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SEPTEMBER 2020

The Volatile Tunisia-Libya Border: Between Tunisia's Security Policy and Libya's Militia Factions

Hamza Meddeb

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Hamza Meddeb

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Publications Department
1779 Massachusetts Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20036
P: + 1 202 483 7600
F: + 1 202 483 1840
CarnegieEndowment.org

Carnegie Middle East Center
Emir Bechir Street, Lazarieh Tower
Bldg. No. 2026 1210, 5th flr.
Downtown Beirut, P.O.Box 11-1061
Riad El Solh, Lebanon
P: + 961 1 99 15 91
F: + 961 1 99 15 91
Carnegie-MEC.org

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CONTENTS

Summary

The 2010–2011 uprisings disrupted a long-standing informal arrangement governing border trade between Tunisia and Libya. Over the following decade, as Libya disintegrated into mutually hostile fiefdoms, Tunisia maintained its unity, transitioned from authoritarian to democratic rule, and increasingly shunned official dealings with competing Libyan power centers. As such, grassroots cross-border agreements initiated by and between nonstate actors became the norm, albeit with the acquiescence of the Tunisian state. Yet these agreements have failed to constitute a sustainable mechanism for the trade that Tunisia's eastern borderlands need for survival.

Key Themes

- Since 2014, Tunisia's eastern borderlands have faced three major challenges: fragmentation of the security landscape in western Libya, a frequent interruption of cross-border oil supply caused by Libya's economic hardships, and Tunis's heavy-handed approach to border security. Together, these three phenomena have seriously disrupted the region's economy, which was largely dependent on cross-border trade and smuggling, leading to sporadic social unrest.

- Realizing that it had to alleviate the pressure bearing down on the borderlands, Tunis began to allow ad hoc civil society groups as well as local municipalities to engage in grassroots initiatives and people-to-people diplomacy of the sort that resulted in cross-border trade agreements with localized Libyan power centers.

- Increasingly, Tunis began to play a participatory role in the forging of such cross-border trade agreements. This gave the agreements in question an asymmetrical quality, with the Tunisian side represented by a mix of municipal council members and state representatives and the Libyan side represented by municipal councils and leaders of local powerful nonstate groups.

Recommendations

- Tunis should strengthen and expand its border-related security cooperation with the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA), the main power broker in western Libya. This would serve to address the country's security concerns more than isolationist measures would. The government should also work with the GNA to establish a free trade zone straddling the two countries' border. This would imbue merchants with confidence and stimulate trade.

- Tunis should encourage border cities' municipal councils to broaden their grassroots agreements with their Libyan counterparts to encompass cultural and educational matters, not just trade. This would deepen personal relationships, which are critical to the success of inter-city diplomacy.

- Tunis should oversee the often uncoordinated involvement of various official bodies—including ministries, the customs authority, and parliamentary committees—alongside municipal councils in concluding asymmetrically negotiated cross-border accords. This would increase coordination between border city municipalities and Tunis and also strengthen the latter's ties to power centers across western Libya, enhancing Tunisia's security.

Introduction

Trade between Tunisia and its neighbor Libya, which had flourished for over two decades, faltered with the 2010–2011 uprisings that engulfed both countries. Worse was in store—trade declined again in 2014, when Libya's internal conflict intensified and the western part of the country fell under the control of an assortment of armed groups.[1] In 2015, Tunisia, which had undergone a relatively smooth transition from authoritarian to democratic rule, enacted stringent border security measures.[2] This development further impinged on the economy of Tunisia's eastern borderlands, which had long relied on procuring cheap goods from Libya. The resulting uncertain and fluid trade situation has given rise to grassroots cross-border arrangements, whereby Tunisian ad hoc civil society groups or municipal council representatives negotiated trade agreements with Libyan municipal councils and politico-military factions that wield power on the ground.[3]

Such agreements stem from a mutual recognition on the part of borderland Tunisians and Libyans that bilateral trade is imperative to their economic sustenance and that some sort of regulation of the activity is needed. Notably, the government in Tunis has generally acquiesced in such arrangements. For all its security concerns, Tunisia cannot afford to seal its border with Libya, as that would shatter its economy, which might in turn lead to social upheaval. As for the Libyan factions that hold sway in the western parts of the country, trade with Tunisia provides an economic means of shoring up their hard-won autonomy.

Yet most agreements in question have turned out to be limited in both scope and duration. From the Tunisian perspective, improving this fraught state of affairs is imperative. Libya shows no signs of merging into a unitary state, yet Tunisia's already impoverished borderlands cannot endure the precarious and uncertain economic situation for much longer. The Tunisian authorities will have to strike a balance between their security concerns and the borderlands' economic necessities.

Cross-Border Trade Before the Arab Spring

In February 1988, following years of closure due to political tensions, then Tunisian president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and then Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi reopened their countries' shared border for mobility and trade.[4] Over the next two decades, Libya became a major trading partner for Tunisia. Official trade was mainly the preserve of Tunisian companies involved in agribusiness and construction. However, informal trade played a more important role, with two channels of operation undergirding the bustling cross-border economy: a quasilegal trading route referred to as "the line" (*al-khat*), which made use of an official border crossing for transactions that were themselves conducted unofficially, and smuggling routes known in the region as *al-contra*, in reference to contraband.[5] Tunisia's border economy was tightly controlled by the country's security services, which protected politically connected merchants, smugglers, and currency dealers. Permission to conduct trade, whether quasilegally through *al-khat* or ostensibly illegally through *al-contra*, was tied up with prospective merchants' acceptance of an informal system characterized by clientelist relations.[6]

Through "the line," consumer products, household equipment, and foodstuffs made their way from Libya to Tunisia, principally through the Ras Jedir border crossing.[7] Customs officials often deliberately underassessed the value of these goods, charging merchants lower tariffs in exchange for kickbacks. Sometimes the goods were not registered at all, meaning that their value was never assessed, and the only payment made was a bribe from the traveler to border officials. The arrival in Tunisia of imported goods from China and other east Asian countries in the first decade of this century and the transformation of Libya into a regional hub for transit following the lifting of international sanctions in 2003 boosted this illegal trade.[8]

In contrast, the smuggling routes of *al-contra* were utilized by networks wishing to bypass Ras Jedir. Goods transported across the border in this manner included tobacco, gold, foreign currency, large quantities of consumer products, and subsidized gasoline from Libya to Tunisia, as well as alcohol and pharmaceutical products from Tunisia to Libya. *Al-contra* was profitable but riskier than *al-khat*; in order to avoid running into trouble with border guards, smugglers had to establish strong connections with higher-ups in the security services. This was time-consuming—and costly, given the bribes involved. Merchants of limited means tended to choose "the line."

Both *al-khat* and *al-contra* enabled Tunisia to maintain its coast-centric development model. Both channels tolerated circumventing authority, which served to mollify the local, demonstrably disadvantaged population. In other words, rather than launch development programs in the eastern borderlands, Ben Ali's regime elected to permit smuggling and cross-border informal trade in exchange for quiescence. From a social and economic perspective, smuggling turned into a boon for a select group of unemployed or underemployed young men—whether high school dropouts, university graduates, or public sector employees—who in turn benefited the borderlands.[9] *Al-contra* smugglers were required only to shun narcotics and weapons.

The dual-track arrangement worked. As a source of income for countless inhabitants of economically deprived regions in southeastern Tunisia, cross-border trade through both channels led to the sort of growth the state was unable to generate itself without a massive public investment program, which was not an option for a regime eager to keep its debt and budgetary deficit from ballooning.[10] The various networks utilizing *al-khat* and *al-contra* wove themselves into supply and distribution chains across Tunisia (see map 1), forging links with markets and *souq*s in every governorate of the country.

MAP 1

Cross-Border Trade Routes in Tunisia

Inevitably, what was by all appearances an informal (and, in the case of *al-contra*, illegal) economy became part of Tunisia's formal economy. Bribes and protection fees collected by the security services provided them with an incentive to remain loyal to the regime, which itself received kickbacks as part of the arrangement.[11]

The 2011 uprisings in Tunisia and Libya disrupted the two countries' shared border economy. New smuggling networks arose on both sides of the border, especially in Libya, where ascendant anti-Qaddafi forces froze out longtime local merchants and smugglers who had maintained close ties to the old regime. Fierce competition between these new smuggling networks caused prices to decline until, by 2013, profits were negligible.[12] Yet many on either side of the border remained as desperate as ever to conduct trade. Their livelihoods, and those of many in their communities, depended on it.

Tunisia's Eastern Borderlands: No Shortage of Bad News

Since 2014, when Libya effectively crumbled as a unitary state, Tunisia's borderlands have faced three major, and increasingly overlapping, challenges. First, the fragmentation of the security landscape in western Libya led to periodic fighting between various groups over the control of border crossings and smuggling routes.[13] Such fighting significantly derailed trade, with particularly adverse consequences for Tunisian merchants who were subject to the whims of the militia that controlled the Libyan side of Ras Jedir. These merchants often fell prey to extortion at the hands of other militias controlling smuggling routes. Second, Libya's ongoing banking crisis, which erupted in 2016 due to falling oil production and revenues, decreased Libyans' purchasing power, caused a spike in corruption, and made Tunisian merchants and traders even more vulnerable to shakedown operations at the hands of Libyan militias.[14] Third, the heavy-handed approach to border security pursued by Tunisian authorities intent on preventing a spillover of the Libyan conflict made several smuggling routes impassable and led to a prolonged closure of Ras Jedir, choking off both traditional channels of trade—*al-contra* and "the line."

The result of all this is a ravaged border economy and an impression among many Tunisian merchants and smugglers that Tunis is focused on the security of the state more than the security of the state's citizens.[15] Trade with Libya, on which so many inhabitants of the borderlands have traditionally depended, has become prohibitively costly, and ordinary Tunisians do not have the means to protect themselves and their merchandise from extortionist armed factions.[16] Only well-connected merchants and smugglers have managed to operate unhindered during these past several years, a phenomenon that has further concentrated wealth and power in the hands of a select few.

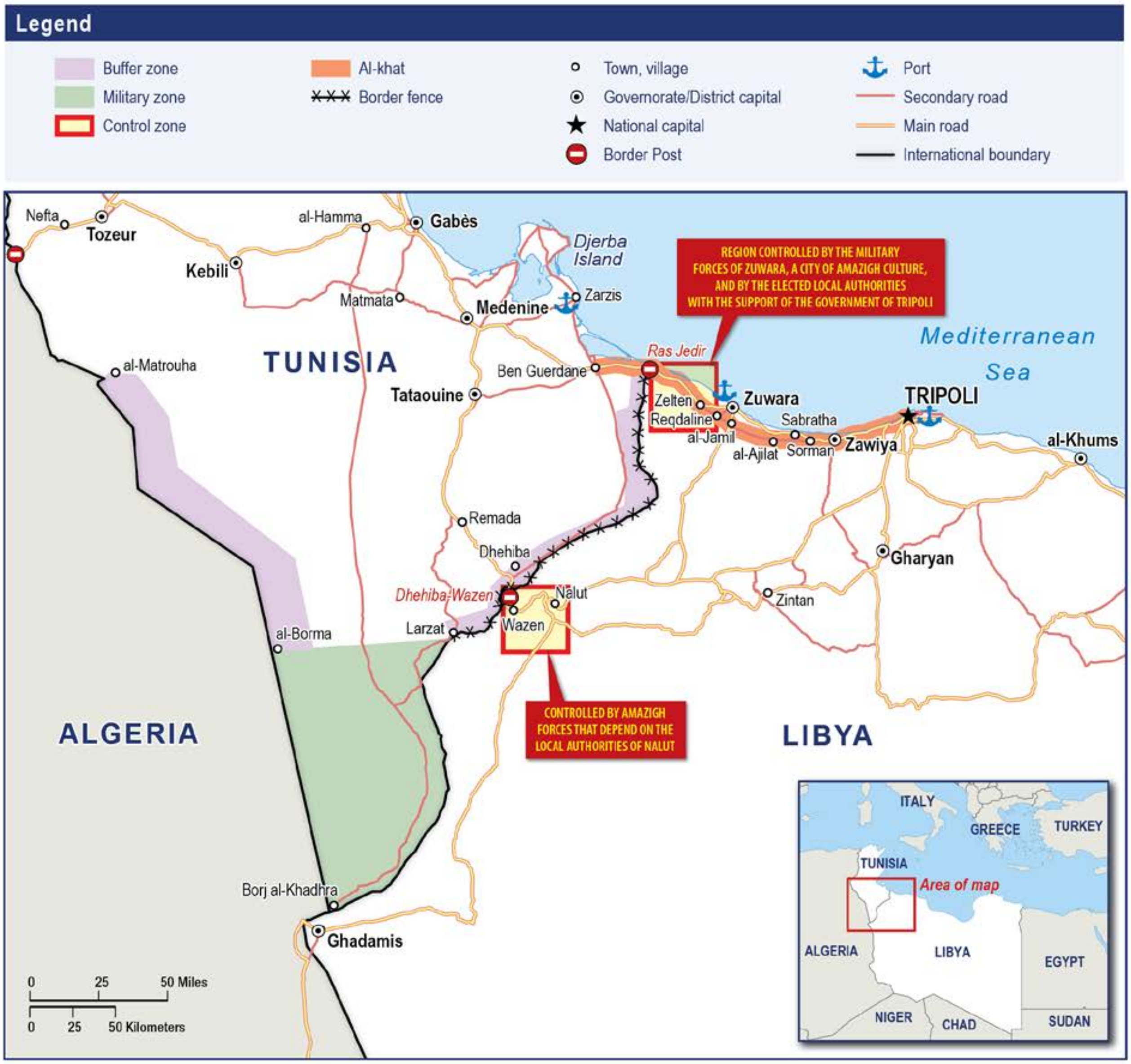
Border Crossings, Identity Politics, and Militias

In western Libya, the fall of Qaddafi and the simultaneous dissolution of central authority led many local communities to jockey for their positions, aiming to become power centers and secure access to economic resources. Competition over access to the border reactivated historical rivalries, in particular between Arabs and Amazigh, an ethnically indigenous subgroup that predominates in several cities and towns near the border with Tunisia.[17] Qaddafi's regime had used border trade to consolidate its power, co-opting and privileging certain tribes and social groups over others. Predictably, such a divide-and-rule strategy gave rise to grievances among sectors of the population that were denied a cut of the spoils. The community discriminated against most consistently in this fashion was the Amazigh.

Following the toppling of Qaddafi, the Amazigh city of Zuwara, which was politically marginalized and excluded from the border economy throughout his reign, came to the fore. Zuwara's militia seized control of Ras Jedir and officially annexed the border post to the administrative zone under the control of the municipality of Zuwara (see map 2). This constituted an important step toward establishing the city as a true power center in the increasingly fractious country. The rise of Zuwara, which is nominally under the authority of the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) but enjoys a wide measure of autonomy, had a negative effect on the livelihoods of merchants and smugglers from nearby Tunisian towns such as Ben Guerdane. As explained by a wholesaler from Ben Guerdane, the redrawing of the politico-military landscape has reshaped the border economy. "Our business partners have always been Arabs from the small cities of the west: Zelten, al-Jamil, and Reqdaline," he said. "The problem now is that Zuwara is controlling the border post. Those who were influential in business are now marginalized militarily and those who now control the ground militarily want to take their revenge in business. This is creating tensions in Libya and inevitably impacting us."[18] In order to do business with their traditional trading partners from Zelten, al-Jamil, Reqdaline, and elsewhere, Tunisian Arab merchants have to contend with the fact that the Amazigh Zuwarans, with whom their relations are strained, control the border post.

MAP 2

Border Control in Tunisia



In fact, control of border crossings has become a strategic element of Amazigh sociopolitical advancement. In Nalut, another Amazigh town, the local militia has taken over the nearby Dhehiba-Wazen border crossing. (Ras Jedir and Dhehiba-Wazen are the only border crossings between Tunisia and Libya, with the former accounting for much more traffic than the latter.) In the same vein, Amazigh armed groups have set up checkpoints along smuggling routes. To counter Amazigh control over Ras Jedir and Dhehiba-Wazen, a group of western Arab cities in Libya led by Zintan toyed with the notion of opening a new crossing on land given to them by the Qaddafi regime and located along the border. However, concluding that it would lead to prolonged and potentially ruinous conflict, the cities ended up shelving the idea.[19]

For many Tunisian merchants, the problem transcended Zuwara. Those who used to operate between Ben Guerdane and Zelten, a Libyan city located 30 kilometers (18.6 miles) from the Tunisian border, for example, now had to pass through several checkpoints controlled by various Libyan militias, both Arab and Amazigh, along the main route. Extortion of Tunisian merchants quickly became common at such checkpoints, and the risks were high; merchants could have lost their goods and even their lives. The number of checkpoints reflected the extent of conflict near the border, control of which was actively sought by the various armed factions operating in the area. That such groups frequently rebranded themselves and changed their alliances only confused matters.[20]

Interruption of Oil Supply

Tunisia's eastern borderlands have suffered a great deal from the frequent interruption of oil production in Libya. Since 2014, Libyan militias have on several occasions fought for control of oil installations, causing production companies to suspend operations for prolonged periods. The fall of oil prices since 2014 caused a further decline in state revenues, a sharp decrease in foreign exchange reserves, and a monetary crisis.[21] Cash-strapped armed groups began to use fraudulent letters of credit to transfer money outside Libya without supplying the Libyan market with goods, which has undermined the border economy and drastically limited opportunities for Tunisian traders and smugglers.[22] Shortages of goods, inflation, and the monetary crisis combined to disrupt Libya's economy and as a consequence further hindered Tunisian-Libyan trade.

At times, decisions by the Tripoli-based GNA, which Tunis recognizes as the legitimate government of Libya, have exacerbated borderland Tunisians' woes. In 2017 the GNA approved the establishment of a security force by Libya's National Oil Corporation to combat the smuggling of gasoline across the border. (Zuwara, which enjoys a steady stream of revenue thanks to seaborne smuggling of gasoline to Malta and Italy, did not object to the development.) The force had some success, which created a gasoline shortage throughout the southeastern Tunisian borderlands.[23] In June 2018, having reached the end of their tether, Tunisian merchants and smugglers staged a series of mass protests against trade disruptions like the deterioration of the security situation on the Libyan side, which caused frequent racketeering and seizure of goods; mistreatment at the hands of armed groups; the decisions of the GNA; and Tunisian authorities' neglect of the borderlands. In Ben Guerdane, protesters damaged vehicles with Libyan license plates and blocked the road to the Ras Jedir crossing, which the Tunisian authorities subsequently closed. It took several days to restore order, but even then the problem was not resolved. One smuggler on the Tunisian side explained it in the following manner: "Gasoline from Libya can cost 40 DT [Tunisian dinar], the same price as at a gas station. So we can't work. For us there is simply no market."[24]

Securitization at the Expense of the Local Economy

Tunisia's increased security measures have adversely affected borderland communities dependent on both trade through Ras Jedir and smuggling for their survival. With each and every security incident that bore a connection to Libya, the Tunisian authorities further restricted cross-border activity. For example, in 2013, a series of assassinations of Tunisian political figures by Tunisian perpetrators who fled to Libya prompted Tunis to ramp up security measures in the border regions. The Tunisian military was even tasked with establishing a buffer zone around Tunisia's southern tip, where its borders with Libya and Algeria nearly converge.

A turning point in Tunisia's security policies toward Libya occurred in 2015.[25] In mid-June of that year, Tunisian consular staff in Tripoli were kidnapped by a Libyan militia in response to the arrest of one of its leaders in Tunis. Although Tunisia did not go so far as to seal the border—Ras Jedir remained open—it put a stop to all nonessential movement of people and goods from Libya into its territory. A series of terrorist attacks in late 2015 led the Tunisian government to shore up security even further by digging a ditch along half of the country's 500-kilometer (300-mile) border with Libya.[26] This development shut off several smuggling routes.

Tunisia officially closed the Ras Jedir border crossing in February 2016, prompted by the deterioration of the security situation in Libya following a series of U.S. bombings on a training camp run by the self-proclaimed Islamic State group in the northern Libyan city of Sabrata.[27] The decision proved to be one step too far as massive protests erupted in Ben Guerdane. Shortly thereafter, a more organized general strike was called to protest government neglect, growing corruption among Tunisian security forces, and the lack of cross-border arrangements with Libyan militias to ensure both trade and protection for Tunisian merchants in Libya. At first, the authorities in Tunis seemed inclined to relent. However, as though to confirm their worst fears, a jihadi group from Libya launched an armed attack on Ben Guerdane in March.[28] The group was repelled but at significant loss to the town's security forces and civilians. The Ras Jedir crossing was not reopened until June 2016, and even then only in a limited capacity. There seemed to be no end to the local population's economic plight.

Grassroots Initiatives—and Their Limitations

When traditional politicking between state representatives, or "diplomacy with a tie," falls short, grassroots initiatives often pick up the slack.[29] This is very much what happened in the Tunisian borderlands once the Tunisian state became consumed with security matters and began to give short shrift to arrangements governing cross-border trade. Beginning in 2016, when Tunisia's heightened security measures first started to strangle the border economy, a variety of ad hoc Tunisian groups took it upon themselves to negotiate trade agreements with Libyan municipalities and tribal councils. These groups included the Tunisian-Libyan Brotherhood Association, the Association of Traders of Ben Guerdane, committees of civil society activists, and even members of parliament acting in a personal capacity.[30] Representing small-scale merchants who cannot afford a long-lasting closure of the border post, mistreatment, and high protection fees imposed by Libyan armed groups, these trade associations launched their initiatives under the umbrella of what came to be known as "popular diplomacy."[31]

In late 2016, for example, Tunisian merchants and truck drivers balked at new customs taxes levied by Libyan authorities as well as restrictions on the smuggling of gasoline. Merchants organized a two-month sit-in under the slogan "Let Ben Guerdane live," and called on the governor of Medenine Governorate (in which Ben Guerdane is located) to intercede on their behalf.[32] Eventually, a delegation from Ben Guerdane, comprising traders, civil society figures, and even a high-status member of parliament representing the governorate of Medenine, went to Libya. The delegation from Ben Guerdane reached an agreement with representatives of nine western Libyan cities. The agreement was signed in Zawiya, a city on the northwestern Libyan coast, on January 2, 2017. According to its provisions, Tunisian merchants were allowed to import at one time tax-free goods capped at 4,000 Libyan dinars (just under $3,000) per day from Libya and transport up to 150 liters (40 gallons) of gasoline through Ras Jedir.[33]

However, Zuwara refused to consent to the agreement, as it was angling to become the Tunisians' sole interlocutor on the Libyan side and also had its sights set on a security deal with the Tunisian state as part of the overall arrangement. A member of the Ben Guerdane delegation described the situation thus:

> In January 2017, before heading to Zawiya, we stopped by Zuwara. Our interlocutors there made it clear that they have requests related to security issues. We said that security is beyond the scope of our initiative. We don't represent the Tunisian state. We are a local and popular initiative and we want to negotiate a cross-border trade agreement. However, we offered to liaise with the Tunisian authorities and communicate Zuwara's requests.[34]

Couching its opposition in terms of respect for state sovereignty, Zuwara accused the nine Libyan cities that were signatories of hijacking the role of the GNA. Given that Zuwara controlled the Libyan side of Ras Jedir, its position was hardly without consequence. Moreover, Zuwara was supported by Libya's national oil company, which denounced the agreement as an attempt by Tunisian authorities to "legalize smuggling."[35]

Zuwara's opposition thwarted the Zawiya agreement. To meet the city's security-related conditions, or at least some of them, the Ben Guerdane delegation enlisted the aid of the Tunisian government. The latter dispatched the ministers of civil society relations, public sector reforms, and regional development, as well as a customs official to the border region, in order to negotiate a security portion of the agreement with the Zuwarans. The revised accord, an asymmetrical affair in which the delegation from Ben Guerdane and the customs official represented the Tunisian side and municipal councils' representatives and tribal leaders represented the Libyan side, was signed by Zuwara along with the nine other original Libyan cities on January 17, 2017.

By this time, the Tunisian authorities had come to realize that, precisely in order for a security-oriented approach not to harm the economy or provoke social unrest, they would have to facilitate or at least allow regular cross-border commerce of the sort that would ease borderland communities' increasingly desperate situation. In 2017, a high-ranking security official floated the idea of a top-down solution, whereby the state would revive long-dormant Tunisian tribal identity in order to use local tribes as interlocutors with Libyan tribal and municipal councils. His reasoning was that, in the past, tribal agreements had proven durable. For example, in the nineteenth century, a powerful tribal confederation in modern-day southeastern Tunisia, called the Werghemma alliance, used to conclude agreements with tribal confederations based in modern-day western Libya over issues related to water, pastoralism, and trade. The 2017 proposal also took into account that Tunisian political parties and even certain municipal councils had expressed support for one or another of the main factions in the Libyan conflict, with Islamists backing the GNA and Arab nationalists supporting the rival coalition based in Tobruk in Libya's east. And it rested on the assumption that, conversely, the newly revived tribes of Tunisia would, at the behest of a central government that controlled them, maintain a studied neutrality when it came to Libyan politics. However, the proposal, which made its way into discussions at the highest security service levels but was never made public, failed to gain traction.[36] A state that had sought to weaken tribal affiliation in favor of an overarching national ethos hardly wished to revive tribal identities and endow tribal councils with political authority.

Instead of engineering top-down solutions, Tunis continued to facilitate grassroots initiatives, particularly by helping to resolve thorny security issues—hence the involvement of the aforementioned ministers in the revised Zawiya agreement. Meanwhile, grassroots initiatives to spur and regulate cross-border trade entered a new phase in 2018. That year, Tunisia held its first free and fair municipal elections since the 2011 transition to democracy.[37] Municipal councils, whose members were previously appointed to their positions by the governor and the political parties represented in parliament, were now elected by inhabitants of the municipalities themselves. Whereas the central government in Tunis was mainly concerned with the security situation and containing spillover from the Libyan conflict, the borderlands' municipal councils, now staffed entirely by local, elected individuals, proved more focused on creating conditions that were conducive to economic activity and local development.

In one sense, the timing of the elections in May 2018 was favorable, as the aforementioned January 2017 agreement fell apart one month later. Throughout June and July 2018, residents of Ben Guerdane held large and spirited demonstrations. They blocked the approach to Ras Jedir, denouncing trade policies that they considered favorable to the Libyans as well as the mistreatment of Tunisian merchants on the Libyan side of the border. The new Ben Guerdane municipal council, bolstered by its status as a popularly elected body, sprang into action. The first order of business was to convince the Zuwarans to renegotiate the agreement yet again, this time in such a manner that it addressed locals' concerns.

The attempt succeeded. The Ben Guerdane and Zuwara councils, seeing eye-to-eye on several issues, made amendments to the agreement that served to placate the protesters and established a joint committee comprised of members of both bodies to ensure follow up. Yet it is instructive that—once again—the intervention of the Tunisian central government was needed for matters of security coordination with the Libyan side, including the reopening of Ras Jedir, which took place one month later.[38]

In the final analysis, what emerges from an examination of Tunisia's experiment with grassroots cross-border initiatives is a realization that municipal councils and other local bodies in Tunisia are capable of finding common ground with their Libyan counterparts. The problem is that their agreements are invariably circumscribed in scope and limited in duration. Even if intended as long lasting, the agreements have turned out to be no more than a series of stopgap measures. Their architects have come to recognize this drawback and the disturbing possibility that it is unavoidable. As expressed by a member of the Ben Guerdane municipal council, "We tried to clear *al-khat*, which is strategic for the city. However, building a comprehensive agreement with Libyan counterparts is beyond our capacities. All these agreements are improvised. They are short-term solutions to urgent problems."[39]

Conclusion: Reckoning With the Only Viable Solution

In permitting grassroots initiatives by Tunisians of the kind intended to revitalize border trade with Libya and impose a measure of order on such economic activity, the Tunisian state demonstrated flexibility. It also bought itself time. Had Tunisia pursued securitization and a concomitant dissociation from Libya without allowing ad hoc Tunisian associations and municipal councils to strike their own trade agreements, its already roiling borderlands might have turned against the state. Yet obtaining a reprieve from an otherwise certain conflagration is not a long-term strategy. Moreover, borderland Tunisians' grassroots approach to facilitating trade with Libya has suffered as many setbacks as it has notched successes.

To cut the Gordian knot in which it is tied up, Tunisia would do well to adopt a triple-pronged approach. First, the central government should enhance its bare-bones security agreement with the GNA and also work with the GNA on creating a free trade zone in the borderlands. Thus far, Tunis has resisted building close relations with the GNA for fear of appearing to take sides in the Libyan conflict. Yet neutrality need not mean passivity, and it has become clear that even if the GNA fails to bring all of Libya under its control, no group will dislodge it from its position as the internationally recognized, main power broker in the western half of the country. With security guarantees and the creation of a free trade zone in which customs duties do not apply, the Tunisian government might succeed in enticing Tunisian business elites, who have become loath to participate in risky cross-border trade, to resume their activities.

Second, Tunis should encourage border cities' municipal councils to broaden their grassroots trade agreements with their Libyan counterparts. The agreements could go beyond trade to encompass cooperation in the realms of culture, education, public health, and youth exchange programs. This would deepen personal relationships, which are critical to the success of people-to-people and inter-city diplomacy.

Last but not least, the state should oversee the often uncoordinated involvement of various official bodies—including ministries, the customs authority, and parliamentary committees—alongside municipal councils in asymmetrically negotiated accords similar to the Zawiya agreement. This would synchronize border city municipalities with Tunis and strengthen the latter's ties to power centers across western Libya, enhancing Tunisia's security. Ultimately, such a triple-pronged approach would enable Tunisia to attend, in at least the most basic sense, to both its security and its economic needs despite a set of circumstances that threatens both.

Epilogue: The Borderlands in a Time of Conflict and Pandemic

Over the past few months, Tunisia's borderlands have suffered a double whammy: escalation of the conflict in Libya following Turkish intervention in the country and the unfolding of the coronavirus pandemic. Combined, the two phenomena have brought the border economy to a near standstill.

In January 2020, Turkey began sending men and materiel to forces aligned with the GNA, led by Prime Minister Faiez Serraj, to assist them in their conflict with a military coalition headed by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar. This culminated in Peace Storm, a military operation to dislodge Haftar's forces from western Libya. By April, the GNA had regained control of the cities of Sabratha, Zelten, Regdaline, Sorman, and al-Ajilat. The power centers of Zuwara and Zawiya remained supportive of the GNA forces throughout. Ultimately, the Turkish intervention enabled the GNA-aligned forces to recover lost ground and reassert their dominance in western Libya. Yet the conflict caused a precipitous decline in traffic at Ras Jedir (which at one point was caught up in the fighting) and worsened the already dire economic situation in Tunisia's borderlands.

Before the conflict ended, the coronavirus hit. In March 2020, the Tunisian government announced a general lockdown to try to contain the spread of the virus. That same month, Tunisia sealed its borders. Fearing a disruption of global supply chains and aiming to prevent panic generated by the confinement, the Tunisian government announced the doubling of strategic stocks of basic food, medicines, and gasoline. This ensured that stores did not run out of necessities—but did little to ameliorate the overall situation.

Indeed, the coronavirus pandemic and the escalation of the conflict in Libya have paralyzed the economy of southeast Tunisia. Predictably, the Tunisian government's decision to seal the border with Libya entailed closing Ras Jedir. In Ben Guerdane and beyond, thousands of cross-border traders, small retailers, shopkeepers, informal fuel vendors, and currency exchange dealers were forced to suspend their activities. Meanwhile, hundreds of Libya-based Tunisian workers attempting to return to Tunisia found themselves stuck at Ras Jedir. Security and quarantine measures relegated them to weeks of waiting at the border post before they were allowed to enter Tunisian territory. Overall, the effects of the coronavirus pandemic exacerbated economic tension along Tunisia's border and showed the urgent need to strengthen the coordination between the central government and municipalities of border cities to more effectively manage security and health emergencies.

Note on Methodology

This paper draws on interviews with merchants, smugglers, sellers of smuggled gasoline, and civil society activists, as well as members of trade associations, the Ben Guerdane municipal council, and the Tunisian security services. Conducted in the Tunisian cities of Ben Guerdane and Medenine in the summer of 2019, these interviews constituted the fieldwork undertaken for the paper and were supplemented by the author's first-hand observations.

Chronology of Events

1988: Re-opening of Tunisian-Libyan border following an eight-year closure.

1992–2003: Libya under United Nations sanctions and international embargo. *Al-khat* plays a crucial role in supplying Libya with food products and consumer goods.

2003–2011: Libya turns into a regional hub for importing and re-exporting to neighboring countries sundry items. Consumer goods, household appliances, textiles, and equipment are imported from China and other East Asian countries and re-exported to Tunisia. Cheap gasoline, much of it smuggled over the border from Libya via *al-contra*, plays a major role in sustaining Tunisia's economy, while Tunisia exports mainly food products to Libya. *Al-khat* strengthens the resilience of both regimes.

January 2011: Fall of Tunisia's longtime leader, Ben Ali.

February 2011: Libyan uprising erupts.

February–August 2011: Libyan rebels face off against the Qaddafi regime. Tunisian authorities act pragmatically, allowing smugglers to operate informal economic corridors with both belligerent parties.

August 2011: Tripoli falls to the rebels.

2012–2014: Rivalries between western Libyan power centers intensify without causing a major interruption of the flow of goods and oil to Tunisia.

2013: The Tunisian army establishes a buffer zone around Tunisia's southern tip, where its borders with Libya and Algeria nearly converge.

2014: New conflict ignites in Libya. The country splits into two opposing camps, with rival governments in Tripoli and Tobruk facing off.

2015: The Tunisian army digs a double sand ditch along 250 kilometers (155 miles) of Tunisia's border with Libya in order to prevent infiltration.

2016: Tunisia closes Ras Jedir for nearly six months, bringing border trade to an almost complete halt and sparking several rounds of mass protests by inhabitants of Ben Guerdane and its surrounding towns. In Libya, a banking crisis brought on by falling oil production and declining revenue further affects cross-border trade.

2017: The GNA-aligned Libyan National Oil Company launches an anti-smuggling military unit to combat the diversion of gasoline. The border economy is heavily disrupted, and Tunisia's borderlands edge into impoverishment. Ad hoc Tunisian groups launch grassroots initiatives to negotiate trade agreements with Libyan municipalities and tribal councils. Having been signed by Zuwara, the revised version of an initially stillborn agreement between Ben Guerdane and Libyan municipalities goes into effect, energizing trade.

2018: Grassroots initiatives by borderland Tunisians to resuscitate the moribund border economy receive a new lease on life, thanks to the unprecedented emergence of democratically elected municipal councils across Tunisia. Ben Guerdane's council immediately registers an impact by negotiating changes to those aspects of the Zawiya agreement that affect Ben Guerdane and Zuwara specifically.

About the Author

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

Acknowledgments

This publication was produced with support from the X-Border Local Research Network, a component of the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) X-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) program, funded by UK aid from the UK government. The X-Border Local Research Network—a partnership between the Asia Foundation, the Carnegie Middle East Center, and the Rift Valley Institute— carries out research work to better understand the causes and impacts of conflict in border areas and their international dimensions. It supports more effective policymaking and development programming and builds the skills of local partners.The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this publication are entirely those of the authors. They do not necessarily reflect those of the Carnegie Middle East Center or the UK government.

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Emir Bechir Street, Lazarieh Tower | Bldg. No. 2026 1210, 5th flr.
Downtown Beirut, P.O.Box 11-1061 | Riad El Solh, Lebanon
P: + 961 1 99 15 91

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