



Life on the Edge: How Protests in Tataouine Forced Tunis to Back Down

HAMZA MEDDEB

In 2020, the marginalized border area of Tataouine in southern Tunisia was a focal point of social unrest. Protests there were a continuation of the so-called Kamour movement, which began in March 2017 and demanded jobs and regional development for Tataouine as well as the equitable distribution of the region's oil and gas revenues. In June of that year, protesters and the government reached an agreement that guaranteed the creation of jobs and a regional development fund.

Throughout 2020, however, the protesters were still demanding that the [terms of the 2017 agreement](#) be implemented. The lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic and the consequent closure of the Libyan border led to the collapse of the border economy. This came on top of the militarization of Tunisia's South to guard against the infiltration of militant extremists

from Libya. The dire situation led protesters to escalate their demands and hinder oil production in the area for months. Finally, in November, after negotiations between the protest movement and the government, the two sides came to a new agreement.

The Tataouine protests were borne from a failed Tunisian model of governance based on unbalanced relations between the center and the periphery. For decades, governments have invested less in the country's southern areas than in the northern coastal regions, hampering sustainable development. The protest movement achieved significant successes in 2020, providing an opportunity to rethink and restructure regional development in a way that could benefit both the center and the periphery.



THE STAGES OF THE KAMOUR PROTEST MOVEMENT

Over the years, Tunisians in the deprived South have periodically protested against successive governments' failures to address the region's poverty, unemployment, and poor healthcare services—problems that the COVID-19 crisis has only exacerbated. With frustration coming to a head, on May 29, 2020, Tataouine's

residents rose up in anger once again to highlight the government's broken promises to provide employment and develop the [region](#).

These protests revived the Kamour movement, named for the Kamour pumping station located 110 kilometers (68 miles) from Tataouine. The station is a crucial transit point for oil and gas by companies operating in Tunisia's desert. In April 2017, [protesters](#) occupied the facility and [formed](#) a coordination committee representing cities in the Tataouine Governorate. The movement negotiated with then prime minister Youssef Chahed's government, reaching on June 16 a fragile agreement brokered by the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT).

This 2017 [agreement](#) stipulated that oil companies operating in Tataouine would hire 1,500 people from the region. The state's environment and planting company of Tataouine would also employ an additional 3,000 people spread over three years—1,500 in 2017, 1,000 in 2018, and 500 in 2019—while the government would set up a special development fund of 80 million dinars (\$29 million) that would be allocated to the Tataouine region annually.

However, three years later, the agreement had yet to be fully implemented. In May 2020, [protesters complained](#) that out of the 4,500 jobs promised to locals, only 2,500 had been delivered (and none of these by the oil companies). The protesters also criticized

the development fund, which was merely designed to complement the self-financing capacity or credits provided by the banking sector to young entrepreneurs from Tataouine and, as such, had a very limited impact on the region at large; young entrepreneurs struggle to meet self-financing requirements and to access the banking sector.

By June, the [protesters had set up tents](#) in various parts of Tataouine, blocking roads traveled by the oil companies' trucks and replicating the 2017 sit-in. The demonstrations were largely peaceful until the arrest of the movement's spokesperson and the use of tear gas against demonstrators. The [violent security response](#) generated increased local sympathy for the protests, with more people joining the rallies. The movement escalated even further in July when protesters threatened to prevent access to the Nawara gas field.

The Kamour protest movement [differentiated](#) itself from other protests by being politically independent and focusing on specific demands related to employment and development. It relied on social media to disseminate its message but also mobilized people in the streets. The movement had no legal structure and adopted a decentralized and participatory approach. Ten protest leaders coordinated the activities of cities across the Tataouine Governorate, seeking to avoid a hierarchical leadership structure that would have facilitated repression by the authorities. The movement's participants were mostly young men disenchanted with party politics.

The Kamour movement became more radical in 2020 by [rejecting](#) the mediation of the UGTT, which had failed to guarantee the full implementation of the 2017 agreement. Negotiations in mid-August 2020 between the Kamour coordination committee and a delegation led by the ministers of energy and of employment failed to end the sit-in and resume oil and gas production. Oil companies operating in the region responded by

threatening to withdraw their concessions. They sent a letter to Tunisia's president on August 28, asking him to resolve the situation and avert unemployment for thousands of workers. This escalation risked causing the collapse of the energy sector. Protesters became increasingly concerned when the oil companies reduced the salaries of permanent staff and laid off some contract workers.

The resignation of then prime minister Elyes Fakhfakh's government in September further delayed a resolution of the crisis. But negotiations resumed in October after Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi formed a new government. This was followed by the conclusion of an accord on November 6 that fulfilled all the protesters' demands. Oil production resumed a day later, ending a four-month shutdown.

A GOVERNANCE CRISIS AND FLAWED DEVELOPMENT

The social crisis in Tataouine was fueled by Tunisia's fatally flawed governance model. It took place in a context of multiple forms of marginalization that have repeatedly provoked protests in Tunisia's interior and border regions. Near the southern border—500 kilometers (310 miles) from the capital Tunis and far from the developed coastal areas—there are no highways, railways, or airports, even though the area is rich in natural resources.

Tataouine's oil fields contribute 20 percent of Tunisia's gas output and 40 percent of its oil output. However, the region has remained severely underdeveloped with above-average unemployment, failing public infrastructure, and a stunted private sector. In 2019, Tataouine's unemployment rate was the highest in the country at 28.7 percent, almost twice the national average of 15.3 percent. Tataouine also has one of

the country's highest percentages of unemployed graduates, estimated at 58 percent in 2017. Unlike the coastal areas, schools in the South are neglected and universities in the cities offer limited work prospects for young graduates.

Post-2011 governments have sought to prioritize underdeveloped regions. They have done so by dedicating 60 percent of the funding allocated to a Regional Development Program to promote development of the interior regions. Despite this commitment, investment in the Tataouine Governorate has been negligible. An indication of the lack of implementation is the low completion rates for public projects. In Kasserine, 47 percent of projects were completed in 2015, in Kairouan 41 percent, and in Sidi Bouzid 41 percent.¹ In Medenine and Tataouine, only 7 percent of the public projects were completed in 2013.

The Tunisian Institute of Competitiveness and Quantitative Studies warned in a 2018 report that Tataouine was the governorate with the lowest level of economic attractiveness. In addition, public services were less adequate than in many other governorates. Even today, in the health sector, there are no intensive care beds in interior and border regions despite the coronavirus pandemic, and Tataouine's regional hospital has only eleven specialized doctors (the lowest number in the country).

The 2020 protests took place in a particularly harsh socioeconomic context. The rising anger in Tataouine has to be understood in light of three factors that created a systemic crisis in the governorate. The first is the long decline of the border economy because of the war in Libya and, more recently, the border's closure due to the pandemic. This decline served to aggravate the deep problems already affecting Tataouine. The border's closing meant the loss of thousands of jobs and deprived the region's inhabitants of valuable income.



The second is the **increasing militarization** of the region, beginning in 2015. This followed attacks by Tunisian extremist groups trained in Libya. The heavy-handed policies have not only further harmed the border economy but also have led to a crisis of pastoralism. The military has shut down smuggling routes—significantly reducing cross-border activities—and placed large areas under military restrictions. This is especially true in Remada in southern Tataouine, where the restrictions have provoked anger, particularly among **youths**. Families in the region depend on border trade and smuggling, and the state has failed to provide alternatives. Every time a smuggler is shot by the military, the situation becomes highly volatile. Relations are also tense between herdsman and the army because militarized zones have reduced grazing areas for animals.

A third aspect of the systemic crisis in Tataouine is the enduring tribal land tenure system. **Thirty percent of land** is subject to collective tenure and is managed by tribal councils. This system has hindered privatization, and the fragmentation of land ownership among tribes and communal disputes over land have discouraged investment, obstructing the development of alternatives to oil and gas.

The result of all this has been a multilayered crisis and a feeling among the population that the state's security approach is only reinforcing neglect of the region. According to one survey, **around 90 percent** of inhabitants in the two border towns Ben Guerdane and Dhehiba feel a strong sense of exclusion, echoing a long history of marginalization in Tunisia's South. This crisis has intensified the factors driving migration. Thousands of young people from southern border areas have **migrated** or tried to migrate to Europe in 2020. An estimated **11,000 undocumented migrants**, many from the South, reached Italian shores between January 1 and October 31. During the same period, the Tunisian authorities arrested 11,900 migrants before they could

make the crossing. A comparison with the figures from 2019 shows how significant illegal migration was in 2020. In 2019, 2,592 Tunisian migrants reached Italy, while 3,588 were intercepted.

The impact of Tunisia's broken governance and development model is particularly noticeable at the local level where the continued lack of human and financial resources has increasingly degraded the quality of public services. Municipalities don't benefit from oil and gas production, as tax revenues go to the central government instead of being reinvested in the region. That is why residents have accused the state and foreign companies of **stealing** their wealth.

Given Tataouine's geographical isolation, unemployment has been exacerbated by the absence of infrastructure capable of attracting local or foreign investment. Moreover, extractive industries have generally been unconcerned with sustainable job creation, and there has been little effort to explore alternatives to hydrocarbons. Nor does the governorate have the practical means of embarking on large development projects. That is why protesters in the South have insisted on securing regional development funds from the government.

When institutions for this purpose have been put in place, they have come up short. The Corporate Social Responsibility Fund—created by oil companies operating in the region to empower communities, fund projects, provide **vocational training**, and help diversify the region's economy—has failed to spur development. It has been insufficient for meeting the region's needs, and its management is highly politicized. The fund's 18 million dinars (\$7 million) is under the supervision of Tataouine's governor, who has discretionary power to influence decisions on projects and areas to fund. Decentralization and local tax reform could help local authorities to collect more revenues, which would be crucial for a regional development strategy. The absence

of instruments allowing development makes Tataouine a typical case of what has been called the “[development of underdevelopment](#)”—a situation in which the social and economic center of a country exploits the resources of peripheral regions, locking the latter into dynamics that exacerbate underdevelopment.

The November 2020 [agreement signed](#) between the protesters and a delegation of the central government represents the first time that a Tunisian protest movement has engaged in formal negotiations with government representatives. This shows the capacity of the Kamour movement to impose a balance of power between the center and the periphery. Negotiations took place in Tataouine, not in Tunis. The movement’s challenge was to overcome the divisions among its different components and devise a strategy. Securing the support of the local community in Tataouine was all the more challenging after the decision of oil companies to lay off short-term contract workers and substantively reduce the salaries of permanent workers. These measures put pressure on the Kamour coordination committee by threatening to alienate the movement from the local population and angering those working for oil and gas companies.

The committee responded by [consulting](#) with civil society representatives, parliamentarians from the region, local experts, and the regional branches of national organizations such as the UGTT, UTICA (the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade, and Handicrafts), the Lawyers Association, and the Tunisian Association for Agriculture and Fisheries. These consultations led to the creation of a delegation comprising representatives of these bodies to speak for Tataouine in negotiations with the state. The move had two aims: to consolidate support from local civil society organizations and to show the government that the Kamour coordination committee was neither isolated nor intent on hijacking the region’s future by acting in Tataouine’s name

without real representation. The broad-based nature of the delegation also met a government condition that the delegation speak for a cross-section of Tataouine’s inhabitants.

Although the agreement met most of the protesters’ demands, they raised many concerns about the way the commitments would be implemented. The annual fund totaling 80 million dinars, agreed to in 2017 and dedicated to developing the region, [will be managed](#) by the Tataouine Regional Council, which represents key state administrations in the region—education, health, infrastructure, and agriculture—and is led by the governor. The fund is supposed to finance 1,000 projects to encourage entrepreneurship and diversification of the region’s economy. The council will have to guarantee transparent management to reassure local communities. This will help remove doubts about whether a government body, acting for a state that has long failed to invest adequately in the South, is willing and capable of driving a process that would have a major impact on the region’s development.

A second commitment of the agreement, namely that the government and oil companies would hire more people from Tataouine, also raised concerns. With no margin for maneuver, the government chose the same core strategy as successive post-2011 governments—to create more jobs in the environment and planting company. This is because the region’s anemic private sector currently offers few options for job creation, and ending public sector employment schemes right now could therefore threaten social peace. According to the accord, the environment and planting company of Tataouine will hire 1,000 people—on top of the 2,500 previously employed—while the oil companies will hire 285 people. Of the 285 people, however, 215 were to be immediately hired by December 31, 2020, and this did not occur because of delays in the recruitment process—therefore generating distrust.



The government will also help generate small and medium enterprises in Tataouine by offering loans to finance the projects of one hundred young entrepreneurs (for a total of 2.2 million dinars, or \$800,000). But while this could bolster employment, establishing and sustaining these projects will be a challenge. Entrepreneurship depends on the availability of business opportunities and local economic dynamism, which largely do not exist in Tataouine. There is a serious risk that if expanding projects and encouraging entrepreneurship fails, it will only consolidate Tataouine's reliance on oil. Furthermore, without a regional development strategy based on attracting large non-oil investment to foster private enterprise, such piecemeal endeavors are unlikely to be effective. Reforming land tenure is essential in this regard, as it is the first step toward improving the region's attractiveness.

If the challenges and risks can be mitigated, implementation of the November agreement could become an opportunity to rethink and restructure regional development to better integrate peripheral areas of the South with the center. The government's unprecedented concessions signal that a new and inclusive process of development is underway.

CONCLUSION

Despite the Kamour movement's victory, the unemployed of Tataouine are still awaiting the results. The wave of social unrest in 2020 was a reminder that the government's failure to carry through on its promises might again provoke discontent. The agreement's implementation has to be closely monitored in a socioeconomic climate that has deteriorated because of the coronavirus pandemic.

How will the state respect its commitments in the face of an expected recession? The protesters' interruption of oil production cost the oil companies 374 million

dinars (\$136 million), and the economic contraction aggravated by the COVID-19 crisis was estimated at 9 percent in 2020. A recession will reduce state revenues and further degrade public services such as education, health, transportation, and infrastructure—services already suffering from a dearth of human and financial resources.

Another obstacle is the state's capacity to complete projects—which requires removing bureaucratic regulations that have caused delays—and to manage and coordinate different parts of the agreement. The region needs an agile administration and highly qualified bureaucrats. These are lacking because of administrative overcentralization and the absence of public sector reform.

A serious challenge will also be securing development spending by oil companies when oil prices have fallen and there has been a tightening of investment in energy because of the pandemic and a global economic recession. Traditionally, Tunisia hasn't been attractive to oil companies because oil is not exported but rather sold to the state, which means lower profits and payment delays. And the deteriorating business environment in the South, protests, and accusations that the energy sector is opaque have not helped the situation.

Finally, what began in Tataouine will not stay there. The protest movement has encouraged other marginalized regions to voice their own grievances. Once the agreement was concluded in Tataouine, the governorates of Gabes, Gafsa, and Kasserine began demanding similar arrangements. This trend will pose tremendous challenges for the government, both in terms of negotiations and the public spending needed to reach similar agreements.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hamza Meddeb is a nonresident scholar at the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, where his research focuses on economic reform, the political economy of conflicts, and border insecurity across the Middle East and North Africa.

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NOTES

- 1 “Development Strategy: The Regional Component, Volume 2,” Ministry of Development, Investment and International Cooperation (MDIIC), 2016.

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