of the former regime and sit uncomfortably with the state’s rhetoric of democratic transition. The report lists Ben Guerdane as one of the areas particularly targeted for security operations.

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especially after the 2016 IS attack on the city. Official investigations concluded that many perpetrators of the attack were inhabitants of Ben Guerdane, supplied with arms from the Libyan IS.

At a national level, issues of ‘violent extremism’ are of concern. In a 2015 report, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights estimated that over 3,000 Tunisians had left the country to fight for IS and other groups. Approximately double this number were prevented from leaving by Tunisian authorities. With the demise of IS in Syria and Iraq, the state regards the return of these fighters as a serious security threat. So far, the state has not publicised a coherent strategy for reintegrating returnees. In fact, dozens of returnees have been arrested and imprisoned. With the overall economic situation of the country further deteriorating and no end in sight to the political and social marginalisation of its peripheral zones and communities, current approaches to security and transition are unlikely to provide long-term stability.

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The hard security approach is compounded by communities’ mistrust of the political transition process and the ability of political elites to deliver change – respondents felt that the revolution has done little to change the behaviour of parliamentarians. The centralised nature of the Tunisian state presents a further challenge to credible local governance. The repeated delay of municipal elections scheduled for October 2016 – the first since the 2011 uprising – led to an absence of legitimate local institutions with which communities could engage. The elections finally took place in May 2018, but it is too soon for any serious assessment of how this might change local political dynamics.

Towards a comprehensive peacebuilding approach

Confronted by the reality of regional disparities and marginalisation, International Alert has focused its interventions in Tunisia since 2012 primarily in populous neighbourhoods of Tunis and border governorates, with the conviction that any transitional process in Tunisia cannot be successful without the inclusion of marginalised groups that were long sidelined by the state. A broad approach is taken towards security, which is understood in terms of a comprehensive response to community priorities including social, economic and security dimensions, and which focuses on two main areas of intervention.

The first is concerned with the production of quantitative and qualitative research to better understand the root causes of marginalisation and exclusion. This work uses a participatory approach that gives priority to the viewpoints of citizens and the measures they recommend. Research has proven to be a strong tool for advocacy: whether it is qualitative research on water governance or quantitative research on youth perceptions of (in)security, it offers a well-informed means to counter narratives at the national level.

The second area of work involves programmes based on the participation of marginalised groups, particularly young people, and local authorities to strengthen mechanisms of local governance. In the absence of municipal elections, interim local councils were put in place by the government, comprising independent and party-affiliated politicians and civil society members to govern municipal affairs until the elections.

Bottom-up approaches to strengthen local governance are bolstered by attempts to institutionalise mechanisms of local governance and tools of citizen diagnostics of public services. To this end, International Alert launched projects in marginalised areas using OpenStreetMap – a collaborative mapping tool that allows citizens to add detail to maps of their districts and to pinpoint areas that need local authorities’ intervention. Based on these, International Alert works with local authorities and community-based organisations to implement mechanisms for community involvement, such as participatory budgeting. The objective is that these mechanisms will allow citizens to determine their own priorities for public projects (for example, street paving, street lighting, creation of spaces for youth), oversee their implementation and hold authorities accountable. These projects allow citizens of marginalised areas to actively engage in their local communities and offer them ownership of spaces that were previously concentrated solely in the hands of the state. Other pilot projects have also focused on developing models of community assessment of public services, such as health and education, offering communities a platform to make their voices heard on socio-economic issues.

Engagement between citizens and local authorities serves to create a link in contexts where citizens have historically been excluded from the public sphere, and in the long term has proven to shift the dynamics of state-citizen relations. These tools and mechanisms can be replicated with other communities in Tunisia, reshaping local dynamics towards greater inclusion and participation. However, a number of external challenges remain: the situation on the other side of the border, in Libya, remains volatile and renewed violence will certainly have adverse effects on the Tunisian side. Additionally, closures of the border crossings can temporarily disrupt peacebuilding efforts. Finally, the overall economic pressure, especially on young people, makes their commitment to such projects uncertain.
Conclusion
The Tunisian transition process has been difficult and at times violent, even more so in the periphery, where almost simultaneous disruptions in the Tunisian and Libyan systems of border governance have each created a set of uncertainties.

Border regions have complex dynamics during transition processes. In the cases of Medenine and Tataouine these are partially due to their long history of state neglect, which saw these borderlands marginalised and securitised during historic statebuilding processes. Yet, the democratic transition process has also brought about previously denied freedoms, such as freedom of speech and assembly, which have opened new avenues for research and advocacy in the border regions. Decades of underdevelopment will not disappear quickly and the persistence of a centralised state, maintained by longstanding elites, presents a challenge to structural reform. However, comprehensive peacebuilding efforts as well as the prospect of greater transparency and democratic governance since municipal elections took place in May 2018, provides a positive opening for change.