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YOUNG PEOPLE AND SMUGGLING IN THE KASSERINE REGION OF TUNISIA

Stories of dispossession and
the dynamics of exclusion

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Front cover photo: Tunisian youth face riot police during clashes following a protest to demand jobs in Kasserine, 2016.

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Executive summary

Overview of research

Following our qualitative research into smuggling in the Kasserine region of Tunisia, this report highlights the multifaceted socio-economic and political relationships young people enter through involvement in border economies. At a time of heightened security concerns, political uncertainty and large-scale unemployment, our research moves away from both existing analyses of young people that describe them as a socially homogenous group and the recent systemic association of smuggling with terrorism, in order to understand it as a social reality. Focusing on young people from Kasserine who are involved in smuggling forms part of International Alert's approach to understanding the situation of young people throughout Tunisia today.

Studying the experiences of the young smugglers and their daily struggle to access economic resources and evade crackdowns by the police and customs officers provides a particularly useful perspective for understanding the asymmetrical relationships and sources of injustice and ostracism perceived and experienced by the people of Kasserine.

Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative survey comprising semi-structured interviews covering the course of a young person's life so far, his or her social environment and how he/she became involved in smuggling, as well as his/her attitudes to the state, the authorities and politics. More than 20 interviews were conducted with young people aged between 18 and 34, including women engaged in the 'suitcase trade'.

Summary of findings

Although the border evokes a protective barrier, the porosity of the border region between Tunisia and Algeria reveals both the way it is used by the local communities and the limits to the state's 'infrastructural power' in Kasserine. Smuggling under the Ben Ali regime appeared to represent a sort of government-approved illegality for the people of the region. This report identifies two phases of smuggling following the fall of Ben Ali in 2011: in the first phase, the fear changed sides from the people to the state due to the weakened security forces who were delegitimised by their role in the repression of the popular uprising; and then in 2013 there was a renewed deployment of the security forces with the fight against terrorism and a toughening of controls on smuggling networks.

The relaxation of security that immediately followed the fall of the dictatorship opened the door of smuggling to new players, including a large number known for their involvement in drug trafficking and also those perceived to be involved in terrorism. The counter-terrorism agenda has now led to a situation where subsistence smuggling is conflated with criminality and the demands from young people in the region for social justice and inclusion are delegitimised. Our research fills an important gap, telling the stories of subsistence and survival strategies of individuals and communities in this marginalised region, who view smuggling as something legitimate and normal. It identifies five loosely defined groups, but rather than seeking to establish typologies, our approach is instead to describe individuals' journeys, taking into account wider social dynamics.

The groups are as follows:

- **The grafters** represent those young people whose priority is to ‘stay afloat’. Rather than being a simple transitory phase while waiting to return to what would be seen as a normal career path, the grafters (many of whom are unemployed graduates) enter a humiliating spiral of debt and dependence.
- **The disconnected:** smuggling involves raising considerable financial resources and often entire families turn to smuggling to ensure funds are raised and debts are paid. This solidarity represents the social aspect of smuggling, and the financial side represents a way of maintaining family structures.
- **The climbers** can be seen as those for whom smuggling satisfies the desire of self-fulfilment and those who want to support their families. Having dropped out of school early, the ‘climbers’ are the embodiment of how widespread smuggling is and demonstrate how it has been fuelled by the failures of the education system.
- **The temps** are sporadically employed in the smuggling labour market as porters and lookouts. College students often take on this role during holidays and it intersperses periods of unemployment given the scarcity of work in the formal economy.
- **Women in the ‘suitcase trade’** buy clothing, cosmetics and domestic goods in Algeria and return to Tunisia, hiding their purchases or passing them off as items for personal use to avoid paying taxes. Married or single, these women usually have the consent of their families and face the hard job of managing a commercial venture and negotiating social constraints at the same time.

Implications of findings

The stories that emerge from the research reveal a continuum represented by a range of choices within the constraints of young people’s circumstances. Smuggling encompasses a number of different survival strategies with a common thread of resistance to the forces of exclusion. The security approach to controlling smuggling is not capable of containing this illegal cross-border activity in the absence of alternative sources of subsistence. Therefore, securing the border means drawing a distinction between smugglers and criminals in a way that avoids criminalising poverty and stigmatising local communities that are seeking means of subsistence.

1. Introduction

Rather than being a secondary issue, smuggling in the governorate of Kasserine is a significant social phenomenon.¹ In the absence of other economic opportunities, there are many young people in this area for whom these illicit practices are the only source of income. Although completely illegal – as it circumvents customs controls, formal rules governing trade, and recording and registration procedures – smuggling appears to have social legitimacy. For many years, for the vast majority of those involved, the border economy has reflected the need to survive and the desire for a dignified existence, free from want and deprivation. At the same time, for a minority, it has also represented a means of accessing and accumulating wealth. When the state ceased to fulfil its role as the supplier of resources, many ‘young’ people from Feriyana, Majel Belabbès, numerous places on the border (Skhirat, Oum Ali, Hydra) and Hay Ezzouhour, in the centre of Kasserine city, had to turn to the border, which represents a real “natural resource”² in this impoverished region.

Since the popular uprising that led to the collapse of the dictatorship of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, young people have often been described as though they were a socially homogeneous group that was mobilised due to interests that were specific and different from those of the rest of society. Presented as the voice of discontent, young people were deprived of the opportunity to effect real change following the revolution and, as a result, sank into apathy. The increased focus on young people, a feature both of the period of euphoria and the period of disenchantment that followed it, did nothing to shed light on the specific characteristics of this social group or, indeed, its diversity – for youth has not *one* but *many* facets.³

Thus, studying smuggling in the Kasserine region plays a role in explaining the socio-economic and political relationships entered into by the young people involved in these illegal activities. Youth is generally considered as an intermediate and transitory period preceding adulthood and synonymous with a twofold break with school and family, a stage in the passage from school to the world of work, from vulnerability to security. However, it is becoming an increasingly long and drawn-out phase, as the social conditions in which young people live are deteriorating and their prospects are becoming ever more uncertain, due to the centrifugal forces at the heart of the Tunisian model of development.⁴

It is not easy to talk about the involvement of young people in smuggling at a time of heightened security concerns. Initially feted as the spearhead of the popular uprising against the dictatorship, the young people of Kasserine have gradually begun to be stigmatised, based on a systematic association of smuggling with terrorism. Often described as being motivated by the lure of money and ready to take the next step into criminality and terrorism, young people involved in smuggling are portrayed in some media as enemies of the state, or public enemies. Without denying the existence of links between the two phenomena, it must be recognised that, when security is a

1 See: L. Ayadi, N. Benjamin, S. Bensassi and G. Raballand, Estimating informal trade across Tunisia’s land borders, World Bank, Policy Research Working Paper Series 6731, Washington DC: World Bank, 2013. According to this study, the role played by border posts in illicit cross-border trade on the border between Tunisia and Algeria is marginal, representing just 2% of flows. The majority of cross-border trade involves smuggling.

2 J. Scheele, *Smugglers and saints of the Sahara: Regional connectivity in the twentieth century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012

3 On the diversity of youth, see G. Mauger, *Les mondes des jeunes [The worlds of the young]*, in *Sociétés Contemporaines [Contemporary Societies]*, 21(1), 1995, pp.5–14

4 See: World Bank, *Tunisia: Breaking the barriers to youth inclusion*, Washington DC: World Bank, 2014. On the issue of young people as an indicator of crises in Arab societies, see E. Murphy (ed.), *Introduction: Arab youth and politics*, *Mediterranean Politics*, 17(1), 2012, pp.1–4; and, in particular, E. Murphy, *Problematizing Arab youth: Generational narratives of systemic failure*, *Mediterranean Politics*, 17(1), 2012, pp.5–22

constant topic of public debate, it contributes to the criminalisation of poverty and tends to mask the collusion that has long existed between the law enforcement agencies and the smugglers in this region. Under the previous regimes, this collusion was used as a means of securing and controlling the borders.

Our study does not seek to condone or to judge smuggling, but instead to understand it as a social reality, using the stories of those who are engaged in it as a means of survival.⁵ We also endeavour to decipher the reasons for the inclusion and exclusion of young people in smuggling, and to understand the mechanisms whereby young people experience and continue to experience social subordination four years after the fall of Ben Ali. We seek to analyse the political regulation of smuggling, as well as the deeper reasons behind the importance, for young people, of the discourse around the marginalisation of a region that rediscovered its lost pride during the uprising of 2010–2011 before descending into a state of disenchantment.

In this region, poverty and insecurity do not only affect young people who live in rural areas and impoverished towns – they also affect those who live in Kasserine, like the people of Hay Ezzouhour, whose inability to find employment is exacerbated by the urban marginalisation of this working-class area, established since independence by successive waves of rural exodus. Focusing on young people from Kasserine who are involved in smuggling forms part of an approach to understanding the situation of young people in Tunisia today. This report thus echoes a previous study by International Alert,⁶ which looked at young people in Hay Ettadhamen and Douar Hicher, two neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Tunis, where a large proportion of the population originates from the governorate of Kasserine. It seeks to understand the constraints that hamper the existence and everyday lives of these young people.

Considering youth as a period of transition, “social weightlessness” and quest for status⁷ rather than as a biological state, we seek to identify the sources of youth exclusion by opting for a relational approach.⁸ Instead of taking a ‘static’ approach, seeing inclusion and exclusion as two separate domains, our study adopts a more dynamic perspective and looks at the economic, political and social relationships that influence young people’s experiences of smuggling and foster or alleviate their exclusion. In fact, studying the experiences of the young smugglers and their daily struggle to access economic resources, secure their earnings and evade crackdowns by the police and customs officers provides a particularly useful perspective for understanding the asymmetrical relationships and sources of injustice and ostracism perceived and experienced by the people of Kasserine.⁹

As a position from which to observe and analyse the situation of young people in a deprived region, smuggling provides privileged access to understanding the relationship between young people and the state at a time of crisis for a development model that forces many of them into unemployment and to the fringes of legality.¹⁰ Since the collapse of the Ben Ali regime, unemployment has

5 On the importance of understanding smuggling as a social reality distinct from threats to security, see H. Meddeb, *Courir ou mourir: Course à El Khobza et domination au quotidien dans la Tunisie de Ben Ali* [Run or die: The race for el khobza (bread) and domination in everyday life in Ben Ali’s Tunisia], Paris: Institut d’études politiques [Institute of Political Studies], 2012 (doctoral thesis); and K. Bennafla, *État et illégalisme: Quelle géographie? Une approche par les flux marchands depuis l’Afrique et le Moyen-Orient* [A geographical approach to state and illegalism: Perspectives from transnational circulation of trade in Africa and the Middle East], *Annales de Géographie* [Annals of Geography], 700(6/2014), December 2014, pp.1338–1358

6 International Alert, *Experiences and perceptions of young people in Tunisia: The Case of Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen*, March 2015, <http://www.international-alert.org/resources/publications/experiences-and-perceptions-young-people-tunisia>

7 V. Becquet, “Les jeunes vulnérables”: Essai de définition [“Vulnerable young people”: An attempt at a definition], *Agora/Débats Jeunesse* [Agora/Youth Debates], 62, 2012, pp.51–64

8 For more details on this approach, see I. Bono, *La jeunesse, nouvelle classe sociale* [Young people, a new social class], *Economia*, November 2011, <http://www.economia.ma/content/la-jeunesse-nouvelle-classe-sociale>

9 This awareness of injustice and ostracism is not peculiar to the young people of Kasserine – it is also shared by young people in working-class areas of the capital, Tunis. See: O. Lamoulou, *Les jeunes des quartiers populaires face à la police en Tunisie: Ce qui a changé* [Young people from working-class neighbourhoods and the police in Tunisia: What’s changed], *Orient XXI*, 20 March 2015, <http://orientxxi.info/lu-vu-entendu/les-jeunes-des-quartiers-populaires-face-a-la-police-en-tunisie,0845>

10 H. Meddeb, 2012, Op. cit.

increased due to the effects of a slowdown in investment, political uncertainty and an upsurge in corruption,¹¹ as well as the worsening global crisis and recession in Europe, Tunisia's main economic partner. In 2013, the unemployment rate among young people reached 33.2%, in spite of the programmes and measures implemented by the government coalition.¹²

This study is based on a qualitative survey comprising semi-structured interviews covering the course of a young person's life so far, his/her social environment and how he/she became involved in smuggling, as well as his/her attitudes to the state, the authorities and politics. More than 20 interviews were conducted with young people aged between 18 and 34, including four women engaged in the 'suitcase trade' between the towns of eastern Algeria and the Tunisian towns of Kasserine and Feriyana. Field observations were conducted, during which discussions and interactions with residents and delegates from the towns of Feriyana and Majel Belabbès, as well as the *omda* (chief), were very useful in understanding some of the political and social aspects of smuggling.

In addition, a round table, bringing together smugglers, regional officials and NGO officials, enabled us to compare different points of view and to assess the scale of the impasses in the political economy of the Kasserine region. Initiated by Alert, this research is based on interviews carried out by the author, as well as by a team of young social science graduates from the region. The decision to take a qualitative approach was motivated by the need to give these young people a chance to speak. It was important for them to be allowed to talk about their everyday lives as smugglers, their attitude to the authorities, their expectations and the pressures they face. The portraits contained in this study are based on these interviews, but names have been changed to preserve the interviewees' anonymity. Rather than seeking to be exhaustive, which would be all but impossible in the case of an illegal activity such as smuggling and would require a vast amount of research, our approach is to try to gain at least some understanding of the underlying dynamics and the web of relationships that shape the everyday lives of young people involved in smuggling in Kasserine.

Fuel depot by the roadside between Kasserine and Sbeitla



11 This is confirmed by Transparency International's corruption perceptions index, which saw Tunisia fall from 77th place in 2013 to 79th place in 2014, www.transparency.org/country#TUN; see also: Indice de perception de la corruption: La Tunisie recule de deux places [Corruption perceptions index: Tunisia falls two places], Babnet Tunisie, 3 December 2014, <http://www.babnet.net/cadredetail-95895.asp>

12 International Labour Organization (ILO), Labour market transitions of young women and men in Tunisia, Work4Youth Publication Series 16, Geneva: ILO, 2014

2. The two phases of smuggling following the fall of Ben Ali

The marginalisation of the Kasserine region and the absence over many decades of a development policy have contributed to smuggling becoming a real “economy of necessity”¹³ for poor communities in this region. The fall of the Ben Ali dictatorship did not bring change. On the contrary, after months of weakened security and the withdrawal of security forces delegitimised by their role in the repression of the popular uprising, they then reoccupied the area for the purpose of combating terrorism. The stalemate in the civil war in Libya, the proliferation of attacks against the Tunisian security forces and the strengthening of border controls by Algeria set the scene for an attempt to militarise the border between Tunisia and Algeria, thus reducing the smugglers’ room for manoeuvre.

2.1 A porous border, community solidarity and tightening security

The deep-rooted nature of smuggling in the Kasserine region is a product of the regulatory and economic differences created by the border, and of the kinship relationships and solidarity on both sides. Smuggling has become established as a way of ‘using’ the border and making it productive in this peripheral and long-marginalised region. The porosity of the border between Tunisia and Algeria is due both to its flat, steppe-like terrain, especially to the south of Kasserine, which facilitates traffic across it, and to the way the region is settled by a population that sees its vital economic and social space as being divided by the line of the border. In fact, many tribal groups, such as the Ouled Sidi Abid, the Ouled Sidi Tlil and the Frechiches, were divided by the border as a result of the vagaries of history and the colonial demarcation of national boundaries.

When he wrote a history of a marabout tribe, the Ouled Sidi Abid, the author Lazhar Majri showed how the movements and seasonal migrations of this group were affected by the upheavals caused by French colonisation.¹⁴ In the face of repression, expropriations and movement restrictions that followed the conquest of parts of eastern Algeria, many people were driven to rebel, seek exile in the Beylik of Tunis and then negotiate their return after the latter fell under colonial rule. This was the case for the Ouled Abdelmalek branch, for example. Others preferred to settle in Tunisia, becoming landless tribes, which encouraged some tribal groups – together with marabout networks – to become involved in smuggling. This played a key role in the struggle against colonisation in the two countries.¹⁵

Before it became a productive economic resource, the border, established by the treaty of 1898, was a politically illegitimate institution. Disposessed of their land, which was annexed to Algeria, some Tunisian groups had demanded in vain for Bir el Ater, Bakkaria and Sarraguia to be annexed to Tunisia. The traces of this dismemberment are very visible, as the border passes through places that still bear the same name on either side, such as Oum Ali and Bouderyas. From early on, smuggling relied on kinship links, tribal networks and what Joel Migdal calls “mental maps”.¹⁶

13 F. Adelhah, *Le retour de Sindbad: L'Iran dans le Golfe* [The return of Sinbad: Iran in the Gulf], Paris: Les Études du CERI [CERI Research], 53, 1999

14 L. Majri, *The marabout tribe and colonisation: Ouled Sidi Abid and French colonisation in Algeria and Tunisia 1830–1890, Processes of disintegration and mechanisms of resistance*, Tunis: La Maghrébine pour l'impression et la Publication du Livre, 2013 [published in Arabic]

15 On the links between smuggling and marabout networks in the struggle against French colonisation, see J.A. Clancy-Smith, *Rebel and saint: Muslim notables, populist protest, colonial encounters (Algeria and Tunisia 1800–1904)*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994

16 J.S. Migdal, *Mental maps and virtual checkpoints: Struggles to construct and maintain states and social boundaries*, in J.S. Migdal (ed.), *Boundaries and belonging: States and societies in the struggle to shape identities and local practices*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp.3–26

These are geographical configurations that make sense to people and to which they have a strong attachment, since they correspond to their perception of the land and how they use it. One smuggler expressed it in the following terms:

“There are kinship links between the communities on both sides of the border. In Skhirat, the Ouled Abid are on both sides. The Ouled Marzouk are opposite their cousins (Ouled ‘ambom) the Ouled Moussa; the Ltaifiyya are on the other side from their cousins, the Ouled Mansour. The Baa’ssa, well we’ll not talk about them, they’re binational! There are strong links, marital connections, family visits. The Algerians come to Zardat Sidi Tlil,¹⁷ and the Tunisians go to Algeria to visit their families and honour the saints.”¹⁸

Rather than reducing movement, the border has thus intensified the connections and interactions between communities in the two countries. Furthermore, far from being limited to the border, the kinship links extend as far as Hay Ezzouhour due to the rural exodus, thereby contributing to establishing and embedding the smuggling networks in the heart of the town.

The differences between the way the people ‘used’ the border historically and the government’s controlling and monitoring strategies often caused tensions in this region on the country’s periphery. While the border evokes a protective barrier, guarded by means of controls such as border posts, border crossing procedures, and travel and movement documents, its porosity reveals both the way it is used by the local communities and the limits of the state’s “infrastructural power”¹⁹ in the region.

In reality, the 10 or so outposts that enable the border police to monitor illegal movements between the Kasserine region and Algeria are not adequate to contain the illegal flow of goods. The actions of the police are hampered by obsolescent equipment, and a lack of funding, vehicles and resources – problems that have not been entirely mitigated by the changes that have taken place since the fall of the regime. According to the border guards we met, it is still the case that, at times, some posts lack drinking water, when it is cut off due to the numerous problems experienced by the water management and distribution companies in the region. The lack, until recently, of a regional customs administration since the fall of Ben Ali is proof of the state’s minimal presence in a region that has two border posts, Bouchebka and Hydra, approximately 10 outposts, and which essentially lives from smuggling and cross-border trafficking.²⁰ A border guard describes how the infrastructural inadequacies affect the operations of state officials and shape their priorities:

“The situation at the outposts has improved a lot since the revolution. A few years ago, some posts didn’t have water or electricity and we were patrolling on horses or mules. In those conditions it’s impossible to control the border zones. Where we did manage it, it was thanks to the local communities who passed information to us. Now all the outposts have water and electricity and at least one car. As a minimum. But we still can’t completely control the border. In any case, it’s impossible to prohibit smuggling, so you have to choose your priorities and know how to manage them: you can’t deal with drug trafficking in the same way as fuel smuggling, or fuel smuggling like you would terrorism. With fuel smuggling, you stop it once and then you relax a bit.”²¹

17 Zardat Sidi Tlil is an annual gathering of marabout tribe members, the Ouled Sidi Tlil, of Tunisia and Algeria, which takes place at the mausoleum of the saint in Feriyana. Over time, this gathering has become a cultural festival involving evenings of religious songs, as well as equestrian competitions. We also attended this festival, which is held in September every year.

18 Anonymous smuggler, interview by author, Feriyana, October 2014

19 For more information on this idea, see V. Pereira, *La dictature de Salazar face à l’émigration: L’État portugais et ses migrants en France (1957–1974)* [The Salazar dictatorship and emigration: The Portuguese state and its migrants in France (1957–1974)], Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2012

20 According to the people we spoke to, the Kasserine region was for a long time under the regional customs administration in Gafsa. A regional administration was established in Kasserine after the revolution. The situation is similar for the National Guard, for which a regional directorate was set up a few years before the fall of the Ben Ali dictatorship.

21 Border guard, interview by author, Hydra, September 2014

The Tunisian smugglers rarely venture to the Algerian side; instead they content themselves with waiting for deliveries from their Algerian counterparts a few hundred metres from the border, usually on Tunisian territory. The fact that there is no zone of tolerance (where some illegal practices are allowed) on the border between Tunisia and Algeria weakens the position of the Tunisian smugglers, as they are reliant for their supplies and their margins on their Algerian partners, their business strategies and their ability to evade government controls.

The hostage-taking in In Amenas in January 2013 and the increasing numbers of terrorist attacks against the army and the National Guard on the Tunisian side compelled the Algerian authorities to dig a trench with the aim of limiting the risks of infiltration by jihadist groups.²² According to the accounts we received from smugglers, this trench has had disastrous results for the smuggling networks because it has significantly restricted the flows of goods. This was confirmed by the *omda* of Oum Ali, a village near the border in the delegation of Feriyana, which has seen an intensification in the last two years of waves of people leaving for the towns of Kasserine and Feriyana as a result of the dwindling flows of smuggled goods.

“Since they dug the trench, smuggling activity has fallen by 70%. I’m now receiving constant requests from people asking for help. Before, they were able to live at least partly from fuel smuggling but that’s no longer possible. They’re putting pressure on me and the problem is that I’ve got nothing to offer them. I go and see the Feriyana delegate to explain the situation to him and he can’t do anything either. It’s a very difficult situation which could really explode if things carry on the way they are.”²³

However, it is unlikely that smuggling will be stopped completely in the near future. Its foothold on the border between Tunisia and Algeria is due, in part, to the central geographic position of the young smugglers in the area around Tébessa and Bir el Ater. Among them, some of the serious operators went into politics in the early 2000s as a way of ensuring that their business was protected.²⁴ The liberalisation of foreign trade in the 1990s was accompanied by increasing power for import networks, representing a new entry route into global networks for the Algerian economy.²⁵ These networks have played a significant role in the increasing density of flows in the border region and the expansion, from Tébessa, of the supply chains for the Tunisian economy to include household appliances, clothing, equipment, electronic devices, cigarettes, alcohol, construction iron, copper and livestock. However, the main focus of the smuggling is Algerian fuel. According to estimates by the World Bank, published in 2013, 60% of the 3,000 vehicles operating on the border between Tunisia and Algeria are used for fuel smuggling. The study also found that these routes accounted for the importing of 25% of the fuel consumed in Tunisia.²⁶

22 Géoconfluences, A la frontière tuniso-algérienne, un futur fossé? [On the Tunisia-Algeria border, a future entrenched?], Newsletter No. 88, 2013. In addition to the many accounts provided by smugglers and local officials, we were able to verify the existence of a trench by carrying out observations on the border near Oum Ali, in the delegation of Feriyana.

23 *Omda* (local chief), interview by author, Oum Ali, Feriyana, September 2014

24 See: M. Hachemaoui, *Clientélisme et patronage dans l’Algérie contemporaine* [Cronyism and patronage in contemporary Algeria], Paris: Karthala, IREMAM, 2013. The author describes how, during the legislative elections in 2002, there was an ‘LG list’, derived from the name of the major household appliances brand, which was headed by an Ouled Sidi Abid wheeler-dealer from the Bir el Ater region.

25 S. Belguidoum and O. Pliez, *Construire une route de la soie entre l’Algérie et la Chine* [Building a silk road between Algeria and China], *Routes, Diaspora, Histoire et Sociétés* [Routes, Diaspora, History and Societies], 20, 2012, pp.115–130

26 L. Ayadi, N. Benjamin, S. Bensassi and G. Raballand, 2013, Op. cit.

2.2 The security forces: Treading the line between relaxing controls and clampdown

By changing the structure of smuggling, the fall of Ben Ali also changed the situation on the border between Tunisia and Algeria. According to those we spoke to, in addition to the disappearance of the ‘families’ who controlled whole swathes of the trafficking, the revolution put an end to the way smuggling was regulated. Far from demonstrating government weakness, smuggling under the Ben Ali regime appeared rather to represent a sort of government-approved illegality for the people of the region, as conveyed by the words of a police official:

“Under Ben Ali, there was a kind of tolerance for smuggling intended to help the communities in the border regions. There was material assistance, drinking water tanks and 200 litres of fuel per month for every resident. We were aware of smuggling of food products and we closed our eyes to it because these are poor areas. If it wasn’t for the smuggling, people would end up leaving. A degree of tolerance prevented an exodus from these communities and ensured that we had their cooperation, because it’s impossible to control the border without a minimum level of cooperation from the people – they’re the ones who provide us with information.”²⁷

Under the Ben Ali regime, this tolerance of smuggling was part of a low-cost administrative approach in the border regions.²⁸ If the customs authorities and the police had refused to be flexible and fought relentlessly against smuggling, these areas would have been completely deserted by their inhabitants, given the lack of government development policies. Aware of their lack of equipment and people to control these border regions, the security services saw smuggling as a safety valve that could keep rural exodus, unemployment and poverty at bay – and criminality under control.

This tolerance was accompanied by a policy of encouraging cronyism among the border communities, without which it would have been impossible to control the border. Small-scale assistance in the form of food products, livestock and water tanks increased the power of the *omda* and the local officials who selected the beneficiaries. In addition to the political and cronyism dimensions, these aid packages played a role from the security point of view as they represented a vital filter in recruiting and involving the local community in controlling the borders.

Many of the accounts we heard in Kasserine suggest that the work of the security services was principally based on human intelligence obtained by recruiting informers among forest rangers and smugglers. This recruitment relied on intimidation, fear of reprisals and the lure of money, as described by Ismail, aged 33, a smuggler from Hay Ezzouhour involved in smuggling tyres and copper.

“I was summoned by the district head of the National Guard, who asked me to work for them as an informer. I refused because it was frowned upon and I didn’t want to do it. Since then the intimidation has been constant; I’ve been arrested, booked and had to pay a fine of 7,000 Tunisian dinar (TND). I was in a high-speed car chase and had a serious accident and lost my car.”²⁹

The recruitment of informers provides an indication of the security forces’ ability to penetrate smuggling, divide up the smugglers and control the flow of goods. Although it increased the porosity of the border, this approach to monitoring still helped to regulate it by strengthening the profits and dominance of the smugglers who were therefore protected and docile.

²⁷ Police official, interview by author, Thala, September 2014

²⁸ H. Meddeb, 2012, Op. cit.

²⁹ Ismaeil, smuggler from Hay Ezzouhour, interview by author, Kasserine, October 2014

In the two years following the fall of the regime, the security services' difficulties in controlling the border and the intensification of acts of terrorism in the region led to increased stigmatisation of young smugglers. In the post-Ben Ali period, the security forces were discredited and people ceased to fear them, leading to the disintegration of the networks of informers who were essential for the security surveillance of the region. "We had informers, but things changed after Ben Ali," explained a regional police official.

"The people aren't afraid any more and so they don't want to work with us now. Fear helped us with recruitment, but since the revolution that's no longer the case. In fact, the fear has shifted to the police. For months, I've been afraid that someone might see me talking to a smuggler. It's not only the people who feel they're in danger, the police feel like that too. But things are starting to get back to normal, thanks to the fight against terrorism."³⁰

During the months that followed the fall of the dictatorship, fear changed sides, passing from the people to the state. However, this situation did not last, as 2013 saw the security situation taken in hand with the fight against terrorism, a direct result of which was the toughening of controls on smuggling networks. The digging of the trench on the Algerian side, as well as increased numbers of roadblocks and patrols carried out jointly by the police, the National Guard and the army (which, according to some of the interviews, no longer hesitate to open fire on smugglers who try to evade controls and refuse to submit), have contributed to restricting the flow of goods and to steadily reducing the numbers of vehicles active in cross-border trade. The renewed deployment of the security forces and increasingly coercive regulation of smuggling have led to greater competition between indebted smugglers, who want to position themselves under the protection of state agents in order to secure their profits as best they can.

This is the conclusion we reached on the basis of our qualitative survey and it confirms the findings of the World Bank in its 2013 report assessing informal trade in Tunisia. The report alerted public authorities to the futility of increased police and customs controls, noting that, in the absence of any concrete measures to address the economic and regulatory differences on either side of the border, tighter controls would risk increasing corruption among state agents and, over time, undermine government control.³¹ Tougher action against smugglers as part of the fight against terrorism is accompanied by a resurgence of corruption – the price to pay for harnessing police violence and collusion among police and customs officials.

2.3 The consequences of conflating smuggling and terrorism

Numerous attacks on the army and security services in the Sammama and Chaambi Mountains have led to an increasingly heated debate, most often centred around a conflation of terrorism and smuggling, and ignoring the changes that have taken place in smuggling since the revolution. Disadvantaged young people who are active in cross-border trade have been stigmatised and this has moved the debate about the Kasserine region from the realms of development to a situation where the focus is solely on security, generating profound disaffection among the young people concerned.³²

According to many interviewees, the relaxation of security that followed the fall of the dictatorship opened the door with regard to smuggling to new players, including a large number of those known for their involvement in drug trafficking. The smugglers of Kasserine call them *erebba* (the

³⁰ Police official, interview by author, Kasserine, September 2014

³¹ L. Ayadi, N. Benjamin, S. Bensassi and G. Raballand, 2013, Op. cit.

³² H. Chennaoui, Reportage: En attendant la présidentielle, Kasserine ravale sa dignité bafouée au nom de la lutte contre le terrorisme [Reportage: In the run-up to the presidential election, Kasserine swallows its ragged pride for the sake of the fight against terrorism], Nawaat, 9 December 2014, <http://nawaat.org/portail/2014/12/09/reportage-en-attendant-les-presidentielles-kasserine-ravale-sa-dignite-bafouee-au-nom-de-la-lutte-contre-le-terrorisme/>

plural of *rebib*, a term used to describe children born to a previous marriage). “Not everyone who drives a D-Max pickup is necessarily a smuggler,” Amer, a smuggler from Feriyana, told us. The fall of the regime led to an influx of newcomers, many of them from the criminal milieu.

“It’s like when a widow with children remarries. Her new husband can’t accept the children as his own. We call them ‘erebba’, meaning children from a different marriage. And those guys, they come from the marriage between crime and the border. Why are they lumped together with the smugglers who have always worked clean? We’re tarred with the same brush as these new kids of the border.”³³

This distinction highlights an issue that emerged with the end of the arrangements that traditionally regulated smuggling under Ben Ali, namely criminals becoming involved in the border trade. The people of Kasserine whom we encountered were unanimous in their opinion that trafficking in cannabis, narcotics and arms, and the links between terrorism and cross-border trafficking, are not due to smugglers being drawn into crime but rather criminals muscling in on smuggling. Unlike the smugglers, these criminals do not identify in any way with the morals that have always formed the basis of smuggling’s legitimacy in society, that is the refusal to become involved in trading prohibited items and shifting to criminal activities.

In fact, the smugglers feel as though they have been the victims of a twofold injustice since the fall of Ben Ali: economic injustice, because they are being deprived of their profits, which are becoming increasingly poor and uncertain; and moral or ethical injustice, because the moral economy that previously regulated and legitimised their activities has become infested – sometimes with criminals and sometimes with terrorists. This has inevitably driven the public debate about how smuggling should be dealt with from the security perspective. The counter-terrorism agenda has led to a situation where subsistence smuggling is conflated with criminality, and the demands from young people in the region for social justice and inclusion are delegitimised.

We heard numerous accounts describing how the tightening of controls has resulted in many smugglers being excluded from this cross-border trade. The security risks posed by this situation are very real, since the lack of any alternative options means that the crackdown serves to augment the feeling of abandonment and disaffection among the young people who, as well as being hit by unemployment, are being excluded from the informal economy. Historically seen as a means of inclusion for young people deprived of access to paid employment, smuggling is now viewed as the very embodiment of exclusion, due to the effect of toughening coercive security measures.³⁴

Presenting smugglers as public enemies is likely to fuel the grievances and mistrust of the community towards central government and, in the process, to obscure their historical role in monitoring the border and to call their patriotism into question. Yet when smugglers infringe government regulations, they are not challenging or rejecting the state – communities are legitimately trying to survive by any means, particularly by seizing economic opportunities and by taking advantage of the regulatory differences across the border.³⁵

33 Ismaeil, smuggler from Hay Ezzouhour, interview by author, Kasserine, October 2014

34 For more information on smuggling used as a means of including those on the margins during the Ben Ali regime, see H. Meddeb, 2012, Op. cit.

35 The legitimate nature of illegal economic activities is not peculiar to Tunisia – it is a classic aspect of cross-border activity. With regard to Sub-Saharan Africa, see J. Roitman, *Fiscal disobedience: An anthropology of economic regulation in Central Africa*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004; in relation to Latin America, see R. Galemba, “Corn is food, not contraband”: The right to “free trade” at the Mexico-Guatemala border, *American Ethnologist*, 39(4), 2012, pp.716–734; and for other regions, see W. van Schendel, I. Abraham (eds.), *Illicit flows and criminal things: States, borders, and the other side of globalization*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005

The breakdown of the state as employer, and, more broadly, of the welfare state, has left young people with very few options, as indicated by this young smuggler:

“I’ll give my car to the government, it’s worth 50,000 TND, and in exchange I’ll ask for a job. If the government accepts the deal, I’ll stop smuggling. In reality, we have no choice: it’s either working in smuggling or stealing.”³⁶

In fact, young people rarely bother to justify their involvement in smuggling, for the simple reason that there is nothing out of the ordinary about it in this impoverished region. This does not mean that they are satisfied with smuggling as an occupation or that they have ceased to acknowledge the security threats associated with it, but simply that they are trying to live with it, to get by, to take their fate into their own hands, to dodge problems when they can and to fix things when dodging becomes impossible.

Photo of an abandoned house in Oum Ali, evidence of the significance of rural exodus in the region, according to the local *omda*. Above the door it says: “A gift from the president, 2 March 1999.”



36 Anonymous smuggler, interview by author, Feriyana, October 2014

3. Young people involved in smuggling – stories of individuals and communities

Smuggling on the Algerian border takes place at the intersection of global and local factors. On the one hand there is the integration of the region's economies into the processes of globalisation, which brings a huge influx of consumer and capital goods at relatively low prices to Tunisia's borders, as a result of the compensation policies adopted by neighbouring countries. On the other hand are the subsistence and survival strategies of the communities in this marginalised region. Although it involves moving goods and commodities outside the authorised crossing points and government regulations, smuggling is viewed as legitimate and normal in the eyes of the individuals we talked to and, more widely, by the people of the region. For many years, work on the border (*yekhdem a'la el h'ad*) has established itself as a means of accessing basic resources in an impoverished region that is suffering from a dearth of paid employment and a significant lack of development since independence.

Therefore, young people in the Kasserine region becoming involved in smuggling activities, as couriers, porters, lookouts and vendors, represents a kind of response to the absence of routes to inclusion. Because of that, categorising these young people as 'excluded' runs the risk not only of generalising situations that are very different but, above all, of obscuring the wide range of stories and experiences. Rather than seeking to establish typologies, our approach is instead to describe individuals' journeys in order to take account of the wider social dynamics that shape the stories of these young people involved in smuggling and explain their situation on the margins. The 'grafters', the 'climbers', the 'disconnected' and the 'temps' (who are just involved from time to time, *yadhrab dharba*), and the women involved in cross-border trade, provide stories and experiences that must be placed in their political, economic and security contexts. The two phases of smuggling described in the previous section reveal an essential aspect of smuggling in Kasserine: the political context and the security arrangements are determining factors in the fates of these young people, protecting some and causing others to disappear. It is therefore useful to identify how government regulations have influenced the experiences of young people in smuggling.

3.1 The grafters

For the vast majority of young people we interviewed, smuggling is synonymous with 'servitude'.³⁷ They describe their experience as a daily struggle to survive and protect their place in this border economy. They use an evocative expression to describe their experience, talking about "grinding water" (*ybarsou fel maa*), meaning emptiness.

Mokhtar, aged 33, is originally from Majel Belabbès and has been involved in smuggling with his brother since 2006. He has a degree in biology from the Faculty of Sciences at the University of Sfax and has taken the CAPES tests for secondary-level teaching several times without success. After three years of smuggling fuel and sometimes transporting spare parts (from the engines of vehicles transported from Menzel Kamel to the Algerian border), he was employed in 2009 as a biologist by an agricultural firm in the Sidi Bouzid region, for a monthly salary of 1,200 TND. However, this period of employment did not last long because two years later – a few months after the fall of Ben Ali – the company closed down due to endless problems with the farmers in

³⁷ For more on the experience of 'servitude', see F. Dubet, *La galère: Jeunes en survie* [The galley: Youth survival], Paris: Editions Point Mars, 1995 (Fayard, 1984)

the region, who were demanding higher prices for their potatoes.³⁸ Unemployed once more, he returned to smuggling after buying a car from a leasing company. This distorted mobility reveals an interesting dimension to the situation of young people in Tunisia today: inclusion does not necessarily follow a linear and irreversible path; for many young people it tends to be a precarious and reversible state, with considerable blurring of the line between the categories of the included and the excluded. The result is that youth becomes a prolonged stage, linked with this difficulty of finding your place between unstable employment and periods of unemployment, punctuated by failed civil service entrance examinations and returns to smuggling, with the latter remaining a last resort. Mokhtar describes his experience of smuggling as follows:

“I bought a car from a leasing company for 53,000 TND. My repayments are 610 TND per month. Over the last year and a half, the situation in the region has become complicated because of terrorism. Before we used to work every day and we got by, but now I barely manage to work three days a week. I don’t leave the governorate of Kasserine to avoid my goods being seized and having problems with the security forces, which means I earn one dinar per can [of petrol]. For several months, I’ve been earning around 800 TND per month. Once I’ve paid the leasing firm, I’m not left with much. In effect, I’m just working to pay the leasing company – like lots of other people here. The problem is that once the car’s been paid for, it won’t be worth anything. You can imagine the state of a car that’s done four years of smuggling ... just a pile of scrap. It won’t be worth much on the market – 7,000 or maybe 8,000 TND: just enough for a new deposit to get a new car with a new leasing deal, and then it starts all over again.”³⁹

Mokhtar’s experience, like that of the large majority of smugglers in the Kasserine region, reveals an important aspect to this activity: becoming involved in cross-border trade entails entering into a spiral of debt and dependence (in relation both to the leasing companies, and to family and networks of friends and acquaintances), in order to avoid defaulting on the repayments and to minimise the risks of seizures by the security forces. As far as our interviewees are concerned, the rising prices for vehicles, as a result of restrictions on imports and the devaluation of the dinar, do not justify the high rates of interest charged by the leasing companies. The smuggler’s position is further weakened, since the ‘route price’ paid to the security services, which has risen steadily since the beginning of the fight against terrorism in the region and the increase in patrols, comes on top of the rise in vehicle purchase prices, thus wiping out the profits generated. It is an intractable situation, as described by Mokhtar:

“Since the revolution, there haven’t been any profits. Supplying fuel to Ljem made a net profit of 300 or 400 TND during the Ben Ali era, but you don’t get more than 30 or 40 TND now, once you take off everything you pay along the way. The golden age of smuggling ended with the fall of Ben Ali. Luckily, I can rely on my father. He has sheep and sells two or three of them to tide me over when I ask him. But other people don’t have anything to fall back on. These days we’re working for the leasing firms and ‘el hakem’ (public officials).”⁴⁰

It is not merely anecdotal to say that indebtedness to the leasing companies is shaping the experience of these young people, as a result of the uncertainty, anxiety and challenges of managing the payment deadlines and difficult situations in relation to late and missed payments. Consequently, the priority for young people is to “stay afloat”,⁴¹ to keep going and to avoid being forced out of smuggling, due to their goods being seized, some kind of mishap or an excessive burden of debt.

38 For more on the situation in rural parts of the region of Sidi Bouzid and the conflicts that arose there after the revolution, see M. Fautras, *Injustices foncières, contestations et mobilisations collectives dans les espaces ruraux de Sidi Bouzid (Tunisie): Aux racines de la “révolution”?* [Land injustices, contestations and community protest in the rural areas of Sidi Bouzid (Tunisia): The roots of the “revolution”?], *justice spatiale [spatial justice]*, 7, January 2015

39 Mokhtar (name has been changed), smuggler, interview by author, Majel Belabbès, September 2014

40 Ibid.

41 R. Castel, *Les métamorphoses de la question sociale [The changing social question]*, Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1999, p.17

This is true for Mokhtar and also for Khaled, aged 28, from Hay Ezzouhour, who makes a point of not going beyond the Jelma roundabout and restricting his deliveries to the governorate of Kasserine.

“I pay 570 TND per month to the leasing company. Before the revolution, I used to make deliveries to Kairouan and Sfax, but that’s too risky now. If my goods were seized, I’d be ruined: I’d lose 2,000 to 3,000 TND, the value of the fuel I was transporting, plus a 2,000 TND fine. I always manage to fix things in the governorate of Kasserine, but anywhere else it’s complicated. Once I was arrested and prosecuted and it put me in the red, so I don’t take risks any more. If I lose my car, I’ll lose everything.”⁴²

This fear of ‘losing everything’ and being forced out of cross-border trade has a profound impact on the everyday lives of these young people who have to cope with security threats, restrictions on their trading activity, financial obligations and the uncertainty that comes with being in debt. ‘Servitude’ (*tmarmid, tahriss el maa*) seems to be an experience of dispossession, due both to the nature of this servitude and to exclusion. It is an experience that ‘makes, tames, produces, regulates and creates subjectivity’, and which enables the extension of the exercise of power over a group that is excluded from paid employment and state protection.

During one interview, a smuggler told us that his vehicle really belongs to the government, not the leasing company. This attitude of holding the government responsible highlights both its silence and the collective hypocrisy that criminalises the smugglers while turning a blind eye to those who finance and benefit from their activities. The involvement of leasing companies in financing illegal trade really exposes the futility of making a distinction between the formal and informal, legal and illegal sectors of the economy: the profits from smuggling are the revenues of the leasing firms.

This involvement of the leasing companies in funding smuggling activity is by no means harmless and reflects a process of what Béatrice Hibou describes as the “privatisation of the state”.⁴³ This process exposes not so much a withdrawal by the state but more its redeployment through the increasing power of the smuggling networks, customs fraud, and the economic and financial players such as the banks and leasing companies involved in financing these networks, as well as the market places,⁴⁴ such as those of Benguerdene, Ljem, Boumendil and Moncef Bey. These places, which play a role in supplying the Tunisian economy by means of more or less legal arrangements, while giving the authorities room to manoeuvre, nevertheless weaken those involved and even become levers in the exercise of power.

This experience of ‘servitude’ undermines the young people all the more because, even if they want to, getting out of smuggling seems impossible, given the structural deadlock afflicting the economy of the region. Mokhtar learned this the hard way:

“My family has 2,500 olive trees, but we have no water. I tried to get a loan to dig a well; I applied several times over the course of three years but with no luck. In the end, I sold a tractor for 43,000 TND and started to dig without a permit or anything. But after a while, I ran out of money and so I stopped it all. If I do manage to get water, I swear I’ll give up the smuggling.”⁴⁵

For this unemployed graduate, the injustice that deprives him of employment is added to that which deprives him of the water that is essential in order to work the land, engage in agriculture and get out of smuggling. Rather than being a straightforward means of income diversification

42 Khaled (name has been changed), smuggler, interview by author, Kasserine, October 2014

43 B. Hibou (ed.), *La privatisation des États* [The privatisation of the State], Paris: Karthala, 1999

44 B. Hibou, *Retrait ou redéploiement de l’État* [Withdrawal or redeployment of the State], *Critique Internationale* [International Critic], (11), 1998, pp.151–168

45 Mokhtar (name has been changed), smuggler, interview by author, Majel Belabbès, September 2014

when farming is not enough, smuggling is turning into a fatal trap that swallows up economic resources, as many smugglers resign themselves to selling plots of land, if they own any, or some livestock, in order to pay their leasing instalments, support their families, or meet healthcare costs or other welfare obligations.

From being a temporary necessity – a simple transitory phase while waiting to return to what would be seen as a normal career path – smuggling is becoming a trap and an experience that ends up being humiliating:

“You’re living with the fuel – summer and winter alike. I can feel it on me; it sticks to my skin. To empty the tanks, you have to suck it through pipes and you end up swallowing some of it. It’s not just a business – that fuel is right inside me. Even when I have a shower, I can’t get rid of the smell. I just tell myself it’s just as well I’m not married. What woman would want to live with that smell all the time?”⁴⁶

This perception of injustice and dispossession is not peculiar to unemployed graduates or the smugglers obliged to ‘buy their route’ – it is also experienced by others who are less qualified or who work in other areas of the trade, such as those who work at the *douar* (depots). Located all along the border, the *douar* depots receive the goods delivered by Algerian smugglers, mainly fuel and construction iron. The poorest live at the depots, while the better off live in the towns, in Feriyana or Kasserine, leaving one or two workers to receive the goods, ensure their disposal and guard the depot for between 60 and 80 TND per day.⁴⁷

At one of these depots in Skhirat, we met Hédi, aged 34, who was in the process of loading fuel into vehicles. After dropping out of school, Hédi did a series of odd jobs as a security guard and working on building sites in the capital, before resigning himself to coming back to Skhirat after the fall of Ben Ali. His story is far from being unique.

“Since the arrival of the monster (ghoul) of terrorism, business has gone downhill because of all the crackdowns on the border. Take last week – we spent the whole night waiting for our Algerian supplier. When he turned up, the Tunisian guards caught him, booked him and he got a 2,000 TND fine. My brothers and I ended up paying it for him. Why? Because we depend on him to survive: he takes risks so we can afford to eat. The result is that, since last week, we’ve been working to make up the money.”⁴⁸

3.2 The disconnected

Unable to meet their repayment obligations, some smugglers end up losing their vehicles, which are seized by the leasing companies. It is difficult to estimate how many people fall into this category. However, the evidence we gathered and some of the interviews we conducted testify to the correlation between the toughening of government regulations and the increase in the numbers of those who have become disconnected.

Mohamed, aged 31, has had bitter experience of this. Illiterate as a result of dropping out after just two years of primary school, smuggling is the only way he has ever earned any money. Mohamed is a member of the Ltaifiyya clan, which is very active on the border. He got involved in smuggling at the age of 15, as a porter, together with an older and more experienced cousin.

⁴⁶ Anonymous, interview by author, Majel Belabbès, September 2014

⁴⁷ Delegation of Feriyana, interviews and observations by author, September 2014

⁴⁸ Hédi, interview by author, Skhirat, September 2014

“I learned the job when I was very young. I emptied the petrol cans, loaded the car and attached the net so the cans wouldn’t move. I went everywhere with my cousin. I learned to drive on wasteland and I worked for a while as a driver. When construction iron started to be smuggled in 2006, I decided to go it alone and I got a car through a leasing deal with the help of my family.”⁴⁹

People do not go into smuggling on the basis of a simple, personal decision, especially since it involves raising considerable financial resources. In many cases, the decision is based on family considerations. In fact, in this impoverished region, entire families turn to smuggling. The whole family funds the acquisition of utility vehicles and ensures the repayments are met. This solidarity reveals a social aspect of smuggling, where the financial side represents a way of maintaining family structures and the framework of community life. The debts incurred commit not just the young smugglers, but their whole families who are involved in managing the debt together.

Mohamed, who was joined in his business by two of his younger brothers, had to hand his car over to one of them and leave the family business. This breakdown was apparently caused by his decision to marry against the wishes of his family. Having lost their support, in 2010 he had to start from scratch again, with a new leasing agreement. However, things are different now. The fall of Ben Ali led to changes in the border economy. Although some people managed to make a fortune through alcohol smuggling in the months following the end of the Ben Ali regime, this was not true for the majority, who specialised in construction iron or fuel. “In 2011, some smugglers were driving their cars with a shisha pipe at their side, with no fear or stress. There were no controls on the roads at all,” Mohamed said with irony, before continuing:

“There were people who loaded up with construction iron and went to Sidi Bouzid to sell it without even having any buyers. They’d phone me to ask if I knew anyone who wanted to buy iron. That wasn’t work, it was child’s play.”⁵⁰

The relaxation of security definitely had an influence on the value of the goods, the prices and profits being largely dependent on the risks involved. With no police restrictions in 2011 and part of 2012, the smugglers found themselves engaged in a price war that got the better of the ‘small time players’ and newcomers. They were negatively affected by the tightening of police and customs controls in 2013. The numbers of prosecutions, fines and seizures of goods increased, as smuggling was hit by the crackdown.⁵¹ According to the smugglers we interviewed, the heightened security made their trips long and difficult and the profits uncertain, due to the increased transit costs and the spread of fines paid to security services along the routes. Here’s what Mohamed, whose business has gradually been affected by this situation, said:

“Before the revolution, 10 TND did the trick, but now you have to pay 20, 30 or even 50 TND to get past. You have to pay every time. The journeys have gotten really long: it takes me eight or nine hours to get from the border to Regueb, taking detours and tracks to avoid the patrols.”⁵²

After learning that his vehicle was about to be seized as a result of a series of missed payments, in early 2014 he decided to take it covertly across the border to sell it. Since then he has been unemployed, living off the money he made from the sale, without any realistic alternative. Mohamed’s story is unlikely to be an isolated example: according to accounts collected in the

49 Mohamed (name has been changed), smuggler, interview by author, Feriyana, October 2014

50 Ibid.

51 International Crisis Group (ICG), Tunisia’s borders: Jihadism and contraband, Middle East/North Africa Report No. 148, Brussels: ICG, 2013. According to this report, prosecutions of smugglers and seizures of goods by the customs service, which were very rare in 2011, increased threefold during 2012 to 2010 levels. Likewise, smuggling operations thwarted by the National Guard numbered only 91 in 2011 and 441 in 2012, compared to 3,650 in 2010.

52 Mohamed (name has been changed), smuggler, interview by author, Feriyana, October 2014

region, leasing companies have gradually imposed prohibitive restrictions on the smugglers of Kasserine, because of the rise in outstanding debts.

3.3 The climbers

Despite the misfortunes of some, smuggling retains its power to attract because, in spite of everything, a handful of people do manage to work their way up the ladder. Ali, aged 24, whom we met in Hay Ezzouhour, is one of the young people who has succeeded in scaling the heights of the smuggling business. He started at the age of 17, as a porter alongside a neighbour who was a smuggler. Ali became a driver when his boss's business prospered and he decided to buy a third car. Transporting tyres and cigarettes, as well as fuel when these goods were scarce, Ali got into smuggling thanks to its professionalisation. He seems pleased with his situation:

“As a porter I got 10 TND per day, now I earn 50 TND – I end up with a monthly salary of 600 TND. Plus, I always have money to make phone calls, because it's my boss who pays for them. I'm happy with my situation when I see how many graduates there are who have no work after all those years of studying.”⁵³

Ali's story reflects that of a generation born after the adoption of the structural adjustment programme and deeply affected by the devaluation, in material and symbolic terms, of the old models of success – the ‘graduate’ and the ‘civil servant’. By delivering material satisfaction, however minimal, smuggling satisfies the desire for self-fulfilment among these young people who want to assert themselves as being capable of supporting their families and themselves. After dropping out of school at a very young age due to their families' difficult financial circumstances, through smuggling these young people have found a way to get by, a means of subsistence, working on a small scale on the border, looking for small rewards and social mobility, however fleeting they may be.⁵⁴

In fact, the ‘climbers’ are a product of major investment in smuggling by young people who have dropped out of school early. In this way, the development of smuggling has historically been fuelled by the failures of the education system, which is proving increasingly incapable of supporting and supervising children and young people and relieving them of the burden of poverty in this marginalised region. Strengthened by these failures, smuggling has started to produce a certain ‘type’ of individual, to use the terminology of Max Weber, characterised by the assertion of an ethos of virility and expressed, in particular, by driving powerful cars, alcohol consumption and listening to raï music. Ali talked to us enthusiastically about all the different vehicles used in smuggling, from the Peugeot 504 and 505, to the Toyota Hilux and the Isuzu D-Max, not to mention the Kairouan Isuzu (*el karwiyya*),⁵⁵ as well as the meaning of the various signals and headlight flashes exchanged between smugglers. This shows how smuggling has become normalised, inextricably linked with the youth culture of getting by in the border region.

While Ali has managed to find his way in smuggling without relying on family support, the same is not true for Mounir, aged 19, from Feriyana, whose father and uncles, originally from Skhirat, are themselves smugglers. Mounir started at the age of 12 and learned everything at his father's side, helping him from time to time, before leaving school at the age of 15 to devote himself to the business. “I did everything: porter, lookout, I learned to drive at 15 and got my driving licence at 18. Once I had my licence, my father bought me a car through a leasing deal.”⁵⁶

53 Ali (name has been changed), smuggler, interview by author, Hay Ezzouhour, October 2014

54 A large proportion of the smugglers interviewed had to leave school very early. School dropout rates have reached significant levels in the region, especially in poor rural areas.

55 This refers to vehicles made at the Isuzu factory in the town of Kairouan in central Tunisia.

56 Mounir (name has been changed), smuggler, interview by author, Feriyana, October 2014

The fact of being an ‘heir’ contributed significantly to Mounir’s rise in smuggling. He sees smuggling as a career and a craft that he learned from a very young age. There are several aspects to this craft: it involves knowing how to negotiate (at police and customs checkpoints), how to transport goods, how to find customers, and how to change products to meet fluctuations in demand and seasonal variations. Above all, it means knowing how to duck and dive, how to get on and get by.⁵⁷ Social capital, inherited by some and acquired by others, is an essential asset for the ‘climbers’ because it gives them an advantage over their rivals, although it does not protect them from commercial misadventures, hardship or other difficulties. The ‘climbers’ are the embodiment of how rooted and widespread smuggling is in the region.

3.4 The temps

As the main economic activity in the region, smuggling offers young people opportunities and a means of survival. For young people who are out of work it represents a kind of labour market, providing sporadic employment as porters or lookouts. The scarcity of work in the formal economy and the austerity of living conditions in the region leave very little choice for these young people who are the ‘foot soldiers’ of smuggling. Unemployed people looking for the means to survive, college students seeking ways of earning some money and helping their families during school holidays or *hittistes*⁵⁸ dreaming of emigration, the experiences of these temporary workers in the world of smuggling vary because they depend on the ups and downs of life and the opportunities provided by the border.

Kamel, aged 28, works in smuggling as a porter. He spends most of his time in the cafés of Feriyana, jumping into his car whenever a smuggler friend asks him for help in return for 10 or 20 TND. Kamel dreams of going to Europe, after having given it a try in 2011, in the months following the fall of Ben Ali (like 28,000 other Tunisians, most of them young people),⁵⁹ before being deported in 2013. On his return, he sought refuge in the cafés and the woods, which are frequented by many young people from Feriyana as somewhere to drink alcohol undisturbed. However, Kamel’s troubles were not yet over and he was arrested following an altercation with a police officer during one of these drinking sessions. His case was aggravated by the fact that he had consumed cannabis (*zatla*), which earned him a sentence of 11 months and 18 days in prison. He served the full sentence: “I was living abroad and then I was living in prison,”⁶⁰ he says with irony.

Since coming out of prison, Kamel has been struggling to get by and is looking for work. He contacted the delegation (*mutamadiyah*) in the hope of gaining a place on a construction scheme, but without success. He was rejected, despite his participation in the 2008 uprising, when Feriyana revolted in solidarity with the coal miners, a participation that earned him seven months imprisonment, confirmed by the amnesty certificate issued to him after the fall of the dictatorship. This certificate has been of no benefit to him whatsoever in his search for work. “I was told I came too late, that I should have come in 2011, but in 2011 I was in Italy. I went to the Constituent Assembly, I met the Kasserine Deputies, but they did nothing for me.” Resigned to his fate, he accepted a job in a vegetable oil bottling plant, but soon left, due to the 15-hour shifts.

57 For more on these skills, see M. Peraldi, *Aventuriers du nouveau capitalisme marchand. Essai d’anthropologie de l’éthique mercantile* [Adventurers in new market capitalism. An anthropological study of market ethics], in J.-F. Bayart and F. Adelhah, *Voyages du développement. Emigration, commerce et exil* [Development journeys. Emigration, business and exile], Paris: Karthala, 2007, pp.73–113

58 On the subject of *hittistes* (poor urban young people with no chance of employment) in their Algerian incarnation, see A. Allal, “Avant on tenait le mur, maintenant on tient le quartier!” *Germes d’un passage au politique de jeunes hommes de quartiers populaires lors du moment révolutionnaire à Tunis* [“Before we held the wall, now we hold the neighbourhood!” Young people from working-class neighbourhoods entering the political arena during the revolution in Tunis], *Politique Africaine* [African Politics], 121, 2011, pp.53–68

59 *Boats 4 People and Forum Tunisien des Droits Economiques et Sociaux (FTDES)* [Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights], *Violations des droits des migrants en mer 2014* [Violations of the rights of migrants at sea 2014], Tunis: FTDES, 2015

60 Kamel (name has been changed), smuggler, interview by author, Feriyana, October 2014

“It’s really hard work, from 3pm to 6am at a rate of TND 12 per day. There are lots of unemployed people here, so the employers take advantage and enforce these shifts. Some people accept it and carry on, but I couldn’t do it.”⁶¹

Since then, he has been working intermittently as a porter and earns a few dinars, while continuing to dream of leaving the country again.

In addition to the porters, lookouts are another element of this workforce that is essential to ensuring the networks can function, especially when there are valuable goods and the financial stakes are high. Some of them work regularly with the same smugglers, while others find work intermittently, when the opportunity arises. The third category of this young workforce is made up of the traders, shopkeepers and vendors at the petrol stations who, due to their ‘strategic’ positions on the main roads, are able to alert the smugglers to the movements and locations of the patrols. Mobile phones have played an important role in increasing the responsiveness of these lookout positions, as they ensure that information is passed to a larger number of operators.

Najib, aged 30, comes from Hay Ezzouhour and occasionally works as a lookout. When smugglers transporting tobacco or cigarettes contact him, he drives around by car or motorbike to monitor the road from Bouchebka to Kasserine. Like Kamel, Najib tried to emigrate, travelling through Turkey and Greece, before being arrested and sent back. Although it is not a job in the true sense of the word, the role of a lookout provides occasional work, which intersperses periods of unemployment and inactivity.

3.5 Women and the ‘suitcase trade’

The involvement of women in the border economy reveals another side to this trade, namely the ‘informal economy’. Unlike smuggling, which is carried on covertly, circumventing both customs controls and the official channels of trade and registration procedures, the fraudulent activities practised by women consist of concealment and false declarations in order to avoid paying taxes. Many young women buy goods in Tébessa, crossing the border at the Bouchebka post. Alone or accompanied, they buy clothing, cosmetics and domestic goods (curtains, blankets and kitchen utensils, for example) and return to Tunisia, hiding their purchases or passing them off as items for personal use in order to avoid paying taxes.

Whether married or single, these women usually enter this trade with the consent of their families. There is no doubt that families exercise powerful social control. For the last six years, Samira, aged 33, from Feriyana, has travelled once a fortnight to Tébessa, sometimes on her own, sometimes with her husband, also a smuggler, who organises the transport of the goods beyond the border posts when there are large volumes. The support from her husband is important to her, “...especially in a society which doesn’t always accept women travelling, doing business, negotiating etc. I’ve never had any problems, but our society is still conservative nonetheless”.⁶²

Sonia, aged 22, followed her mother into the ‘suitcase trade’. Since she dropped out of school in Year 9, she has helped her mother, who is divorced and has a business dealing in women’s clothing, shoes and perfume. Four times a week they set out at dawn and come home in the evening.

“You have to make sure you don’t spend more than a day in Tébessa; it’s not good to be away from home for longer than a day. We’d never hear the end of it from the wagging tongues. Sometimes we have to break off from shopping so we don’t miss our lift.”⁶³

61 Ibid.

62 Samira (name has been changed), woman involved in the ‘suitcase trade’, interview by author, Feriyana, October 2014

63 Sonia (name has been changed), woman involved in the ‘suitcase trade’, interview by author, Feriyana, October 2014

Reality for these women means that they have to get round economic and social restrictions. In addition to dealing with the social pressures, there are issues of trying to run a successful business and organising getting the goods across the border. “The customs officers know us – they’re used to seeing us. Sometimes they let us through, other times they demand money and we give it to them,”⁶⁴ Sonia told us. This fine balance of managing their daily lives can be likened to a ‘composition’ in the sense of the musical metaphor used by Jane Guyer, meaning the art of managing different elements and employing a range of skills.⁶⁵ Women’s experience of cross-border trade consists of hard work, managing a commercial venture and negotiating the social constraints.

To conclude this presentation of personal and community stories, it is important to highlight the danger of generalising the motivations for people’s involvement. Some individuals enter the border economy in the manner of someone taking up a profession – “work on *el h’ad*” is just a means of survival like any other in the context of economic austerity, while other people slip into it gradually in response to opportunities that arise and the material constraints to which they are subject. Some people manage to establish themselves, graft away, doing one return trip after another, while others are kicked out of the business. A small minority of young people, largely consisting of ‘heirs’, manage to climb the ladder, while the vast majority are just part of a basic workforce looking for a job, subject to fluctuating opportunities and luck.

These stories reveal a continuum represented by a range of choices within the constraints of people’s circumstances. Smuggling encompasses a number of different strategies for survival at a critical time, with a common thread of resistance to the forces of exclusion. Youth is usually considered to be a transitory period, yet in Tunisia this stage of life continues to be extended, causing the young people involved in smuggling to become real “frontiersmen”,⁶⁶ driven to battle daily against the centrifugal forces that threaten to drive them away from their activities. They are compelled to do what they can to find a precarious balance in a situation characterised by fragility, uncertainty and the expectation of change.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ J. Guyer, *La tradition de l’invention en Afrique Equatoriale [The tradition of invention in Equatorial Africa]*, *Politique Africaine [African Politics]*, 79, 2000, pp.101–139

⁶⁶ M. Agier, *La condition cosmopolite: L’anthropologie à l’épreuve du piège identitaire [The cosmopolitan condition: Anthropology put to the test by the identity trap]*, Paris: La Découverte, 2013

4. Conclusion

The security approach to controlling smuggling is, without doubt, not capable of containing this illegal cross-border activity in the absence of alternative sources of subsistence. Combating the terrorist threat requires the establishment of a regional development strategy that will generate economic and social inclusion. Securing the border also means drawing a distinction between smugglers and criminals in a way that avoids criminalising poverty and stigmatising local communities that are seeking means of subsistence.

Four years after the fall of Ben Ali, research into young smugglers in the Kasserine region plays a role more broadly in establishing the terms of the debate on social issues in Tunisia, and on the difficulty of ensuring the social rights guaranteed by the new constitution (the right to work, health, education and a life of dignity), which were the real cause of the popular uprising of 2010–2011 and the periods of unrest that preceded it. The complaints about the apathy of the authorities and the corruption of some local officials both point the finger at the absence of the state. This is a reproach that, on the surface, seems paradoxical, in a region where the presence of security forces continues to intensify. The state at issue here is the welfare state, which is accused of having abandoned this region and of making do with temporary measures, such as the construction schemes, intended to occupy young people and to assuage the anger of the local population. The region of Kasserine has one of the highest numbers of beneficiaries of these displacement tactics: 16,000 young people work on the building sites, 4,000 are part of employment assistance schemes.⁶⁷

In the absence of reflection about how the existing development model might be reorganised, public intervention is limited to ad hoc support and social programmes to reduce unemployment, creating fictitious and temporary jobs, and encouraging absenteeism, cronyism and corruption that is undermining the administration in the region. This short-term approach to managing a region in crisis, which generates acerbic remarks about a ‘population of welfare recipients’, is mortgaging the future of the young people of the region. “All this money could have been used to set up factories instead of being spent on temporary construction sites,” exclaimed one young person, only for another to respond, expressing an opinion that is becoming increasingly entrenched among many of the people we interviewed: “If the government opens factories here who’s going to harvest the olives in the Sahel or work on the building sites of Tunis and Sfax? The government wants us to be the reservoir of labour we’ve always been for other regions.”⁶⁸ In other words, the phenomenon of dispossession is extending beyond the smugglers to affect a whole region. It is the product of a historical trajectory in Tunisia, “the asymmetric development of the state”,⁶⁹ which is constantly being reinvented and is unlikely to be reversed in the near future.

⁶⁷ Figures collected during our interviews with the delegates of Kasserine and Feriyana, August and September 2011

⁶⁸ Extracts from a discussion with young people, Kasserine, September 2014

⁶⁹ “The asymmetric development of the State” is a concept developed by Béatrice Hibou and Jean-François Bayart in B. Hibou, J.-F. Bayart and H. Meddeb, *La révolution tunisienne vue des régions. Néolibéralisme et trajectoire de la formation asymétrique de l’État en Tunisie* [The Tunisian revolution viewed from the regions. Neoliberalism and the asymmetric development of the State in Tunisia], Paris: Etudes du FASOPO, 2011

