

WHEN THE MARGINS RISE

The Case of Ouargla
and Tataouine

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FOREWORD

Borderlands in North Africa are usually perceived by their respective governments as vulnerable and unstable. The Algerian and the Tunisian borders fall in the same category. The border question has gained much attention from central governments in both countries over the last few years. More specifically, Ouargla in Algeria, and Tataouine in Tunisia, which are considered to be strategic and vital for their central governments, tend to gain an increased media attention because of their potential for social instability and conflict. Indeed, although both cities are resource-rich, being home to oil fields, yet they both suffer from deep socio-economic marginalization comparing to the northern and coastal regions. The Covid-19 outbreak has worsened the situation in these two border towns. The lack of long-term tactical approach from the Algerian and the Tunisian central governments and the limited investments in infrastructure, including health facilities, intensified the feeling of frustration and anger among those marginalized communities.

In this context, this study will shed light on the importance of Ouargla and Tataouine for the central governments in Algeria and Tunisia by delving into spatial disparities, corruption and social instability movements that have been taking place in these two border towns. It will also present policy recommendations for community actors, practitioners, and policymakers.

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This study is a part of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean (KAS PolDiMed), which aims to implement cross-national projects with reference to the South and East Mediterranean. Its objective is to strengthen the political dialogue and societal and economic integration in the Mediterranean region and to sustainably promote cooperation and partnership with the European Union.

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INTRODUCTION

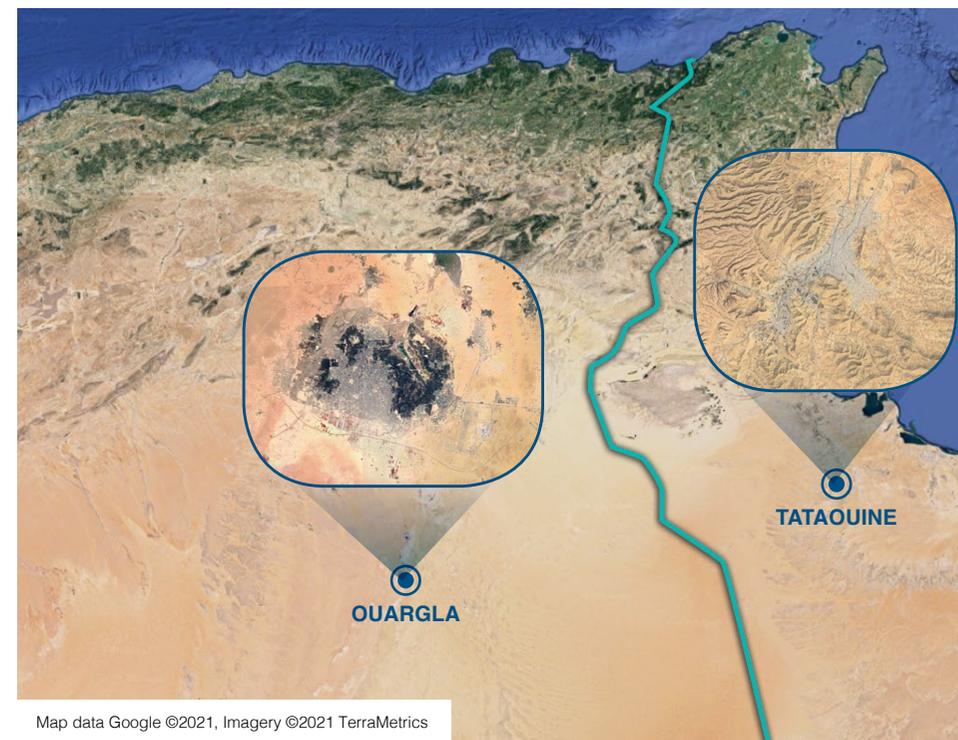
Last January 2021, some 5,000 people marched in **Ouargla**, a province in central southern Algeria, asking the government to provide job opportunities, fight corruption in public institutions and stop their region's marginalization.¹ Similarly, in February of the same year, dozens of young residents of **Tataouine** province in southern Tunisia staged protests demanding the government to implement the terms of a 2017 agreement promising greater development and employment.² These kinds of demonstrations were not new. The Algerian and Tunisian governments have respectively neglected southern provinces such as Ouargla and Tataouine for decades. As a result, these historically marginalized areas began to experience a political awakening, fueled in part by widespread dissatisfaction with the fact that, despite rapid oil extraction, residents managed to reap little economic benefits.

Like colonial authorities before them, the central authorities in Algiers and Tunis have focused, in their development plans, on coastal and northern cities. These development policies have resulted in territorial disparities that have been fueling exclusion and marginalization among people living in the interior of the country and borderland communities where the land is rich and the people marginalized. In both Ouargla and Tataouine, territorial disparities have reached pathological levels, perpetuated at the sub-regional level. For instance, towns and cities are favored while remote areas are left in the dark. Spatial inequalities in Ouargla and Tataouine prove the inability of the Algerian and Tunisian states to penetrate society equally across regions.

Ouarglis and Tataouinis are tired of the lack of transparency and total opacity of the central authorities regarding resource extraction. For them, not enough is being invested in their resource-rich region, a situation that must change. Both have voiced their concerns about how rich their soil is and how deprived their communities are. Both Ouarglis and Tataouinis have asked the central authorities to improve their economic conditions, provide jobs, improve infrastructures, and develop their regions and living conditions. This is called “**resource regionalism**,” meaning that the people woke up to the fact that they are living in a wealthy region, vital for the state's survival, yet populated by poor people who can neither benefit from the wealth of their land nor have jobs in the oil industry.³ Local communities have also asked for priorities in employment in the oil industry and for political power over the policies of their region (i.e., discuss the impacts of extraction on

the environment at the local level and ask for local representation, rather than having northerners make decisions in their name). As part of this “resource regionalism,” dissenting voices are being heard from several parts of the Algerian and Tunisian South.

Today, beyond their securitization and marginalization, these regions are living places and vibrant spaces; they are sites where power, inventiveness and pragmatism often come together. Constant pursuit, capture and replay have unleashed resistance and defiance at the borders, not only to face the authorities but also to ensure survival; but, more importantly, to reclaim their right to their own territory and resources, their “right to the city.” Nevertheless, “resource regionalism” is intensifying in Algeria's and Tunisia's borderlands, and social unrest and instability might spread to other southern provinces/regions. Furthermore, the unanswered grievances of local communities might echo in groups that will push some citizens to join underground groups and empower jihadist organizations, as has already happened. Ouargla and Tataouine might become Algiers' and Tunis's Achilles heel.



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Borderlines in Ouargla and Tataouine

¹ Dalia Ghanem, “Algeria's Achilles' Heel? Resource Regionalism in Ouargla”, Carnegie, March 24, 2021, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2021/03/24/algeria-s-achilles-heel-resource-regionalism-in-ouargla-pub-84157>

² No author, “Tunisia: Further protests likely in Tataouine following clashes between police and protesters”, Garda World, February 15, 2021, <https://www.garda.com/fr/crisis24/alertes-de-securite/443006/tunisia-further-protests-likely-in-tataouine-following-clashes-between-police-and-protesters-feb-15>

³ Geoff D. Porter, “The New Resource Regionalism In North Africa And The Sahara”, Center For International Studies, July 2013, <https://www.sciencespo.fr/ceii/en/content/new-resource-regionalism-north-africa-and-sahara>

OUARGLA



Photo credit: Association du Ksar de Ouargla

Old man sitting in the Ksour (Old city).

Ouargla is one of the largest oases of the Algerian Sahara, with an area of 163,263 km² and 400,000 inhabitants. Three districts and seven municipalities make up the wilaya (province).⁴ Ouargla City, which lends its name to the province, is the administrative center and an asset center, an oil production wilaya (province).⁵ Oil production from the Hassi Messaoud oil fields keeps the country's economy afloat. Hassi Messaoud produces 400,000⁶ barrels per day and holds 71% of the country's crude oil reserves.⁷ The province is also the fourth military region (RM IV) and home to numerous garrisons. Voices of dissent arose in this resource-rich province, with an expectation of greater future confrontation.

⁴ The wilaya is a public territorial collectivity administrated by the People's Assembly of wilaya (APW), elected by universal suffrage, and an executive appointed by the government and led by the wali (code of the wilaya, 1969).

⁵ The wilaya is a public territorial collectivity administrated by the People's Assembly of wilaya (APW), elected by universal suffrage, and an executive appointed by the government and led by the wali (code of the wilaya, 1969).

⁶ No author, *Maintenir l'exploitation des gisements de Hassi Messaoud à 400 000 barils/jour*, Liberté, December 9, 2015, <https://www.liberte-algerie.com/radar/maintenir-l-exploitation-des-gisements-de-hassi-messaoud-a-400-000-barils-jour-237922>

⁷ No author, « Pétrole: l'EIA estime les réserves prouvées de l'Algérie à plus de 12 Mds de barils », Algerian Embassy communiqué, March 27, 2019, <https://www.emb-argelia.pt/petrole-leia-estime-les-reserves-prouvees-de-lalgerie-a-plus-de-12-mds-de-barils/>

SPATIAL DISPARITIES

Despite Algeria's efforts to develop the Sahara, combined with strong economic growth and investments in the region, land inequalities persist. However, these inequalities have reached unreasonable levels in some areas, such as in Ouargla and its surrounding areas.

A Bit of History

Ouargla was established on a plateau across the Sedrata canal and around a water point. Ethnic groups built their homes around this water point and the tomb of Sidi l'Ouargli. These settlements eventually became the embryo of the three districts (Béni Brahim, Béni Sissine, and Béni Ouaguine) that composed the future city.

With the arrival of the Ibadites and the creation of Sedrata (Isedraten), Ouargla became the center of the Saharan caravan trade tracks. At the end of 1400 CE, Ibn Khaldun described the city in these words: "Nowadays, Ouargla is the gateway to the desert through which travelers from M'Zab must pass when they want to go to take their merchandise to Sudan." The city enjoyed several centuries of prosperity based on the trade of different products, mainly dates and cereals, fabrics, salt, gold, livestock, and slave trade.

When the French colonized Algeria, their control of the oasis went through two stages. First, General Lacroix Vaubois conquered the Ksour (the old city) in 1872 and started constructing a westernized town around new buildings (school, church, and city hall). Then, in 1927, Colonel Carbillet built a modern town and imposed a new urban model next to the old one (ksour). South of the colonial town, in the southeast, nomads settled. Their settlements became centers of various communities named after the tribe that established them (i.e., Béni Thour, Mekhadma, Sait Otba).

Available data show regional disparities of **twice** as much poverty in the Sahara as in coastal areas.⁸ Underdevelopment in southern regions in general and Ouargla in particular results from two factors: absence of a fair national policy for development and a tendency to focus on coastal cities and major population areas.

⁸ No author, "Poverty has Fallen in the Maghreb, but Inequality Persists", The World Bank, October 17, 2016, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2016/10/17/poverty-has-fallen-in-the-maghreb-but-inequality-persists>.

UNDER DEVELOPMENT AND SPATIAL DISPARITIES

This model is replicated at the sub-regional level where there is an uneven distribution pattern of investments. As a result, population centers are developed, while the rural hinterland is left behind. On the other hand, projects pursued and sold as developments of remote areas and border regions are either useless or of bad quality, and they suffer from lack of maintenance. These investments come with political manipulation, waste, fraud, and corruption and serve to enrich influential people and their coterie.

The Original Sin: The Spatial Bias

Spatial disparities are a legacy of the colonial past that continued under the independent nation-state because of a poor choice of policies and a territorial bias. During colonization (1830-1962), the French colonial power divided Algeria into the “useful Algeria” vs. the “useless Algeria.” In this vision, development plans were concentrated in Algiers and coastal areas for an economy geared toward delivering goods to the colonial metropolis and the coastal areas of settlers’ communities.

Similarly, with the independence of the country in 1962, the nation-state reproduced this same pattern. Central authorities have focused their development plans on coastal and northern cities, leaving most natural resources-rich areas in remote places underdeveloped. Moreover, when development plans were pursued in these remote regions, developed urban centers were established and rural places left behind.

In Ouargla, development of the province was linked to oil and gas exploitation. The first phase of development aimed at reducing the remoteness of the oasis and connect it to the rest of the country. This effort translated into construction of roads: Since 1962, no less than **6,500 km** have been built in the desert to connect numerous oases. Besides, existing aerodromes built by the French (i.e., Biskra and Béchar) were revamped, and new ones (i.e., In Guezzam and Bordj Baji Mukhtar) were built.⁹

The second phase consisted of developing services and administration to integrate the Sahara economically and politically to assert its sovereignty as an integral part of the Algerian nation. The key to this plan was administrative division and economic development. The administrative division, adopted in 1974, aimed to assist and organize regional and urban spaces. This involved an endowment of public investments to build infrastructure and provide services (administration, hospitals, schools, universities, post

offices, and banks), which directly impacted employment, housing, and living levels. The state aimed to erase spatial disparities inherited from colonial powers and eventually reduce the overpopulation of congested coastal areas that developed during the first decade of independence. This development had consequences on Saharan society that involved a strong presence of the state, new types of jobs, wages, salaries, and the decline of traditional forms of labor (mainly trade). The Sahraoui population adapted to and adopted the rules of the global economy.

“Abandoned in the Land of Oil”¹⁰

Despite these efforts, spatial disparities throughout Algeria are glaring. They are much more apparent when a desert region is resource rich. In such a situation, central authorities invest in the region to extract oil and gas that feed the national economy but hardly ever divert funds to local communities. This is evident in Ouargla, which is still impoverished and underdeveloped. For the past two decades, Ouarglis have asked the central authorities to improve their living conditions and infrastructures to improve quality of life, including access to educational, recreational, and health services. Many Ouarglis express their dissatisfaction with their situation by saying that they are “mah-gurin fi bled el petrole” (abandoned in the land of oil).

Nonetheless, even if Ouargla’s urban centers continue to suffer from underdevelopment, neglect, lack of targeted investments, and high unemployment levels, they remain better off than isolated areas at the sub-regional level. When development plans are developed, they tend to benefit urban centers, such as Ouargla town and Hassi Messaoud, to facilitate the influx of foreign staff and Northerners, goods, and services without extending development to the surrounding areas.

The two districts of Sidi Khouiled and El Frane are a case in point. In these localities, local authorities have failed to ensure the availability of essential services, such as potable water or reasonably equipped hospitals with the proper staffing. The lack of access to public services is best illustrated in the health sector. Health facilities are remote and, when available, they are understaffed and underequipped. Those available in Sidi Khouiled and El Frane are small health centers that lack resources (i.e., an ambulance) and medical staff (i.e., they rely on a single roving doctor). Similarly, in El Borma, a locality of 5,000 inhabitants situated at the border with Tunisia, home to Algeria’s largest oil and gas basin, there is a single ambulance and no doctor. Only one nurse staffs the health center two hours a week.¹¹

⁹ Olivier Pliez, *Vieux réseaux et nouvelles circulations entre les deux rives du Sahara, Méditerranée*, 2002, pp. 31-40, https://www.persee.fr/doc/medi_0025-8296_2002_num_99_3_3258

¹⁰ Several interviewees from Ouargla and its surroundings used this expression to describe their feelings towards central authorities. Interviews conducted in El Frane, Ouargla town, Sidi Khouiled between November 2020, and February 2021.

¹¹ TV documentary, “Ouargla: The absence of health facilities worries the residents of Al-Borma border district”, October 30, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qxRHwXQyZNA>

Even Ouargla is a long way from university-affiliated public hospitals and private health centers, which usually offer better services. The nearest well-equipped private health center, for instance, is in El Oued, which is 320 km away, and the closest university hospital (CHU) is in Batna, which is 550 km away. Medical treatment is sought by those who can afford it in El Oued, Batna, or even across the border in Tunisia, where medical services are of better quality than in southern Algeria.

Those who have no other choice than to be treated in Ouargla may find themselves in a hospital where certain specialists are unavailable. The death of academic **Aïcha Aouissat** in 2018 as a result of a venomous scorpion sting led Ouarglis to openly condemn inadequate healthcare facilities and accuse state officials of criminal negligence.¹² According to Dr. Aouissat's brother, her death was due to the lack of a cardiologist and a neurologist at the facility, as his sister died of respiratory failure. Her death was not the first nor the last of its kind. Aouissat was one of **seven** people in Ouargla who died due to complications from a scorpion sting that year.¹³ The death of Aouissat reignited the debate over the lack of public services in Ouargla. According to a local doctor, the proliferation of scorpions and unhygienic conditions in public spaces, the lack of public lighting, and poor or non-existent health education are linked.¹⁴ The pandemic of Covid-19 further exposed the poor state of health facilities in the province.

Covid-19: An Aggravating Factor

There are only twelve intensive care beds spread over four care facilities (Ouargla, Toggurt, Hassi Messaoud, and Taibet). Community mistrust in government and health institutions, coupled with the local authorities' poor communication strategy, led people in Ouargla to doubt and even ignore the dangers of viral transmission dynamics, despite the increase in contamination and death cases. The state responded with better communication campaigns, creating a call center to guide citizens and a Mobile Help and Social Emergency Services (**SAMU**).¹⁵ Additionally, only 200 of 600 beds at the public hospital, Mohamed Boudiaf, were dedicated to Covid-19 patients. Nevertheless, this was not enough, as health structures were in bad shape long before Covid-19. For instance, only one medical scan was available at Mohamed Boudiaf's public hospital, which provoked the anger of patients who complained for months, asking the hospital to obtain a second scan. Local associations joined the efforts to face the pandemic. For instance, the local association **Ahbab El-Maridh** (the Friends of the Sick) collected donations from economic operators to acquire medical equipment for Mohamed Boudiaf hospital. However, tensions between local populations and the authorities escalated as the economic situation deteriorated.

¹² Houria Alioua, *Ouargla : décès d'une universitaire piquée par un scorpion*, *El Watan*, September 3, 2018, <https://www.elwatan.com/edition/actualite/ouargla-deces-dune-universitaire-piquee-par-un-scorpion-03-09-2018>

¹³ APS, *Ouargla: plus de 1.600 victimes de piqûres de scorpion depuis janvier 2019*, APS, August 20, 2019, <https://www.aps.dz/regions/93379-ouargla-plus-de-1-600-victimes-de-piqures-de-scorpion-dont-4-deces-depuis-janvier-2019>

¹⁴ APS, *Ouargla: plus de 1.600 victimes de piqûres de scorpion depuis janvier 2019*, APS, August 20, 2019, <https://www.aps.dz/regions/93379-ouargla-plus-de-1-600-victimes-de-piqures-de-scorpion-dont-4-deces-depuis-janvier-2019>

¹⁵ No author, *Ouargla : un nouveau SAMU bientôt opérationnel*, *Le courrier d'Algérie*, April 17, 2021, <https://lecourrier-dalgerie.com/ouargla-un-nouveau-samu-bientot-operationnel/>

Currency devaluation and inflation (**5%**), coupled with the precarious local labor market, directly impacted the purchasing power of households.¹⁶ Frustrated with the government's response to the disease and its socio-economic consequences, people have been demonstrating despite confinement measures. To prevent a dangerous escalation in a region that has been prone to social unrest, central authorities calibrated their response with economic considerations. According to official figures, local authorities distributed more than 100,000 masks, supported **3,088** needy families with temporary assistance of 10,000 DZD (the equivalent of \$74),¹⁷ and a solidarity allowance to **1,506** transport sector operators (taxi and bus drivers).¹⁸ In addition to government aid, there was an essential local mobilization by individuals and associations to reach local communities and migrants from sub-Saharan countries living in Ouargla. Nevertheless, the pandemic contributed to further damaging an already strained relationship between the center and its periphery, Algiers and its southern capital, the government and its citizens.

¹⁶ No author, *Algeria: Inflation rate from 1986 to 2025*, Statista, April 20, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/439788/inflation-rate-in-algeria/>

¹⁷ Aziz Boucebba, *Aide financière à 3000 familles démunies*, *Liberté*, April 14, 2021, <https://www.liberte-algerie.com/centre/aide-financiere-a-3000-familles-demunies-357239>

¹⁸ APS, *Ouargla: 10.000 dinars pour les transporteurs*, APS, June 20, 2020, <https://dzmotion.com/ouargla-10-000-dinars-pour-les-transporteurs/>

CORRUPTION: THE PATHOLOGY OF LOCAL POLITICS

Available figures show that Ouargla has high levels of investments. Nevertheless, roads seem to lead to nowhere, irrigation canals remain unusable, and libraries that were built have remained closed.¹⁹ Corruption and public investments, quality of infrastructures, and operations and maintenance expenditures are clearly related.

“They Eat and Feed Their Circle”²⁰: Corruption in Public Spending

In 2019, public procurements represented more than 20% of the GDP in Algeria, well above the average for OECD countries, which accounted for nearly 12% of GDP.²¹ According to the latest available figures, markets falling under wilaya commissions are the largest in number and financial holdings, respectively up to 52% and 69%.²² The national open call to tender proposals for contracts predominates; however, mutual agreements are also consistent with the same previously cited figures, with 30% at the national level, 36% at the wilaya, and 22% at the municipality level.²³ As a result, development projects come with political manipulation, corruption, fraud and waste.

Ouargla’s tramway *citadis* is a case in point: A political pet project but, above all, a white elephant project that cost \$274 million and took five years to complete.²⁴ This large project was merely 9 km long and did not even connect the entire city; instead, it connected the old city, Ksour, to the new one. The construction of the tram was marred with delays and a corruption scandal. A Spanish court examined charges against 18 Spanish and Algerian politicians for illegal international business transactions, money

laundering, and bribery for the Ouargla project in 2016.²⁵ Algerian politicians and officials are believed to have received, via a consulting firm called United Consultancy Services, a bribe of \$8,5 million.

According to interviews conducted with locals in Ouargla²⁶, senior officials at the province level have complete discretion over capital investment, the budget, and its composition. There are no effective controlling and auditing institutions, and institutional controls are weak. Senior political figures are happy to cut ribbons and attend inaugural ceremonies without accurately knowing what people in the region need. Opaque contracts and closed bidding processes, a murky procurement process, inappropriate project choices, poor quality standards, high prices, inadequate maintenance, and low returns led the province to calamitous results. Due to the bribery potential of new investments, Ouargla has experienced a surge in the number of infrastructure projects without meeting the minimum level of quality. Saleh, a 35-year-old resident of El Frane, explained to us:

In this neighborhood, there are some 23 projects underway. We have been asking for a high school and gas for years...our demands are based on a real need. High school is a priority for us. We have some 300 high school students at El Frane, and they need a school here instead of going by bus to the next locality 25 km away.... We ask for one thing, and they bring us another.... You ask them for a glass, and they bring you a chair. They brought us a sanitation network, and we do not even have water.... So today, the road remains broken, and the network is not connected.²⁷

An inhabitant of the locality of Sidi Khouiled spoke for many of his neighbors when he summed up the situation:

Here, the authorities built a roundabout worth fifty million DZD (\$375,000), but why? No one understands why? We have one road on the right and another one on the left. If we had twelve or even five different junctions with an intense traffic flow, it would have been understandable. There is not any! It does not even improve safety since we have only two sides. Go figure! On the other hand, there has been a broken sanitary maintenance hole at that same roundabout for five years! Five years! It has not been repaired. Why? Simply because the roundabout was more profitable for them and their clique!²⁸

According to several interviewees, because these public investments are medium to large, they are also very profitable for contractors who build them. The contractor splits the money received from the government into three parts: one for himself, one as a

¹⁹ APS, *Ouargla : plus de 140 projets d’investissements avalisés par l’ANDI en 2018*, APS, February, 8, 2019, <https://www.aps.dz/regions/85215-ouargla-plus-de-140-projets-d-investissements-avalises-par-l-andi-en-2018>

²⁰ This expression has been used by several interviewees among them, Saleh, a former SONATRACH employee and an activist in a local association.

²¹ OCDE (2019), *Revue du système de passation des marchés publics en Algérie : Vers un système efficient, ouvert et inclusif*, Examens de l’OCDE sur la gouvernance publique, Editions OCDE, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/49802cd0-fr>.

²² République Algérienne Démocratique et Populaire, *Rapport Analytique Sur La Passation Des Marchés*, June 2003, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/949751468768272933/pdf/297650AL0CPAR01OL10P07668801public1.pdf>

²³ République Algérienne Démocratique et Populaire, *Rapport Analytique Sur La Passation Des Marchés*, June 2003, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/949751468768272933/pdf/297650AL0CPAR01OL10P07668801public1.pdf>

²⁴ No author, *Algérie: Ouargla, nouveau tramway à la française*, Transport urbain, March 21, 2018, <http://transporturbain.canalblog.com/archives/2018/03/21/36251402.html>.

²⁵ Roberto R. Ballesteros, *El juez imputa a Gómez de la Serna y Aristegui por el caso de las comisiones*, *El Confidencial*, April 4, 2016, https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2016-04-08/el-juez-de-la-mata-imputa-a-aristegui-y-gomez-de-la-serna-por-el-caso-de-las-comisiones_1180667/

²⁶ Interviews were conducted in Ouargla between November 2020 and February 2021 with ordinary citizens, palm grove plantations, members of local associations, and members of the National Committee for the Defense of the Rights of the Unemployed (CNDDC).

²⁷ Interview conducted in Frane, December 19, 2020. Saleh is a former SONATRACH employee and an activist in a local association.

²⁸ Interview conducted in Sidi Khouiled. January 22, 2021.

kickback to the government official who ensured his company secured the contract, and one for the agreed-upon project, which was always of poor quality and often not even finished.²⁹ As explained by an interviewee, “*They eat and feed their circle*,”³⁰ meaning they welcome bribes and share with their networks.

According to several interviewees from the local civil society, politicians, mayors, governors, and public officials who receive payments for helping contractors and companies to win bids have vested interests in increasing the scope and the size of projects. This is why locals end up with costly superfluous projects, such as the roundabout and the tramway or ones that are completed but never used like El Frane’s library which was completed but never opened its doors, or a project of inferior quality like the sanitation network in El Frane that requires repair after leaving many potholes in the main road.

As a result, capital spending reduces the rate of return, but it also fails to generate the expected growth. In addition, high spending on capital projects reduces resources available for other crucial spending. Furthermore, absence of arbitration between citizens and state officials or representatives about points of disagreement creates mistrust and suspicion towards the latter. Citizens perceive state officials as highly unscrupulous as they manipulate the process (design, specifications, tender calls, negotiations, and approvals) to increase commissions and the bribes they receive.

Oil: A Blessing for the Few

Beyond grievances concerning underdevelopment and accusations of corruption in public spending, the struggle in Ouargla has been, for the last two decades, centered on more jobs for disenfranchised youth. In January 2021, despite Covid-19 confinement measures, some **5,000** citizens gathered in the center of Ouargla to demand that the government stop their region’s marginalization, create job opportunities, and combat corruption in public institutions.³¹ According to their spokesman, Kamel Bouchoul, the local branch of the National Employment Agency (ANEM) is rife with abuse. Protesters accused the agency of rigging the filing system for the benefit of “outsiders,” meaning northerners from Algiers, Oran, and Constantine, despite a **2005** law that compels companies to prioritize locals in employment.³²

While unemployment exists all over the country, in Ouargla, local populations must rein in their expectations: the province is home to one of the wealth poles of Algeria and the richest energy city-town in the country, Hassi Messaoud. In this oil city, some **159 companies** engage in oil-related projects, including the national state-owned oil com-

pany, SONATRACH.³³ The latter is the leading employer in the region, with some 18,000 openings every year, including 6,000 dedicated to locals.³⁴ Nevertheless, for Ouarglis, this number is not enough, given that they consider that SONSTRAC is on Ouargla lands and that local youth are as educated as “outsiders” and deserve fair treatment and more transparency in the recruitment process.

Due to its monopolistic recruitment position, SONATRACH, among other companies, places workers in a dependency situation and a weak bargaining position. With better-educated and skilled northerners arriving in the labor market to compete against local low-skilled workers, there is systematic favoritism in recruitment and wage inequality. In addition, there is a limit to how many positions the industry can offer. As a result, the unemployment rate is as high as 35%.³⁵

It is important to note that populations were predominantly farmers earning their living by cultivating palm groves (dates) and trade before the dawn of the oil industry. However, with the advent of oil and gas production, people started to leave farming. Palm plantations were abandoned, and youth mainly started to queue up for jobs in oil companies or construction firms, as salaries in these sectors are typically higher than average. This industrialization, coupled with ecological conditions (i.e., harsh weather) and agronomic conditions (i.e., erosion, aging palm groves, and lack of water), led to reduced agriculture. An increasingly small portion of the population now works on palm plantations. Only 3-5% of people work in agriculture in Ouargla, with an aging workforce, as a majority of workers are over 50 years old.³⁶ In total, no more than **15%** of the people of the southern regions live off agriculture.³⁷

As for smuggling, it used to be *the occupation par excellence* among many youths in Ouargla in the 1990s. Smuggling functioned as a safety valve that relieved some of the economic pressure felt by Ouarglis in their neglected southern province. Then Ouargla was known for cigarette smuggling. From the port of Cotonou, the cigarettes were taken by truck to the border towns of Assamakka in Niger and Boughassa in Mali, where they were legally sold and brought into Algerian territory. This merchandise was transported to Ouargla, the distribution point across the Algerian territory. The cigarette smuggling route followed a defined route: Boughassa, Borj Badji Mokhtar, Moulay Lahcen, Amguid, the Faidjat corridor, then bordj Omar Idris and Ouargla. The latter used to have traders specialized in cigarette trafficking who distributed their contraband to the northern wilayas.

²⁹ Houria Alioua, (in Arabic), *Ouargla and In Salah: land of contestation in Southern Algeria*, September 19, 2018, *el murasil*, <https://bit.ly/3zjNUaL>.

³⁰ Interview with a local Ouargla expert who has been working on the topic for years. January 9, 2021.

³¹ Interview with a local Ouargla expert who has been working on the topic for years. January 9, 2021.

³² Yahia Chérif Halla, *La ville saharienne de Hassi Messaoud : paradoxe entre la prospérité industrielle et l'échec du développement urbain*, thesis, (2018), <http://thesis.univ-biskra.dz/4222/1/MEMOIRE%20MAJESTER%20de%201%27%C3%A9tudiate%20YAHIA%20CHERIF%20Halla%20La%20ville%20s.pdf>

³³ Similarly, in El Borma, Algeria’s first province in terms of animal husbandry (exclusively camels), with 27,000 heads, farmers complain about the total absence of state aid in the domain, putting the activity in jeopardy.

²⁹ Several interviewees in Ouargla mentioned and explained these mechanisms in the process of bidding and contracting.

³⁰ Interview with a local from El Frane who used to be an activist in a local association. Interview conducted in El Frane, November 11, 2020.

³¹ Houria Alioua, *Ouargla : Une grandiose manifestation interpellant le président Tebboune*, *El Watan*, January 13, 2021, <https://www.elwatan.com/edition/actualite/ouargla-une-grandiose-manifestation-interpellant-le-president-tebboune-13-01-2021>

³² *Journal Officiel De La Republique Algerienne N° 50*, July 19, 2005, <http://www.droit-afrique.com/upload/doc/algerie/Algerie-Code-2005-hydrocarbures.pdf>

Today, with security measures in place at the border, repression, and the political awakening of locals, youth have other aspirations than smuggling cigarettes and now refuse to take part in this illegal activity. They have become more vocal about obtaining what they believe is their natural right to the oil bonanza. According to their perceptions, the over 100 companies present on their land can and must recruit every Ouargli. As a result, most of them do not wish to work in agriculture or participate in smuggling activities as they once did. As put by an interviewee:

*Why would I engage in illegal activity while wells are waiting for us? I did it before, but now I want to have legal work, a social security number, a status, and a good salary. No more fraudulent work. Enough is enough. We have been quiet for too long.*³⁸

Luring with Development and Intimidating with Repression

Ouarglis have been more outspoken in recent years about obtaining what they believe is their fair share of the oil revenues. During this period, two protests emerged to give a voice to the capital of the south. The first, the **Southern Children's Movement for Justice (MSJ)** was established in 2004 by a group of young men who wished to be independent of conventional political parties and tribal leaders.³⁹ The MSJ asked for more jobs, with a priority in hiring locals in companies doing business in Ouargla, and more resources devoted to local development projects. On this last point, the MSJ was adamant that it should have a voice in development projects to maximize their benefits for locals.

The second, **The National Committee for the Defense of the Rights of the Unemployed (CNDDC)** was established in 2011.⁴⁰ The CNDDC, like the MSJ, is primarily a male youth group. It arose from the National Autonomous Union of Public Administration Staff, an earlier Ouargla-based union. The CNDDC took a more openly political path than its predecessor, forming a joint campaign to serve all Algerians who were unemployed and force the government to take steps to alleviate their plight. It also managed to bridge the gap between secularists and Islamists, with members drawn from both camps, and gain support from groups sympathetic to the plight of marginalized southerners, such as human rights campaigners, university students, and politicized middle-class members. Both the MSJ and the CNDDC produced a thriving protest culture and gave a voice to the South in general and Ouargla in particular, resulting in people becoming more informed and better organized politically.

Algiers began enacting reforms in reaction to the formation of the CNDDC and the demonstrations that the MSJ organized. However, while the authorities made minor changes in development models and carried out limited investments in infrastructures,

³⁸ Interview with a local, unemployed for five years. Interview conducted in February 2021.

³⁹ Meziane Abane, L'histoire secrète du Mouvement des enfants du Sud, *El Watan*, March 29, 2014, <https://algeria-watch.org/?p=22958>

⁴⁰ Facebook official page, <https://www.facebook.com/COMIT%C3%89-NATIONAL-POUR-LA-D%C3%89FENSE-DES-DROITS-DES-CH%C3%94MEURS-170428203010627/>



Photo credit: Dalia Ghanem

ANEM's Local branch in Sidi Kouiled. Signs put by demonstrators. Unemployment = crime. We want justice in employment, no to false promises. Employment is a guaranteed right (article 69).

they also intensified policing and repression. Besides **promises**⁴¹ to pressure domestic and foreign contractors to recruit locally and raise public employee salaries, reducing the **interest** rate for loans granted to Southerners, the authorities invested in a **training center** for oil professions in 2013, a first of its kind.⁴² However, it quickly became clear that the government was more concerned with maintaining appearances than bringing in substantive reforms.

While attempting to appease Ouargla's residents with development projects in the decade following the birth of the MSJ, the authorities increased repression against political activists. Members of the MSJ and CNDDC were frequently arrested, particularly after protests. The repression, however, has had counterproductive effects, leading to the radicalization of youths in the region. According to the human rights activist Yacine Zaïd, who witnessed repression and prison firsthand, extremists have a considerable influence in prison. In Ouargla's prison, they play a crucial role in the **radicalization**⁴³ of peaceful activists who have been **arrested**⁴⁴ under fallacious accusations, such as being "**secessionist**" and trying to destabilize the country.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Toufik Boukaada, (in Arabic), *The anger of the youth of southern Algeria shakes the rentier system and "buys social peace"*, DW, March 22, 2013, <https://bit.ly/3iwnrRy>

⁴² Leila Beratto, *Ouargla à bout de patience*, *El Watan*, March 13, 2015, <https://www.elwatan.com/archives/actualites/ouargla-a-bout-de-patience-2-13-03-2015>

⁴³ Benjamin Roger, Yacine Zaïd : « La lutte pacifique pour les droits de l'homme dérange le régime algérien », *Jeune Afrique*, October 9, 2012, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/173944/politique/yacine-zaed-la-lutte-pacifique-pour-les-droits-de-l-homme-d-range-le-r-gime-alg-rien/>

⁴⁴ S.A, *Ouargla: Lourdes peines contre les animateurs du mouvement citoyen*, *Algeria-Watch*, December 13, 2009, <https://algeria-watch.org/?p=22196>

⁴⁵ No author, *Affaires Des Delegates Du Mouvement Citoyen De Ouargla*, *El Watan*, July 6, 2004, <https://www.elwatan.com/archives/actu-regions/affaires-des-delegates-du-mouvement-citoyen-de-ouargla-06-07-2004>

The frustration of some members of the MSJ, caused by being restrained from achieving significant change and what they consider the state's unresponsiveness to injustice, coupled with the repression of security forces, led what started in 2004 as a peaceful movement to escalate gradually, culminating into a full mutation into an Islamist jihadist group in 2012-13. Several affiliates, including founding members [Lamine Bencheneb](#)⁴⁶ and [Abdessalam Termoun](#)⁴⁷, who had no previous involvement with Islamism or jihadism, took up arms and joined notorious jihadist groups in the region.

Bencheneb went his own way and established the Southern Children's Movement for Islamic Justice (MSJI). He is believed to have been connected to AQIM's [attack](#) against Djanet airport in 2007⁴⁸ and was involved in the [attack](#) against Ouargla Gendarmerie (police) headquarters in 2012.⁴⁹ A year later, his faction collaborated with infamous jihadist Mokhtar Bel Mokhtar to plan and execute the four-day siege of the [gas facility](#) of Tigentourine (Ain Amenas) on January 16, 2013, in which 37 hostages died and 29 jihadists were killed, among them Bencheneb, and three were captured.⁵⁰

Termoun and his followers, on the other hand, took up arms before reversing their decision to make a deal with the Algerian authorities in 2008, who gave them amnesty. During the May 2012 legislative elections, Termoun submitted his candidacy as representative of the Islamist party, the Front of Justice and Development (Al Adala) of Abdallah Djaballah. His candidacy was turned down because of his involvement in a terrorist organization.

His disappointment at not being allowed to enter the political arena, coupled with a sense of injustice that he received amnesty even though he did not perpetrate any terrorist act (Authorities accused him of the 2012 gendarmerie attack committed by Bencheneb), and the harassment security forces administered to him and many others prosecuted by the Public Prosecution at the Illizi District, led him to take up arms a second time in 2012. Termoun first joined the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), only to defect in 2013.⁵¹ He then joined Bel Mokhtar's group, the Signatories by Blood, defecting again to focus his action on Algeria's southeastern borders and western Libya. Termoun was sentenced to death by Bel Mokhtar and was [killed](#) by unidentified jihadists in 2018 in Sebha, in southwestern Libya.⁵²

The central government's dual policy for containing the situation in Ouargla is unsustainable. If the economic growth that was supposed to follow the intensified repression had been more fruitful, the policy might have succeeded. However, the state's brutality has become even more unpalatable, due to the extremely few substantive improvements in people's daily lives. Thus the likelihood of civil unrest has risen, as shown by the [violent protests](#) in March 2021 after the sentence of local activist and blogger Ameer Guerrache to a seven-year prison term.⁵³ Furthermore, [outright militancy](#) is rising.⁵⁴ Despite intensified repression, most southern social movements remain rooted in peaceful advocacy, but many of their proponents have become dissatisfied with the ineffectiveness of petitions and peaceful demonstrations.

⁴⁶ Karim Djaad, *Prise d'otages d'In Amenas : récit d'une opération kamikaze*, Jeune Afrique, February 1, 2013, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/138486/politique/prise-d-otages-d-in-amenas-r-cit-d-une-op-ration-kamikaze/>

⁴⁷ Malek Bachir, *Algérie : Termoun, de la contestation sociale à l'islamisme armé*, Middle East Eye, January 11, 2018, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/reportages/algerie-termoun-de-la-contestation-sociale-lislamisme-arme>

⁴⁸ No author, *Révélation sur l'attaque avortée de l'aéroport de Djanet*, El Watan, November 21, 2007, <https://www.elwatan.com/archives/enquete/revelations-sur-lattaque-avortee-de-laeroport-de-djanet-21-11-2007>

⁴⁹ Reuter Staff, *Suicide bomber kills one in Algeria attack*, June 29, 2012, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/algeria-attack-idUSL6E8HT82620120629>

⁵⁰ Karim Djaad, *Prise d'otages d'In Amenas : récit d'une opération kamikaze*, Jeune Afrique, February 1, 2013, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/138486/politique/prise-d-otages-d-in-amenas-r-cit-d-une-op-ration-kamikaze/>

⁵¹ Arabia.net, (in Arabic), *Sons of the Desert Movement announces split from "Tawhid and Jihad"*, Arabia.net, May 9, 2013, <https://bit.ly/3zi3yTZ>

⁵² Malek Bachir, *Algérie : Termoun, de la contestation sociale à l'islamisme armé*, Middle East Eye, January 11, 2018, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/reportages/algerie-termoun-de-la-contestation-sociale-lislamisme-arme>

⁵³ The New Arab Staff & Agencies, *Riots in Algeria following jailing of activist*, The New Arab, March 1, 2021, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/riots-algeria-following-jailing-activist>

⁵⁴ Dalia Ghanem, *"Algeria's Achilles' Heel? Resource Regionalism in Ouargla"*, Carnegie, March 24, 2021, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2021/03/24/algeria-s-achilles-heel-resource-regionalism-in-ouargla-pub-84157>

TATAOUINE



Panorama of Chenini, a fortified Berber village in Tataouine governorate, South Tunisia.

The Governorate of Tataouine is located in the southwest of Tunisia, 500 km south of the capital. With an area of 38,889 km, it represents about a quarter of Tunisia and is home to over 151,000 residents. Eight delegations, seven municipalities, and 64 sectors make up the area. Tataouine is one of the richest provinces in Tunisia in terms of natural resources, mainly fuels, gypsum, and marble. According to [official](#) figures, its oil and gas fields represent 40% of Tunisian oil production and 20% of the country's gas production.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, this province suffers from poor infrastructure and marginalization. As a result, the region has been shaken by continued demonstrations and confrontations between the inhabitants and the security forces. Tataouine remains a source of constant government monitoring.

Geography, Resources, and Politics

Tataouine is a Berber [word](#), which means “sources of water.”⁵⁶ However, today, people living in oil-producing regions in the Tataouine desert, such as El Borma and Dhehiba, are forced to use and drink [contaminated water](#) because water resources are depleted due to their use for oil-related activities⁵⁷. Besides, local communities have suffered from many environmental problems due to oil-related companies discharging

⁵⁵ Majdi Ismail, « Tunisie : reprise des manifestations à Tataouine pour réclamer des emplois », March 30, 2021, Anadolu Agency, <https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/afrique/tunisie-reprise-des-manifestations-%C3%A0-tataouine-pour-r%C3%A9clamer-des-emplois/2193093>

⁵⁶ Office du Développement du Sud, « Gouvernorat de Tataouine en chiffres 2019 », October 2020, <http://www.ods.nat.tn/upload/files/pdf/CHIFTATAOUIINE.pdf>

⁵⁷ Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Economiques et Sociaux, « نفقة الموارد في صحراء تطاوين: تلوث بيئي واستنزاف للثروة المائية », February 12, 2021, <https://tdes.net/ar/tataouine/>

their waste into the desert. As a result, a lake of wastewater pollutes the water supply. These environmental [dangers have](#) increased since the Nawara gas and oil field began service in February 2020.⁵⁸

In an attempt to improve this environmental situation, several projects have been proposed, including a governmental program to improve water quality in the integrated development program announced by the General Commission for Regional Development of the Ministry of Development, Investment, and International Cooperation in 2017. However, plans have remained only a promise, reflecting the state's neglect of a vital resource such as water in a region that suffers from a terrible depletion of its groundwater resources.

While the world turns to renewable energies such as solar, wind, and hydro, Tunisia continues to draw on its stock of fossil hydrocarbons like gas and oil to meet its energy needs. Even worse, operators of the oil sector consider that Tunisia is under-explored and that new research authorizations should be given despite the 2017 amendment of the Hydrocarbons Code, which requires a vote in parliament to obtain permits. Politicians welcomed the entry into service of the Nawara fields, which promised to reduce Tunisia's energy deficit by 20% but further affect the ecosystem of southern Tunisia. The latter has been weakened for decades by the effects of climate change, particularly drought and growth of the desert.

Tataouine: A bit of History

Known as the “gateway to the desert,” Tataouine is first and foremost a relay on the caravan route between Gabès on the one hand and Fezzan and Sudan on the other. Shortly after the institution of the protectorate in Tunisia in 1881, the French decided to set up a military penal colony in Tataouine: The Bat 'd'Al' (the Battalions of Light Infantry of Africa) whose recruits were convicts of common law infringement or soldiers punished for disciplinary reasons. The prison was notorious for its terrible condition. Hence, the popular expression "going to Tataouine" means getting lost at the end of the world, and "Tataouine-les-Bains" suggests a despised and inhumane place.

Disparities and Dispossession

Despite the adoption of a new constitution that seeks “to achieve social justice, sustainable development and balance between regions, based on development indicators and the principle of positive discrimination” (Art.12), inequalities in Tunisia are obvious in significant geographic disparities. With globalization and territorial control by outsiders, regional disparities in Tunisia have widened, creating three regions: the central, the semi-peripheral of the coast and the south and the peripheral rural and interior. In the central metropolitan regions, such as Tunis, Sfax, Sousse and Monastir, education, development, and standards of living are high by comparison with the rest of Tunisia. In

⁵⁸ Heinrich Böll Stiftung Afrique du Nord – Tunis, « Gaz de Schiste en Tunisie, entre mythes et réalités », March 2015, https://tn.boell.org/sites/default/files/gaz_de_schist_final_version_2.pdf

the semi-peripheral regions of the coast and the South, development is based either on tourism (Djerba), on industry (Gabès) or on tourism and services (Zarzis). Thus these areas are more vulnerable to unemployment. Gafsa, for instance, where unemployment stands at 25.5% is a case⁵⁹ in point.⁶⁰ Finally, in the peripheral rural areas and the interior of the country, the situation is very different. Having no direct access to the coast and no industrial or tourism assets, rural areas have a low level of education, development, and access to the international market.

The gaps between the coastal regions and their interior counterparts, in terms of education, infrastructure or access to employment continue to widen. The lack of infrastructures is best illustrated in the health sector, which was in a poor state even before the Covid-19 pandemic. Until early May 2021, Tataouine lost 216 lives to the corona virus, a critical health situation,⁶¹ in one of the country's medically least equipped regions, with no specialized doctors in the public sector (12 in the private)⁶² compared, for instance, to 20 specialized public sector doctors in Kebili⁶³, and 15 in Tozeur⁶⁴.

The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the disparities in health service, in terms of equipment and distribution of reanimation beds.⁶⁵ With Tataouine facing the Covid crisis with zero reanimation beds (in both private and public sectors) compared to 184 in the greater Tunis area, followed by Sousse (46 beds).⁶⁶ Since this data was collected, Covid-19-specialized equipment has improved in the country. Yet, a continuing shortage in interior regions remains.⁶⁷ With 506 beds in Greater Tunis (reanimation and oxygen beds in private and public sectors) and 241 in Sfax, only 28 beds have been provided in Tataouine. For locals, the provision of basic services, such as healthcare and education, are far greater concerns than terrorism and insecurity.⁶⁸

At the economic level, coastal regions concentrate economic activities on 92% of private companies established in these urbanized regions. On the other hand, inland regions, usually not very industrialized, suffer from lack of opportunities, which makes

Tataouine the region that is most affected by unemployment. It reached 32.4% in 2018, compared to 27.06% in 2014⁶⁹. According to reports, "An inhabitant of Tataouine is three times more likely to be unemployed than an inhabitant of Monastir (9.1%)."⁷⁰

Not only does the Tataouine region lag behind⁷¹ Monastir and other governorates of greater Tunis in terms of employment,⁷² but it also lags behind in terms of the number of businesses and employment placement rates. For instance, there are no regional competitiveness clusters in Tataouine, no industrial zones, no private clinics, and no radiology centers. The governorate ranks 22nd of 24 in terms of private investments. Essamar, Ghomrassene and Dh'hiba come at the bottom of the list for social conditions, followed by the del Bir Lahmar, Remada and Tataouine Sud. These rankings reflect the low level of attractiveness and hence the inability to absorb labor deficiencies.

Also, despite the new constitution that provides that "ownership of natural resources" (Art. 13) and that "a portion of revenues coming from the exploitation of natural resources may be allocated to the promotion of regional development throughout the national territory" (Art. 136), a sense of exclusion, dispossession⁷³ and retribution prevails among the population. According to an International Alert document in 2016, 98% of Dh'hiba (an ethnic group in Tataouine) reported a strong sense of exclusion.⁷⁴

Laws regarding land acquisition are a good example. Collective land is, in fact, an extremely undivided rural asset, an elusive and imprescriptible asset, belonging, under the administrative supervision of the State, to the group that enjoys it. The use of these lands is therefore collective, and no secession nor seeparation is possible without the authorization of the supervisory authority. This results in a complex situation regarding land development and use and a clear hesitation on the part of those in control to change. An inhabitant of Tataouine expresses his feeling of deprivation as follows:

*We feel deprived of our wealth, resources, rights and labour. We are rich in oil; however, we do not manage or benefit from these revenues. Our region has been the object of regular protests driven by a sense of injustice and dispossession.... We feel doubly dispossessed: oil wealth is diverted both by "locals" and by "outsiders." Above all, we now need a governor's permission to enter parts of our land, with the creation of the buffer zone. Most of the workers here are from other regions, the Sahel, Sfax.*⁷⁵

⁵⁹ Institut National de Statistiques, « Indicateurs de l'emploi et du chômage, Deuxième trimestre 2019 », August 2019, http://www.ins.tn/sites/default/files/publication/pdf/Note_ENPE_2T2019_F2.pdf

⁶⁰ In Early 2008, Tunisia witnessed one of the biggest social movements in the Gafsa mining area. Unemployment generalized insecurity and corruption were the main drivers of the protest.

⁶¹ No author, "Tataouine, une situation sanitaire critique », April 13, 2021, Tunisie Numerique, <https://www.tunisienumerique.com/tunisie-tataouine-une-situation-sanitaire-critique/>

⁶² Office du Développement du Sud, « Gouvernorat de Tataouine en chiffres 2019 ». Op.Cit.

⁶³ Office du Développement du Sud, « Gouvernorat de Kebili en chiffres 2019 », October 2020, <http://www.ods.nat.tn/upload/files/pdf/CHIFKEBILI.pdf>

⁶⁴ Office du Développement du Sud, « Gouvernorat de Tozeur en chiffres 2019 », October 2020, <http://www.ods.nat.tn/upload/files/pdf/CHIFTOZEUR.pdf>

⁶⁵ Inkyfada, "the evolution of covid-19 in Tunisia: statistics, predictions and threats", March 31, 2020, <https://inkyfada.com/en/2020/03/31/the-evolution-of-covid-19-in-tunisia-statistics-predictions-and-threats/>

⁶⁶ No author, "أنا يقيظ تشو التوزع الجغرافي لأسرة الانعاش المخصصة لمرضى الكوفيد ولا أمل في الحصول على أسرة في المناطق الداخلية", January 17, 2021, Essada, <https://essada.net/%d8%a3%d9%86%d8%a7-%d9%8a%d9%82%d8%b8-%d8%aa%d9%86%d8%b4%d8%b1-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d9%88%d8%b2%d8%b9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%ac%d8%ba%d8%b1%d8%a7%d9%8-1%d9%8a-%d9%84%d8%a3%d8%b3%d8%b1%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a7.html>

⁶⁷ I Watch, "Distribution of the number of resuscitation and oxygen beds allocated for Covid patients in the public and private sectors", January 2021, 19 <https://www.facebook.com/I.WATCH.Organisation/photos/3576893255698544>

⁶⁸ International Alert, "Evaluation of public health services in the governorate of Tataouine: diagnosis and alternatives," February 2019, https://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Tunisia_EvaluationOfPublicHealthServices_EN_2019.pdf

⁶⁹ Office du Développement du Sud, « Gouvernorat de Tataouine en chiffres 2019 ». Op.Cit.

⁷⁰ Interview with a local Ouargla expert who has been working on the topic for years. January 9, 2021.

⁷¹ Sami Boussida, Imed Ben Rabah and Rim Ben Salhine, "Notes et analyses de l'ITCEQ : Indicateur de Développement Régional : Méthodologie et résultats », May 2018, Tunisian Institute of Competitiveness and Quantitative Studies, <https://trans-late.google.com/?sl=fr&tl=en&text=Institut%20Tunisien%20de%20la%20Comp%C3%A9titivit%C3%A9%20et%20des%20Etudes%20Quantitatives&op=translate>

⁷² Compared, for instance, to Tunis, which hosts 27% of large companies in Tunisia, followed by Ben Arous with 11% and Nabeul 10%.

⁷³ Dispossession can be traced to the colonial era, with collectivism: in 1935, the colonial administration established direct state control over collective lands, dispossessing the populations living on these lands of their freehold rights applied since the emergence of this form of ownership.

⁷⁴ Olfa Lamoum, "Marginalisation, insecurity and uncertainty on the Tunisian-Libyan border Ben Guerdane and Dhehiba from the perspective of their inhabitants", December 2016, International Alert, https://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/TunisiaLibya_MarginalisationInsecurityUncertaintyBorder_EN_2016.pdf

⁷⁵ Interview with a young unemployed Tataouini. April 27th, 2021.

According to latest available statistics, Tataouine's unemployment rate is among the highest in the country, reaching **32,4%** in 2018 in contrast to 6% in Monastir. Graduates are the most affected, comprising 36.49%, while women make up 48.19% of the unemployed in the region.⁷⁶ These unemployment rates affect living conditions and, as such, while the average national poverty rate stood in September 2020 at 17.8%, in Tataouine's localities, especially those situated at the border, such as Remada and Dh'hiba, it reached 27% and 33% respectively. This situation contrasts sharply with the governorate's wealth.

As a result of the current underdevelopment of the region and its high levels of unemployment, frustration and dissatisfaction among local communities has increased during the last four years. The number of demonstrations that took place in Tataouine is a good metric of this social activism. In 2018, 310 demonstrations occurred, compared to 427 in 2019. Protests erupted in Tataouine in 2017 in the town of Al-Kamour, calling for development projects and a fair and efficient distribution of resources. People demanded that 20% of oil and gas revenues be re-invested through public spending to improve the infrastructure. While this change has still to materialize, the social mobilization in Al-Kamour has succeeded in pressuring the government into pledging development plans and employment opportunities. Although social discontent continues to mount, Covid-19-related restrictions have limited large-scale gatherings. For example, only 69 demonstrations and protests occurred in 2020.

Al Kamour: Politics of Stalling and Repression

Al-Kamour, a non-partisan, decentralized youth movement is an issue-oriented, rather than ideologically oriented, movement. Its collegial leadership allowed it to mobilize large numbers of people and maintain momentum as it presented an alternative model of social movement. The Al-Kamour movement provided an example of continuity and evolution in obtaining demands peacefully without the intervention of traditional actors, such as politicians, trade unionists, or members of the local elite. The fact that the movement's spokesperson does not belong to any traditional political parties or unions and comes from a modest background, gave the movement legitimacy.

Violent confrontations between protesters and security forces have been ongoing since 2017; they further escalated when a young protestor, Anouar Sokrafi, was **run over** by a national guard car.⁷⁷ This further exacerbated an already tense relationship. In June 2020, the Al-Kamour movement intensified its tactics to demand the governor's departure. After organizing sit-ins and hunger strikes, confrontations **escalated** when the security forces arrested the movement's spokesperson, Tarek Hadded.⁷⁸ As a result, people took to the streets to demand his release. Then the protest turned violent. The indiscriminate violence used by the security forces has led to an increasing local support to the movement.

⁷⁶ Gouvernorat de Tataouine en chiffres 2019

⁷⁷ Hortense Lac, "impunité policière : mourir dans l'indifférence", July 31, 2018, Inkyfada, <https://inkyfada.com/fr/2018/07/31/impunite-policiere-mourir-indifference/>

⁷⁸ Hamza Meddeb, "Life on the Edge: How Protests in Tataouine Forced Tunis to Back Down", February 01, 2021, Carnegie Middle East Center, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2021/02/01/life-on-edge-how-protests-in-tataouine-forced-tunis-to-back-down-pub-83768>

Throughout 2020 and 2021, protesters were still demanding the implementation of the terms of the 2017 agreement. Demands culminated in protesters' stopping oil production for months, until November,⁷⁹ when the two parties reached a new **agreement**. Additionally, civilians, especially members of the Al-Kamour Coordination Committee,⁸⁰ are being tried before military courts, in clear violation of the 2014 constitution (Art.110), as well as the Updated Set of Principles for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights Through Action to Combat Impunity, recommended by the Human Rights Commission of the UN.

To date, different parties to the agreement, including petroleum companies and the Environment, Plantation and Gardening Company of Tataouine,⁸¹ have **failed** to fully fulfil their pledges.⁸² People in Tataouine are deeply disappointed, as expressed by an inhabitant:

*There is an explicit feeling of disappointment and disillusion from the people of Tataouine towards political leadership in the country, and mostly the president Kais Saïed.*⁸³

What the interviewee is referring to is Kais Saïed's promises during his presidential campaign. The former candidate built his campaign on promises to reduce the gap between regions with unequal distribution of wealth. These empty promises "giving voice to the marginalized" allowed him to obtain **96%** of the votes in Tataouine in the presidential elections of 2019.⁸⁴ When Al-Kamour demonstrations took place, the president proceeded with his planned official trip to Paris, despite the seriousness of national events. As explained by an interviewed activist from Tataouine:

*.... [D]uring a crisis in Tataouine following the arrest of one of Al-Kamour figures, the president chose to visit Paris to meet with French President Emmanuel Macron. His visit was disturbed by unhappy Tunisians who accused him of failing to make or delivering on promises.... In July 2020, he wrote to the Al-Kamour sit-inners inviting them to the Palace of Carthage to discuss the situation. But protestors have **declined** the invitation⁸⁵, calling on the head of state to come to Al-Kamour instead.⁸⁶*

Since these events, solutions have been crafted to address underdevelopment, but economic issues in the region have failed due to high politicization. In fact, the Corpo-

⁷⁹ Al Kamour Coordination Committee, "Details of the new agreement", November 06, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/elkamour/posts/2472653489703604>

⁸⁰ The incident of summoning the military court in Sfax to face a group of youths from the municipality of Samar, against the background of what is known as the night confrontations of August 17, 2020, which took place between the youth of the delegation of Samar and some soldiers working in the district barracks.

⁸¹ The Environment, Plantation and Gardening Company was created in 2015 as a temporary solution to unemployment in the region; it continues to exist today without any law regulating it, which prompted widespread criticism of these companies and what it has become a burden on public companies.

⁸² Alessandra Bajec, "Tunisia: In Tataouine, SocioEconomic Marginalization Is a Time Bomb", July 24, 2020, Arab Reform Initiative, https://www.arab-reform.net/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Arab_Reform_Initiative_en_tunisia-in-tataouine-socio-economic-marginalization-is-a-time-bomb_11217.pdf?ver=42ba94007bf16d91c5b5db32e5aca85e

⁸³ Interview with a journalist from Tataouine. 5th May 2021.

⁸⁴ No author, "Tataouine : Kais Saïed obtient 96% des voix", October 14, 2019, Mosaïque Fm, <https://www.mosaïquefm.net/fr/presidentielles/622759/tataouine-kais-saied-obtient-96-des-voix>

⁸⁵ No author, « Les sit-inneurs d'El Kamour déclinent l'invitation de Saïed », July 2020, 17, Mosaïque Fm, <https://www.mosaïquefm.net/fr/print/770681/les-sit-inneurs-d-el-kamour-declinent-l-invitation-de-saied>

⁸⁶ Interview with an activist from Tataouine 1st May 2021.

rate Social Responsibility Fund created for this purpose has been criticized for being under the supervision of the governor, a representative of the central authority,⁸⁷ whom Al-Kamour protesters hold responsible for non-execution of the agreement'. They have called for his immediate dismissal.⁸⁸

Also, in early May 2021, tension rose in Tataouine after the announcement of the preliminary results of recruitment in the Environment, Plantation and Gardening Company of Tataouine in Dh'hiba and Bir Lahmer. The Al-Kamour coordination committee announced that, while it should have been involved in the recruitment process, it was not informed and transparency was not guaranteed. Because fair and transparent recruitment has been a challenge in Tataouine for years, protesters have demanded that the recruitment process be made public, both internally and externally, be open to all, and be merit-based.⁸⁹ Despite everything, the movement has matured over the last four years, resisted uniting around one leader, and set up functioning oversight mechanisms. Citizens have a direct role in reviewing every step, action point, and demand before making any decision. Establishment of a regional delegation in charge of negotiating with the government is a case in point. Beyond giving the region visibility, it provides a concrete roadmap with specific programs and a plan of action to benefit Tataouinis.

Although this movement encountered aggressive opposition, distortion of demands, and high security pressure, it succeeded in bringing together large swaths of people. This could be seen in 2017 through the declaration of the Tunisian Energy Minister Hela Chikhrouhou that "cutting off routes and halting energy production is a crime! It will not be tolerated anymore because it is destroying the economy."⁹⁰ The movement has temporarily halted its activities due to Covid-19 restrictions, Ramadhan and, above all, repression. Nevertheless, the Al-Kamour coordination committee launched calls to resume demonstrations after the Aid el Fitr in mid-May 2021.⁹¹

Whether these protests will be revived or not, one thing remains sure, the Al-Kamour movement, has created an "oil stain" effect on the rest of the regions. Indeed, once the agreement was concluded in Tataouine; Kerkenna, Gafsa, Kasserine, Sfax, Kairouan, Sidi Bouzid, Beja and Gabes began demanding similar governmental commitments, thus forcing the government to rethink its national development model.⁹²

⁸⁷ Hamza Meddeb, "Life on the Edge", *Op. Cit.*

⁸⁸ No author, "Tataouine: Appel au limogeage du gouverneur (Vidéos)", February 15, 2021, Mosaïque Fm, <https://www.mosaïquefm.net/fr/actualite-regional-tunisie/859519/tataouine-appel-au-limogeage-du-gouverneur>

⁸⁹ No author, "تطويين: احتجاجات بعد الإعلان عن نتائج مناظرة انتداب في شركة البنية", May 03, 2021, Mosaïque Fm, <http://www.attesia.tv/news/nation/769632/%D8%AA%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D8%B8%D9%87%D9%88%D8%B1-%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%AC-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A3%D9%84%D9%81-%D8%B4%D8%AE%D8%B5-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A9-%D8%A7-%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A6>

⁹⁰ Zoubhir Souissi, "In marginalized south Tunisia, unrest over gas tests government", May 15, 2017, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-tunisia-protests/in-marginalized-south-tunisia-unrest-over-gas-tests-government-idUSKCN18B0VA?il=0>

⁹¹ As of June 11, 2021, protests had not resumed yet.

⁹² Khaled Hedoui, "Tunisian government in quandary over protesters' oil production stoppage", November 06, 2020, The Arab Weekly, <https://theArabweekly.com/tunisian-government-quandary-over-protesters-oil-production-stoppage>

NO WAY OUT?

Locals face three ways to escape the region's harsh realities: (1) smuggling and cross-border trade; (2) migration (regular or irregular) and escaping to other, more humane areas, and (3) joining violent groups.

Smuggling: The Occupation Par Excellence

The livelihoods of a large percentage of the population in this region depend on an informal, hidden economy, with 20% of the industrial activity in informal economy in Tataouine, compared to less than 10% in Greater Tunis, Sousse, and Monastir.⁹³ According to MoD and Mol official communiqués, the three most smuggled goods across the border with Libya, are, respectively, cigarettes, Mu'assel (tobacco smoked in hookas), and tea. Hence, since smuggling appears common and socially accepted, it has rules of conduct which obviously ignore legal and normative conventions, but which are established on a conception of legitimacy and justice very different from those governing trade in alcohol, drugs, weapons and trafficking of human beings. For obvious reasons, very few smugglers admit to practicing illicit activities (2.6% in Ben Guerdane and 2% in Dh'hiba).⁹⁴

Furthermore, the war in Libya, as well as border restrictions, has impacted livelihoods which depended on either smuggling, especially in Dh'hiba, or agriculture along the Tunisian-Libyan border. This situation has resulted from a heavy *de jure*⁹⁵ militarization of the borders since 2013, by creating the buffer zones (constituting up to 2/3 of the governorate's territory).

Furthermore, accusations that armed forces burned smuggling trucks instead of confiscating them⁹⁶ has led to increasing discontent among the population and accentuated vulnerabilities of social groups living on the borders⁹⁷.

Beyond this militarization, de facto militarization is also a reality in the south of Tunisia, as shown by the incidents of Ain Skhouna (120 km from Tataouine) and Bir Soltane (100 km from Tataouine) when tribal riots broke out following a dispute over a plot of

⁹³ Mohamed Amara, "The linkages between formal and informal employment growth in Tunisia: a spatial simultaneous equations approach", December 24, 2015, *The Annals of Regional Science*, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00168-015-0731-8>

⁹⁴ Olfa Lamloum, "Marginalisation, insecurity and uncertainty on the Tunisian-Libyan border", *Op. Cit.*

⁹⁵ Republican Order No. 2013-230 of August 29, 2013, proclaiming a buffer border zone.

⁹⁶ Yassine Atoui, "تطويين: تبادل إطلاق النار بالحدود بين الجيش ومسئولين يُسفر عن حرق 9 شاحنات تهريب", April 05, 2018, *Tunisie Numerique*, <https://ar.tunisienumerique.com/?p=1359487>

⁹⁷ African Manager, Tataouine : Grève générale à Remada suite au décès d'un contrebandier », July 25, 2016, https://african-manager.com/11_tataouine-greve-generale-a-remada-suite-au-deces-dun-contrebandier/

land located between the two localities.⁹⁸ To separate and disperse the belligerents, armed forces blocked roads to the access routes to the water source. This situation signalled the shift from a certain **complicity**⁹⁹ with and trust in the military to a confrontational relationship.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, civil-military relations in Tataouine were marked by great trust before it became the center of a tug-of-war between smugglers and protesters.

As observed by an interviewed journalist from Tataouine:

*If you observe the structure of the town, it was built around the military barrack, it is the heart of Tataouine. ... Most of the commercial and service activities are centered around meeting the needs of the military unit in the town and its formations in the advanced centers, and of course the families of soldiers who settled in Tataouine who ensured military community connectiveness..... The National Army used to provide many other services for the people of the region, such as transportation, health and infrastructure building.... Today, things have changed, with **recurrent confrontations** at the buffer zone leading to the deaths of unarmed Tataouinis who struggle for a decent life with the absence of alternatives from the state.¹⁰¹*

This kind of situation often leads to popular protest and mass discontent, further aggravating the civil-military relations in the governorate.

The most recent confrontation began May 25, 2021, when a young man, Ali Fraies, was shot and killed in a pursuit in the buffer zone of Jenine- Remada. This incident, following others that have incited residents' resentment, coincided with the 63rd anniversary of the battle of Remada.¹⁰² According to interviews, calls to **abolish the buffer zone** are mounting in Remada and Dh'hiba, to be replaced by a wholistic approach to the region, mainly from a socio-economic angle. One activist observed:

National security concerns are important, taking into consideration terrorist, human and arms trafficking, but we cannot only rely on a security approach, especially [since] the security situation is improving in Libya. Real and practical solutions to unemployment and the inclusion of young people in the economic cycle, as they find themselves compelled to work on parallel trade [are needed].... We have lost too many lives, while we were thinking that the zone was supposed to be a temporary solution and not to last 9 years and counting....¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Mabrouk Jebahi & François Pouillon, "Un affrontement 'tribal' dans le Sud tunisien ? », December 25, 2020, Leaders, <https://www.leaders.com.tn/article/31148-un-affrontement-tribal-dans-le-sud-tunisien>

⁹⁹ In May 2020, army units stationed in the TRAPSA facility allowed the protesters to enter the facility and close the oil valve, leading to the National guards' intervention to clear the protesters by force.

¹⁰⁰ Sharan Grewal, "Military Defection During Localized Protests: The Case of Tataouine", July 8, 2018, International Studies Quarterly, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c1021f7a9e028788fb04a9b/t/5c10d8ee758d46e15e69bdfc/154460798_4078/Grewal_Tataouine.pdf

¹⁰¹ Interview with a journalist from Tataouine. 5th May 2021.

¹⁰² In 1958, more than fifty people, including Mosbah Jabou, were killed after three days of clashes between French colonial forces, militants and resistance fighters in the region.

¹⁰³ Interview with an activist from Tataouine. 10/06/ 2021.

Also, despite Covid19 restrictions, a peaceful protest was organized on March 27, 2021, to demand urgent solutions to skyrocketing unemployment and to spare the blood and lives of Tataouinis. Efforts to establish community dialogues around these issues and to avoid escalation of tensions that are likely to tarnish the image and reputation of the armed forces, are **reportedly** being made.¹⁰⁴

Into the Boats or Escaping Emotions

According to available data, in 2014, **11%** of Tataouinis have chosen to migrate inter-governorate (mostly to Medenine and Gabes) in contrast to 1.6% who have chosen international migration through regular means.¹⁰⁵ Reportedly, Ghomrassen has the highest migration rate in the country. One Tataouini described a "ghost town" he witnessed:

In winter, some delegations (especially Ghomrassen), look like ghost towns. But if you come back in the summer, when migrants come back, you will feel like it is a completely different town.¹⁰⁶

Because of its secretive nature, reliable data on irregular migration is lacking. However, in September 2017, **around 600** youths reportedly left Tataouine, which represents 1% of the population.¹⁰⁷ Since then, **more** youths have left.¹⁰⁸ Irregular migration has become a form of **collective protest** against the living conditions and pervasive marginalization.¹⁰⁹ As one unemployed youth from Tataouine remarked,

Migration equals success in the imagination. Especially when you see how quickly and drastically those who have left succeeded, according to local criteria; they bought houses, fancy cars.... In their mindsets, benefits of the endeavour don't have to be outweighed by the risks to which they would be exposed.¹¹⁰

Interviewees complained about the lack of recreational infrastructure. Tataouine has no public museums and only two private ones (compared to 4 and 6 respectively in Medenine), 6 Cultural Centers (compared to 26 in Tunis), 2 theaters (compared to 7 in Gafsa) and 12 public libraries (compared to 22 in Gafsa). According to locals, they have little to be proud of and less to occupy themselves. Boredom and languor seem to

¹⁰⁴ Local MP- Bechir Khelifi, along with municipal authorities, civil society actors are facilitating a meeting with the minister of Defence, to discuss these issues.

¹⁰⁵ Institut National de Statistiques, "Recensement Général de la Population et de L'habitat 2014. Volume 5: Caracteristiques Migratoires", March 2017, <http://census.ins.tn/sites/default/files/RGPH-national-migration-CD5.pdf>

¹⁰⁶ Interview with an activist from Tataouine. 1st May 2021.

¹⁰⁷ Tarek Amara and Ulf Laessing, "Smugglers offer new routes to Europe for jobless Tunisians", October 18, 2017, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-tunisia/smugglers-offer-new-routes-to-europe-for-jobless-tunisians-idUSKB-N1CN0PK?i=0>

¹⁰⁸ Matt Herbert and Max Gallien, "Out of the streets and into the boats: Tunisia's irregular migration surge", November 27, 2017, Atlantic Council, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/out-of-the-streets-and-into-the-boats-tunisia-s-irregular-migration-surge/>

¹⁰⁹ Rihab Boukhatia, "Irregular migration: a family undertaking", July 13, 2020, Nawaat, <https://nawaat.org/2020/07/13/irregular-migration-a-family-undertaking/>

¹¹⁰ Interview with an unemployed young Tataouini. April 27th, 2021.

govern the lives of Tataouinis. Life is defined as an indefinite repetitive state, where the notions of time and life cycle are blurred by routine unfolding of unending sameness. As such, drug consumption is reportedly high among residents, especially young ones, and minors, to overcome ennui, to give themselves courage to continue living.¹¹¹

It is worth noting that in recent years, 2014-2015, Tataouine recorded very few suicides among its population, the number has increased to 9 suicides in 2018 and 5 in 2019, according to Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights [reports](#), signaling an increasing multi-dimensional, multi-factored *malaise*.

Radicalization and Extremism

Following the fall of Ben Ali in 2011, Salafi jihadist movements have gained significant presence in Tunisia. Nevertheless, popular support has varied from one region to another. According to [IS border documents](#), between 589 and 639 Tunisians, 15 foreign fighters, and 4 others killed in Syria and Iraq hailed from Tataouine.¹¹² A January 2018 [study](#) conducted by the Tunisian Institute for Strategic Studies of a convicted terrorists population of 82 inmates from different penitentiary centers throughout Tunisia identified demographic and geographical backgrounds.¹¹³ Of the overall population, 1.22% was from Tataouine. These data show that a less populous governorate like Tataouine has a greater relative representation than other governorates.

Tunisian terrorist [mobilization](#) and travel to Libya from Tataouine is staggering: upward of 90 individuals, including women, have traveled to neighboring Libya.¹¹⁴ This [trend](#) signals that the region has been the hotbed of overall recruitment to IS to Libya.¹¹⁵

Beyond reasons of economic and development insufficiency, other factors must be taken into account, including [religiosity and ideology](#). Yet interviewees and interviewers claim such cases are isolated, with few numbers, and not to be generalized into a phenomenon in the governorate.¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ Interview with a schoolteacher from Tataouine.

¹¹² Aaron Y. Zelin, "Tunisian Foreign Fighters In Iraq And Syria", November 28, 2018, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/1250>

¹¹³ the Institut Tunisien Des Etudes Stratégiques (ITES), « Assessing the Threat Posed by Tunisian Foreign Fighters », January 2018, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Sj1BrPjXAaccuE5-9tKZSXU8uUFZcni3/view>

¹¹⁴ Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Others: Foreign Fighters in Libya", January 16, 2018, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/others-foreign-fighters-libya>

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Farah Chandoul, « هجرة جماعية «جهادية» من رماة التونسية », June 2015 ,09, Al Araby, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/%D9%87%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%A9-%22%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9%22-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%B1%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%86%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9>

CONCLUSION

Ouargla and Tataouine offer informative case studies of how government neglect and abuse, broken promises, poorly crafted commitments and unemployment can fuel discontent and incite new dissatisfaction, purposelessness, addiction, antagonism, and poverty. At the same time, Ouargla and Tataouine show why and how violent activism can emerge and flourish, and even how it can become so threatening to authorities as to pose sufficient danger of increasing participation to uncontrollable levels that it can bring public policies in line with community preferences and needs.

This impact was evident throughout the pandemic. Tunisia has not experienced any rollback on transparency during the coronavirus pandemic, so far. For example, in an [unprecedented](#) transparent government disclosure in May 2021, the government announced a general audit of the hydrocarbon sector¹¹⁷ that includes representatives from civil society alongside official audit bodies. Nevertheless, major challenges remain with the continued falling of oil prices, coupled with the Covid-19 pandemic that has pushed the world into a recession.

Any policy solutions to the challenges Ouarglis and Tataouinis face should avoid reinforcing and repeating two things: resource regionalism and resource dependency. To reduce resource regionalism, initiatives that replicate and maintain a sense of negative regional identity must be abandoned. Instead of lavishing resources only on the concerns of resource-rich regions, solutions drafted by Algiers and Tunis should take a national approach and address geographic disparities and social fragmentation as a whole. Wealth derived from impoverished and neglected regions must be shared, obviously with the impoverished communities of origin, but certainly not be siphoned off for corrupt officials and wealth centers.

Second, both Algiers and Tunis should allow local authorities to collect fees from local business and resource activities to support wealth revenue sharing. An infusion of funding might entail levying a specific royalty, severance tax, use tax or other fee.

Third, at this critical point for the region's economy, it is critical to accelerate reforms aimed at transforming the economy and better controlling the industrial fabric. Algeria, for instance, needs to break free from resource dependency, which simply serves to exacerbate the underlying dispute over resources. As a result, governments should seek to diversify their economies and find additional long-term revenue streams. Enhancing

¹¹⁷ Wissem Heni, "Tunisia: Updated Assessment of the Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic on the Extractive Sector and Resource Governance", December 01, 2020, Natural Resource Governance Institute, <https://resourcegovernance.org/analysis-tools/publications/tunisia-updated-assessment-impact-pandemic-extractive>

agricultural production through land tenure stability, irrigation, and increased research and development is a solution that may help rural regions achieve food security and have substantial incomes. Tunisia, on the other hand, needs to undertake structural transformation of the main state-owned enterprises operating in the oil sector. Even though they face serious financial **challenges**, preventing them from fulfilling their commitments to producing regions, they must behave as responsible caretakers of the regions where they operate and the people who live there.

Fourth, closely monitoring tense situations, especially in Tataouine, is crucial while the risk remains of a potential attempt to take control of territories bordering Libya, similar to ISIS's attempt in 2016 to seize the city of Ben Guerdane. In a deteriorated socio-economic situation, tensions in Ouargla and Tataouine could result in quickly consolidated control over a large frontier area by terrorist groups, as happened in Iraq and Syria in 2014.

Finally, local governments must employ fiscal investments in two sectors of priority, health and education. Such investment would allow Ouarglis and Tataouinis to create a healthy, educated workforce locally or join one elsewhere if they want to relocate. Investment in health and education, generally considered universal human rights, nourishes every aspect of quality of life while also increasing community stability, pride, and participation.



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