Marginalisation, insecurity and uncertainty on the Tunisian–Libyan border

Ben Guerdane and Dhehiba from the perspective of their inhabitants

SUMMARY

The towns of Ben Guerdane and Dhehiba on the border between Tunisia and Libya are among the most marginalised places in Tunisia. In mainstream national discourse, they are seen as hotbeds of cross-border smuggling and terrorism. However, the experiences of people living in these towns show that restrictions on border trade and a lack of development caused by a history of marginalisation by the centre are the main sources of insecurity, rather than the terrorist threat.

This policy brief outlines the needs and experiences of people living along the border, based on interviews with over 700 residents. It advances an analysis of the Tunisian transition from the viewpoint of its border areas. Based on its findings, the policy brief calls for the need to direct our attention away from security-centric issues and responses, and to understand and address the drivers and dynamics of conflict in Tunisia's southeastern border regions. The policy brief outlines a number of recommendations for national and local authorities and security agencies in Tunisia in doing so.

Introduction

Ben Guerdane and Dhehiba, two border towns in southeast Tunisia, provide the only official border crossings to Libya and occupy a space at the bottom of the 'hierarchy of spaces' in the country. In addition, they are now characterised by a fluid political situation, both in Libya and in Tunisia. Both are marked by regional disparities, despite their different modes of engagement in the national and cross-border economies, and are subject to a stigmatising national discourse, which conflates borders and border regions with smuggling and terrorism. This prevailing discourse, shared by the Tunisian government, donors and the media, ignores the reality, needs and expectations of people living along the border.

From the end of 2015 to spring 2016, International Alert undertook research aimed at understanding the situation in Ben Guerdane and Dhehiba from the point of view of the people living there. The methodology combined quantitative and qualitative fieldwork, targeting adults (aged 18 and over), which resulted in more than 700 people being interviewed in the two cities. This is the first such primary, field-based research of its kind to be carried out in these two locations. Half of the enumerators were themselves young people from Ben Guerdane and Dhehiba and the other half were students from the University of Sfax. All enumerators were trained by Alert.

Being part of the south: From symbols to stigmas

In Ben Guerdane and Dhehiba, feelings of marginalisation (*tahmîch*) now shape the self-image of people in these border regions and neighbourhoods, with almost 90% and 98% of inhabitants, respectively, reporting a strong sense of exclusion. This perception of marginalisation is particularly distinct among young, unemployed people and is coupled with a strong sense that they are being 'punished' by the state for historical wrongdoing. This echoes the history of southern Tunisia: first colonial history, characterised by dispossession and violence, then the postcolonial period, marked by repression of the Youssefist movement, the opposition to Habib Bourguiba within the Neo-Destour Party in the wake of the independence, and denial of the experiences of the south by the official political narrative. The result is a stark division between the collective memory of the inhabitants of these two cities and the officially held version of events represented in educational curricula, museums and so on. The result is a bitter sense of injustice, voiced by many of the inhabitants.

Inequality, insecurity and marginalisation

In both cities, disparities with other parts of the country are evident in three key areas. The first relates to the weakness of the social state, illustrated by limited and poor-quality public services and infrastructure (sewerage, water networks, health, public transport) and weak social rights (social security, access to justice). The second refers to structural mass unemployment, with rates much higher than the national average, particularly for women (where the rate is two to three times higher than the average), as well as large numbers of people in precarious employment marked by low wages and/or a casual nature. This reveals the structural weakness of institutionalised forms of integration of local economies. The third area is education, where the school dropout phenomenon overwhelmingly affects young adults: their enrolment rate is half the national average.

Five years after the revolution, the border remains a financial resource, generating jobs, mainly for youth, in the absence of other employment opportunities. In Dhehiba in particular, the border is the only means of survival. However, if networks of local and cross-border solidarity once allowed residents to keep some control over the border economy, that relative bargaining power now seems altered by the

Tunis

Mediterranean Sea

TUNISIA

Ben Guerdane

Dhehiba

ALGERIA

LIBYA

chaos in Libya and the disorganisation of the border area. This is particularly the case in Ben Guerdane, where there is increasing competition between new and old actors who deploy there, laying claim to income, legitimacy and control.

Governing the periphery: Between laissez–faire and assistance

Modes of governance have changed little in the period since the revolution, based on laissez-faire policies and minimal state assistance. The state adopts an exclusively security-oriented approach to the border area, at the cost of increased corruption and a growing uncertainty among residents, and fails to fulfil their need for economic and social security. Thus, over 90% of survey respondents in this area say that restrictions on border trade and lack of development are the main sources of insecurity today, rather than the terrorist threat.

For a large majority of the population, these uncertainties are coupled with a great distrust towards political elites and in particular towards the elected representatives of the region. They promote the emergence of a space for protest and dissent largely independent of traditional spaces and mechanisms for doing so, such as the political organisations of the left and the Tunisian General Labour Union. To a certain extent, this space has been filled by local civil society, including youth-led organisations and initiatives. However, it also seems to reinforce the attraction of Salafi jihadism for a section of the youth in Ben Guerdane.

Seen in the specific context of Tunisia's 'margins', the situation of Ben Guerdane and Dhehiba challenges the purely security-focused approach to border regions, and makes it more important than ever to accurately understand and question the endogenous causes of the terrorist phenomenon.

Recommendations

These recommendations are addressed primarily **to national and local authorities as well as security agencies**. They are also relevant to Tunisia's international partners and agencies working along the Libyan border. To ensure the inclusive development and democratic governance of the border regions, it is essential to:

Recognise regional disparities and rehabilitate the specific history of the south:

- recognise the south as a victim of systematic state exclusion and tackle the issue of regional inequality by

enforcing positive discrimination in public policy;
- recognise and commemorate historical figures and the struggle of resistance against colonialism as well as victims of the repression of Youssefism, for example, in the education curriculum, memorial sites and statues, museums and so on;
- support an academic programme of research on the national liberation movement and postcolonial history in order to break with the political instrumentalisation of history and understand and acknowledge controversial and violent episodes that mark Tunisian contemporary history; and
- facilitate and support the work of the Truth and Dignity Commission to restore truth, justice and compensation to victims of repression in Tunisia.

Invest in good governance as a means to overcome political, social and economic exclusion:

- support inclusive governance by instituting participatory processes that give marginalised populations a voice in decision-making and involve them in instituting accountability (examples include participatory budgeting processes, local elections and citizen audits for public projects);
- enhance coordination between local public institutions that understand and respond to community livelihood needs and institutions mandated with the security of the border region; and
- support non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to adopt a long-term, coordinated 'advocacy for structural reform' approach instead of a short-term, palliative individual-focused approach.

Adopt inclusive socio–economic development policies and a cohesive employment policy:

- adopt, in consultation with local communities, a regional development project able to respond to the needs of people;
- develop the agriculture sector by investing in agricultural vocational training, infrastructure, financing mechanisms and landownership reform;
- support projects that promote the collective interests of the local community by promoting mechanisms for the legalisation of social enterprise; and
- undertake transparent and socially responsible natural resource management in the region, including the management of oil, marble and salt, by involving local communities in the decision-making, reinvesting profits into the local community and employing local people.

Improve young people and women's participation in and access to resources, infrastructure and services:

- promote gender-sensitive policies at the national and local levels that support the allocation of resources for the benefit of women in disadvantaged areas, improving their access to infrastructure and services such as transport, water and reproductive health;
- build trust between state institutions and young people by establishing mechanisms that increase young people's participation in the decision-making processes of local authorities, including employment policies; and
- develop a proactive strategy to prevent the phenomenon of school dropouts, which is so prevalent in disadvantaged communities on the border.

Improve understanding of the border and border communities, including the border economy and its relationship to security:

- create an open dialogue between border communities and the central state, and commission participatory research in border regions to develop a nuanced understanding of the border, including the difference between the harmful illicit economy and the illicit economy as an essential survival strategy, and the relationship between terrorist groups and the border economy; and
- support the organisation of local dialogue forums in Ben Guerdane and Dhehiba on border governance, border economy and cross-border trade with Libya to develop policies able to take advantage of the border in the interests of all, such as the establishment of a free-trade zone.

Improve the accessibility and accountability of security provision along the border:

- promote security sector reforms (SSRs) that address corruption, lack of public communication and human rights violations as the drivers of insecurity on the Libyan border;
- support initiatives in favour of community participation in improving security based on respect for human rights, rule of law and accountability of security forces; and
- support and develop impartial academic understanding of processes of radicalisation and the individual backgrounds and perspectives of combatants in conflict zones in order

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to develop evidence-based policies aimed at countering radicalisation and rehabilitating combatants.

To international NGOs, international institutions and Tunisia's partner states, the research highlights the following recommendations:

- support SSR and social reforms that aim to improve accountability;
- prioritise bilateral and multilateral aid for youth inclusion programmes; and
- prioritise a holistic human security approach to prevent radicalisation.

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