

# Tunisia's Borders: Jihadism and Contraband

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## *Executive Summary*

Tunisia is embroiled in recurrent political crises whose origins in security concerns are ever more evident. While still of low-intensity, jihadi attacks are increasing at an alarming rate, fuelling the rumour mill, weakening the state and further polarising the political scene. The government coalition, dominated by the Islamist An-Nahda, and the secular opposition trade accusations, politicising questions of national security rather than addressing them. Meanwhile, the gap widens between a Tunisia of the borders – porous, rebellious, a focal point of jihadism and contraband – and a Tunisia of the capital and coast that is concerned with the vulnerability of a hinterland it fears more than it understands. Beyond engaging in necessary efforts to resolve the immediate political crisis, actors from across the national spectrum should implement security but also socio-economic measures to reduce the permeability of the country's borders.

The security vacuum that followed the 2010-2011 uprising against Ben Ali's regime – as well as the chaos generated by the war in Libya – largely explains the worrying increase in cross-border trafficking. Although contraband long has been the sole source of income for numerous residents of border provinces, the introduction of dangerous and lucrative goods is a source of heightened concern. Hard drugs as well as (for now) relatively small quantities of firearms and explosives regularly enter the country from Libya. Likewise, the northern half of the Tunisian-Algerian border is becoming an area of growing trafficking of cannabis and small arms. These trends are both increasing the jihadis' disruptive potential and intensifying corruption of border authorities.

One ought neither exaggerate nor politicise these developments. Notably, and against conventional wisdom, military equipment from Libya has not overwhelmed the country. But nor should the threat be underestimated. The war in Libya undoubtedly has had security repercussions and armed groups in border areas have conducted attacks against members of the National Guard, army and police, posing a significant security challenge that the return of Tunisian fighters from Syria has amplified. By the same token, the aftermath of the Tunisian uprising and of the Libyan war has provoked a reorganisation of contraband cartels (commercial at the Algerian border, tribal at the Libyan border), thereby weakening state control and paving the way for far more dangerous types of trafficking.

Added to the mix is the fact that criminality and radical Islamism gradually are intermingling in the suburbs of major cities and in poor peripheral villages. Over time, the emergence of a so-called Islamo-gangsterism could contribute to the rise of groups blending jihadism and organised crime within contraband networks operating at the borders – or, worse, to active cooperation between cartels and jihadis.

Addressing border problems clearly requires beefing up security measures but these will not suffice on their own. Even with the most technically sophisticated border control mechanisms, residents of these areas – often organised in networks and counting among the country's poorest – will remain capable of enabling or preventing the transfer of goods and people. The more they feel economically and socially frustrated, the less they will be inclined to protect the country's territorial integrity in exchange for relative tolerance toward their own contraband activities.

Weapons and drug trafficking as well as the movement of jihadi militants are thus hostage to informal negotiations between the informal economy's barons and state representatives. Since the fall of Ben Ali's regime, such understandings have been harder to reach. The result has been to dilute the effectiveness of security measures and diminish the availability of human intelligence that is critical to counter terrorist or jihadi threats. In an uncertain domestic and regional context, restoring trust among political parties, the state and residents of border areas is thus as crucial as intensifying military control in the most porous areas.

In the long term, only minimal consensus among political forces on the country's future can enable a truly effective approach to the border question. On this front, at the time of writing, an end to the political crisis seems distant: discussions regarding formation of a new government; finalising a new constitution and new electoral law; and appointing a new electoral commission are faltering. Without a resolution of these issues, polarisation is likely to increase and the security situation to worsen, each camp accusing the other of exploiting terrorism for political ends. Overcoming the crisis of trust between the governing coalition and the opposition is thus essential to breaking this vicious cycle.

Yet the current political impasse should not rule out some immediate progress on the security front. Working together to reinforce border controls, improving relations between the central authorities and residents of border areas as well as improving relations among Maghreb states: these are all tasks that only can be fully carried out once underlying political conflicts have been resolved but that, in the meantime, Tunisian actors can ill-afford to ignore or neglect.

## *Recommendations*

*To reach a political consensus on security questions*

**To the main political parties, members of the National Constituent Assembly and representatives of residents of areas adjacent to the Algerian and Libyan borders (business and civil society stakeholders, tribal chiefs):**

1. Create working groups whose aim would be to achieve a consensual and non-partisan approach to border control and public security and present their conclusions to regional and national authorities.

*To contribute to the prevention of new jihadi violence through security measures and the improvement of relations with border residents*

**To the Tunisian government:**

2. Intensify checks at the south-eastern border, notably at the Ras Jdir and Dhehiba-Wazen crossings.
3. Increase the number of mixed patrols (customs, police, National Guard, intelligence, military) under the control of the Tunisian Armed Forces and conduct additional joint training between the military and National Guard.
4. Pursue efforts to create a national intelligence agency and integrate intelligence services and counter-terrorism units within it.
5. Develop social and professional reinsertion programs for Tunisian fighters returning from the Syrian front.

**To the Algerian, Tunisian and Libyan governments:**

6. Strengthen security cooperation, notably by adding joint border checkpoints and joint patrols and encourage information sharing.

**To central, regional and local authorities as well as representatives of residents of border areas (business and civil society stakeholders, tribal chiefs):**

7. Discuss practical means to strengthen local border control mechanisms, notably via human intelligence.
8. Discuss the possibility of establishing free trade zones in border areas.

**To the Tunisian trade and handicrafts ministry and its Algerian and Libyan counterparts:**

9. Undertake feasibility studies on the creation of free-trade zones in border areas.

**To Tunisia's principal Western partners (France, Italy, Germany, the U.S. and the European Union):**

10. Focus economic cooperation, investment and development aid on the country's border and interior areas.

11. Encourage – politically, financially and technically – security sector reform, notably by professionalising security forces and avoiding politicisation of their management.
12. Encourage and facilitate inter-Maghreb security cooperation, notably by bolstering information sharing regarding Libya with the Tunisian government, particularly within the context of the European Union Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM).

**Tunis/Brussels, 28 November 2013**

# Tunisia's Borders: Jihadism and Contraband

## I. Introduction: A Border of Many Threats

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Since the Tunisian uprising of December-January 2010-2011, the number of deadly clashes between small jihadi groups and the security forces has increased, especially in border regions. At the same time, drugs and arms trafficking has intensified. This increase in violence and trafficking is fuelling political tensions that further weaken the security situation. To find a way out of this vicious cycle, government and political parties must formulate a realistic approach to the borders, separating security concerns from the political controversies at the heart of the national debate.

Too often, paranoia seems to inform the issue of border control.<sup>1</sup> Every attack against the army, the National Guard and the police puts the spotlight back on the porosity of borders and increases the political polarisation between supporters of the government coalition, led by the Islamists of An-Nahda, and the secular opposition. Each side tries to undermine the other's position, claiming it is responsible for the deteriorating situation. This will neither resolve political differences nor lead to sounder management of the security situation.

Resolving Tunisia's security problems without first resolving the serious political crisis that grips the country will be difficult, and only impedes the development of any consensus. At the time of publication of this report, it is difficult to be optimistic. Officially launched on 25 October, the national dialogue got off to a good start in pursuing its objective of implementing an ambitious roadmap: the appointment of a new prime minister; the formation of a "technocratic" government able to tackle the security question and reflecting the new balance of forces, which the opposition believes to be more favourable to itself;<sup>2</sup> finalising a new constitution; promulgation of the electoral law; and creation of a new electoral authority, all within four weeks.<sup>3</sup>

However, progress has been blocked by a series of obstacles. Although several articles of the constitution were amended to promote consensus,<sup>4</sup> talks stalled over the choice of a new prime minister. Meanwhile, an administrative tribunal disqualified the candidates put forward by the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) for the council of the independent electoral commission (ISIE), blocking discussion of the electoral law. In response, the majority in the NCA, led by An-Nahda, amended the internal rules so that the NCA office, which is its governing body, is able to meet in the absence of its president and with a quorum that allows An-Nahda deputies alone to request the holding of a plenary session.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Most press articles, especially in the Tunisian francophone press, portray the Algerian and Libyan borders as a threatening place and call for the authorities to use force. See "La frontière de toutes les menaces", *La Presse*, 21 October 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Crisis Group interview, opposition deputy, November 2013.

<sup>3</sup> See Monia Ben Hamadi, "Crise politique en Tunisie: Pourquoi la feuille de route du quartet est utopique?", *Al Huffington Post Maghreb* ([huffpostmaghreb.com](http://huffpostmaghreb.com)), 30 September 2013.

<sup>4</sup> See Monia Ben Hamadi, "Tunisie: Où en est-on à l'Assemblée?", 31 October 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Crisis Group interview, opposition activist, Tunis, November 2013.

Egged on by their radical fringes, each side seems unwilling to compromise, reflecting a crisis of trust between the coalition and the opposition. The coalition fears that if the new government does not reflect the majority, it will reconsider appointments to the administration and launch legal proceedings against An-Nahda members for promoting jihadi violence. It also fears that a gap will open up between itself and its activist supporters.

Meanwhile, the opposition is driven on by a determined minority that wants to see the removal of An-Nahda supporters from the administration and new impetus on the security front, with, without or against An-Nahda. It believes there has been a decrease in national and international support for the Islamist party, which it feels has failed to govern the country effectively.

In the absence of a pact between the two main political forces – An-Nahda and Nida Tounes<sup>6</sup> – and the reestablishment of trust in government institutions, there is a risk of political deadlock, polarisation and further deterioration of the security situation. The parties are aware of the measures they could take to gradually calm the climate of political tension in order to avoid this scenario: annul the amendments to the NCA's internal rules; identify and review "partisan" appointments to public administration; finalise the constitution; reach agreement on the electoral law; set up the ISIE; prepare municipal and presidential elections; discuss the arbitrary dismissal of senior security officials and judges by different governments since the fall of Ben Ali; and settle the cases of those killed or injured in the revolution.<sup>7</sup>

Although a wide-ranging political agreement is urgent and necessary, the security situation cannot wait and requires practical initiatives to be taken in parallel to negotiations in order to avoid it taking a turn for the worse. Whatever its ideological affiliation, the government faces a tricky choice. Informal cross-border trade acts as a safety valve, helping to maintain social peace in regions that are neglected by the authorities. However, the security vacuum that prevailed for a while after Ben Ali's fall and which still exists in Libya is having an effect on cross-border trade: the old cartels have been weakened and new actors have entered the arms and drugs trade. Moreover, Tunisia is becoming a theatre of operations for violent jihadis who see it as a strategic hinterland and a regional recruitment base.

Faced with these very real threats, how can the government improve border controls without giving in to the temptation of imposing a security crackdown that could spark a social explosion? What can the government do to avoid jihadis and smugglers forming an explosive mixture as they have already done in the Sahel? How is cross-border smuggling organised? What part does the trafficking of arms and drugs play in this smuggling-based parallel economy? Why has it grown so much since the December-January 2010-2011 uprising? How do people living in the border regions see their activities and what role do the jihadis play in border society? This report, which is based on detailed field research in Tunisia's border regions, attempts to respond to these questions. It aims to show that consensus between political forces and dialogue with representatives of the border populations are indispensable for improving the security situation. The state, although weakened, is still capable of responding to these challenges.

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<sup>6</sup> Nida Tounes is the political group of former Prime Minister Béji Caïd Essebsi.

<sup>7</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report N°123, *Tunisia: Combatting Impunity, Restoring Security*, 9 May 2012.



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## II. Jihadi Violence and the Rise of Political Tensions

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Over the course of 2013, jihadi attacks against the security forces increased in number, first in the border regions, then in the interior of the country. Every attack provoked popular indignation, thrust the issue of territorial security into public debate and increased the tension between supporters of the government coalition, notably its Islamist component, and the secular opposition. The lack of trust between these two sides is polarising the country, including the security forces, and reduces the government's capacity to ensure calm. The result is a vicious cycle: political forces attempt to ease the climate of ideological confrontation – notably within the framework of the national dialogue – but deny any responsibility for security problems, while their inability to reach a minimum of consensus only worsens the security situation.

The deterioration of the security situation and its close relationship with the political climate is dramatically expressed in the increase in the number of casualties inflicted on the security forces by jihadi violence. Between 29 April and 20 June 2013, two soldiers were killed and a dozen members of the army and the National Guard injured by the explosion of nine landmines placed by Islamist fighters near to Mount Chaambi, a few kilometres from the Algerian border.<sup>8</sup> The end of the following month saw an unprecedented massacre.<sup>9</sup> In the middle of Ramadan, on 29 July, four days after an alleged Salafi extremist killed the parliamentary deputy and member of the Popular Front, Mohamed Brahmi,<sup>10</sup> nine soldiers were ambushed on a track leading to the Chaambi National Park. Three of them had their throats cut.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Mount Chaambi (Jebel Chaambi) is a small mountain close to the Algerian border, covered with vegetation, 120 sq km in area and an altitude of 1,544m. Three-quarters of the area is classified as a national park. See Hatem Salhi, *القصرين-مقتل-ارهابي-و-اصابة-واعوان-جيش*, Tunisia Bondy Blog ([tunisiebondyblog.com](http://tunisiebondyblog.com)), 2 June 2013; Crisis Group interviews, soldier and residents of Kasserine, Kasserine, June 2013. On 24 June, on the 57th anniversary of the national army, the chief of staff of the armed forces, General Rachid Ammar, made a three-hour speech in which he announced he was retiring because of the country's disastrous security situation. Interview with Rachid Ammar, Ettouisia, 24 June 2013. He denounced the weakness of the intelligence services; declared that terrorism, smuggling and organised crime are the three main dangers; warned that the country could become another Somalia; and said that the army no longer had the means to keep the country going.

<sup>9</sup> During the 1990s, although Algeria was in the grip of a civil war, the Tunisian-Algerian border was relatively peaceful, suffering only two attacks. See Christophe Boltanski and José Garçon, "Un commando islamiste algérien frappe en Tunisie", *Libération*, 15 February 1995; Crisis Group interview, individual close to the trade union of the internal security services, Tunis, April 2013.

<sup>10</sup> The Popular Front, a coalition formed in October 2012, includes extreme left and Arab nationalist political parties and associations. Chokri Belaïd, assassinated on 6 February 2013, was a member. According to the interior minister, Mohamed Brahmi was killed by a member of an extremist Islamist group. See Nadia Akari, "Conférence de presse de Lotfi Ben Jeddou: Les 'preuves irréfutables' de la responsabilité d'Ansar Al-Chariaa", *Nawaat* ([nawaat.org](http://nawaat.org)), 28 August 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Sarah Diffalah, "La Tunisie est devenue un nouveau front pour Aqmi [al-Qaeda au Maghreb Islamique]", *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 30 July 2013. Several experts believe that the Chaambi "terrorists" were helped by local people. Crisis Group interviews, police officers, senior army officer, Tunis, August 2013. For example, the head of the Armed Forces, General Rachid Ammar, highlighted the negligence of the park rangers responsible for security in the area between the town of Kasserine and the Algerian border. An aggravating factor was that the armed group responsible for the terrorist attacks apparently established itself there more than one year before the first clashes. Interview with Rachid Ammar, Ettouisia, 24 June 2013. Members of the security forces and journalists from the region say that residents of the poor hamlets that skirt the mountain, notably smugglers, supplied the attackers and even laid some of the mines. Crisis Group interviews, interior ministry officials, former army officers, journalists, Kasserine, Tunis, June 2013. See "Le terrorisme au service de

These killings riled opponents of the government coalition<sup>12</sup> and exacerbated the political crisis into which the country had once more plunged since the assassination of Brahmi. An initial crisis had been caused by the assassination of another leader of the extreme left, Chokri Belaïd, on 6 February 2013.<sup>13</sup> The polarisation between Islamists and secularists, accentuated by a regional context marked by the deposition of President Mohamed Morsi in Egypt and the sectarian dimension of the Syrian conflict, led to an outbreak of violence in several governorates.<sup>14</sup>

On 27 July, several opposition deputies withdrew from the NCA and called for its dissolution and the appointment of a government of national salvation. They began a sit-in in front of the NCA, which was joined by several thousand people and led to clashes between pro- and anti-government (so-called pro- and anti-legitimacy) supporters. After the killing of the soldiers on 29 July was announced, the number of people joining the opposition increased significantly. Most of them believed that An-Nahda was responsible for the security crisis because of its inefficient administration, lax attitudes, passive response and even complicity with the terrorists that formed “its radical wing”.<sup>15</sup>

Following these attacks, the government made a more determined bid to deal with the security situation. The interior minister moved to tighten his grip on the Salafi-jihadi organisation, Ansar Sharia (Defenders of Sharia), led by Abou Ayadh.<sup>16</sup>

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la contrebande”, Tunisie Afrique Presse ([www.tap.info.tn](http://www.tap.info.tn)), 7 May 2013; “Jbel Chaambi: possibles connexions entre réseaux de terrorisme et de contrebande”, L’Economiste (leconomistemaghreb.com), 7 July 2013.

<sup>12</sup> On the day of the ambush, an office of An-Nahda was burned down in a suburb of Kasserine, the town closest to Mount Chaambi. “Kasserine: le local régional d’Ennahdha saccagé”, Mosaïque FM, 30 July 2013.

<sup>13</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report N°137, *Tunisia: Violence and the Salafi challenge*, 13 February 2013.

<sup>14</sup> For example, in the Gafsa mining basin, where one person was killed in clashes between demonstrators and the security forces; in the town of Sidi Bouzid, birthplace of Mohamed Brahmi; and in Kef and Sousse. See “En Tunisie, les régions se rebellent”, Al Huffington Post Maghreb ([huffpost-maghreb.com](http://huffpost-maghreb.com)), 29 July 2013. Some members of the opposition to the government coalition think that the overthrow of Morsi was a warning shot across the bows of An-Nahda, a political party belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood. Crisis Group interviews, opponents of the Troika, Tunis, August 2013. For more on the situation in Egypt, See Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Briefing N°35, *Marching in Circles: Egypt’s Dangerous Second Transition*, 7 August 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Crisis Group observations, Tunis, July-August 2013; Crisis Group interview, anti-government demonstrator in Bardo, Tunis, 30 July 2013.

<sup>16</sup> See Crisis Group report, *Violence and the Salafi Challenge*, op. cit. Seifallah Ben Hassine, known as Abou Ayadh, is the former emir of the Tunisian Combatant Group (GCT), which was on the United Nations Security Council’s list of terrorist organisations in the 2000s. On 26 August 2013, Ali Laraidh, head of the government and former interior minister (December 2011-February 2013), officially designated the group a terrorist organisation. This meant membership was now a crime. The following day, a spokesman for the interior ministry presented “proof” of the group’s involvement in the assassination of the two political leaders, terrorist actions on the Tunisian-Algerian border and the circulation of firearms in the country. Since it was formed in April 2011, this group had always maintained that it refused to practice violence on Tunisian territory and that it was engaged exclusively in peaceful preaching (*dawa*). However, in the course of 2012 and 2013, civilian and military intelligence services gradually discovered that it had a security and armed wing, was organised on a Maghreb scale, sold and stored military materials and had a training camp in Libya, a few kilometres across the border from Tunisia. A number of individuals arrested for arms trafficking, political assassinations and the events at Chaambi are alleged to have admitted their links to the GCT. Crisis Group interview, former senior government official, Tunis, June 2013. Sarah Ben Hamadi, “Ansar Al Charia, une ‘organisation terroriste’: Les preuves du ministère de l’Intérieur”, Al

Nevertheless, attacks against the security forces continued on the western border and moved towards the interior of the country, prompting further political polarisation. Deadly attacks against members of the National Guard and the police force almost led to the collapse of the national dialogue.<sup>17</sup> Some officers in the security forces reacted angrily and accused the government of putting the security of its agents in danger.<sup>18</sup> On 25 October, a trade union representing admittedly a minority of members of the security forces<sup>19</sup> lodged a formal complaint against the prime minister for his alleged involvement in the attacks and threatened to resort to “unprecedented forms of action”.<sup>20</sup> Finally, on 30 October, less than one week after the national dialogue was launched, a suicide bomber was killed in an explosion that claimed no victims other than himself on the beach of a hotel in the tourist town of Sousse.<sup>21</sup>

In general, each side blames the other for these acts of violence and exchange arguments that neither side accepts but that are not entirely without foundation. Some supporters of An-Nahda and Congress for the Republic (CPR), the party led by the president of the republic and a member of the Troika alongside the Islamist party, believe they are orchestrated by “dark forces” (close to the former regime, foreign

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Huffington Post Maghreb ([huffpostmaghreb.com](http://huffpostmaghreb.com)), 28 August 2013. A young Ansar Sharia leader denied that either the group or AQIM had played a role in these events, because if they had “they would not have worried about claiming responsibility for the attacks”, which no group has so far done. Crisis Group interview, Tunis, August 2013.

<sup>17</sup> On 16 October, two armed groups tried to seize two outposts manned by the National Guard in Faj Hassine and El Mella, a few kilometres from Algeria. On the next day, in Talla, about 40km from Tunis, a group of about twenty armed individuals killed two national guards and seriously wounded a third. The army bombarded the surrounding hill and killed thirteen members of this cell, which had links with Ansar Sharia, according to the interior ministry. See “Treize terroristes tués à Goubellat”, WMC Direct Info ([directinfo.webmanagercenter.com](http://directinfo.webmanagercenter.com)), 19 October 2013. Near to the house occupied by the attackers, the security forces seized Steyr and Kalashnikov guns, ammunition, detonators and two tonnes of raw materials for use in making bombs. See Karim Ben Said, “Point de presse au ministère de l’Intérieur, vigilance face aux cellules dormantes”, *La Presse*, 20 October 2013. On 23 October, the day on which the national dialogue was officially launched, in Sidi Ali Ben Aoun, a radical Islamist stronghold in the centre-west of the country, a unit of the National Guard was attacked by about twenty jihadis. Six national guards, including an anti-terrorist intelligence specialist, were killed by bullets fired from Kalashnikovs. On the evening of the same day, at the entrance to Menzel Bourguiba, a coastal village known for its strong Salafi-jihadi presence, four people in a car fired on a police checkpoint. One police officer was killed and another seriously wounded. Three members of the group were arrested. Two of them had recently returned from Syria, where they fought in the ranks of the jihadis of the Front for the Victory of the People of the Levant (Jabhat al-Nusra). Crisis Group interview, an individual close to the interior ministry, 24 October 2013. See Crisis Group report, *Violence and the Salafi Challenge*, op. cit.; “Tunisie: Mohamed Ali Laroui revient sur l’agression de Sidi Ali Ben Aoun”, Gnet ([gnet.tn](http://gnet.tn)), 23 October 2013. “Tunisie, terrorisme: un policier tué et un autre blessé par des terroristes à Menzel Bourguiba”, *Tunivisions.net* ([tunivisions.net](http://tunivisions.net)), 24 October 2013.

<sup>18</sup> On 20 October, at the funerals of the guardsmen killed at Goubellat, some interior ministry officials, including trade unionists, forced the president of the republic, the head of the government and the president of the NCA to leave the ceremony. “Tunisie: les dirigeants du pays chassés d’une cérémonie funéraire”, Agence France-Presse, 18 October 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Crisis Group interviews, interior ministry officials and representative of an NGO responsible for police reform, Tunis, October 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Communiqué of the trade union of the internal security forces, 25 October 2013.

<sup>21</sup> On the same day, in Monastir, it was reported that an attack on the mausoleum of Habib Bourguiba, the first president of independent Tunisia, was foiled. See “Tunisie: un homme se fait exploser devant un hôtel de Sousse, attentat déjoué à Monastir”, Al Huffington Post Maghreb ([huffpostmaghreb.com](http://huffpostmaghreb.com)), 30 October 2013.

secret services, manipulated jihadis, etc.) seeking to sabotage the democratic transition. According to this theory, the secular opposition is hoping to profit from the climate of fear generated by the jihadi attacks to create the conditions for a coup along the lines of the Egyptian model.<sup>22</sup>

This view is not shared by most of the opposition (especially the anti-Islamists) and sectors of the security forces, who accuse the government and An-Nahda of being directly responsible.<sup>23</sup> They accuse the Islamist party of weakening the state by taking a lax attitude towards terrorism and even of being complicit with the terrorists. They say it is incapable of ensuring the country's territorial integrity and of protecting it against the fallout from the war in Libya and the decline of the Jamahiriya since the fall of Mouammar Qadhafi – from the explosion of cross-border trafficking, the circulation of firearms and Islamist fighters and jihadi acts of violence.<sup>24</sup>

These mutual accusations undermined attempts to achieve a political consensus on the security question. In June 2013, a national conference against violence and terrorism, attended by representatives of 300 associations and 47 political parties, nearly degenerated into a brawl after secularists accused Islamists of involvement in the attacks against the army and the National Guard and the assassination of political leaders.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, the regional security context continued to deteriorate, borders remained just as porous as before and the border populations retained their defiant attitude to the government and carried on with their smuggling activities.

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<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group interviews, government coalition supporters and opponents, members of the security forces, Tunis, October 2013.

<sup>23</sup> In October 2013, anti-Islamists seized An-Nahda offices in several governorates. "Tunisie – Ennahdha publie la liste de ses bureaux régionaux attaqués", Business News (businessnews.com.tn), 25 October 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Crisis Group interviews, opponents of the government coalition, Tunis, 24 October 2013.

<sup>25</sup> "Sept partis se retirent du congrès national contre la violence et le terrorisme", Tunisie Focus (tunisiefocus.com), 18 June 2013.

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### III. Contraband Creates Porous Borders

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#### A. Naturally Porous Borders

Although Tunisia's political borders were all demarcated by the French army and the Ottoman Empire at the Convention of Tripoli in 1910, they remain in part naturally porous.<sup>26</sup> The mountainous, forested stretch along the Algerian border between Tabarka and Kasserine, which stretches for about 300km, is intersected by plateaus and human settlements, making it very easy to cross the border. Some small groups of settlements and fields where sheep graze straddle the border.<sup>27</sup> It is more to the south, along the stretch of the border that runs through the Chaambi mountain range, where the most serious terrorist attacks on the army and National Guard took place in 2013.

The terrain slopes down towards the south, from Kasserine to the Gafsa mining basin region of Gafsa or, more precisely, to al-Matrouha on the edge of the desert. This desert extends as far as Borj el-Khadra in the far south, where Algeria, Tunisia and Libya have a common border.<sup>28</sup> The terrain becomes more difficult towards the south, except for a few dirt tracks.

The 459km Tunisian-Libyan border is mostly desert with a low population density and requires a certain familiarity with the area and all-terrain vehicles (powerful four-wheel drive cars) to find a way through it. After a marshy area that extends a few kilometres from the Mediterranean Sea to the Ras Jdir border post, a semi-desert area stretches south to the Jeffara Plain. The first 75km are sprinkled with shallow lakes (*sebkhets*) that dry up in summer, forming muddy terrain that only the powerful all-terrain vehicles used by experienced smugglers can pass through. It is sometimes easier to use the tracks that go around the *sebkhets*. After 85km of stony desert lies the village of Dhehiba, at which point the Jebel Nefoussa mountains appears on the horizon, extending in a semicircle for about 200km as far as the town of Gharyan in Libya. Finally, the 210km between Dhehiba and Borj el-Khadra runs through the south-eastern parts of the Tunisian desert, an area with restricted circulation and controlled by the army since independence.<sup>29</sup>

The border police controls border posts through which citizens wanting to legally cross the border into Libya and Algeria can cross.<sup>30</sup> In addition to these legal crossings, there are many options open to anyone wanting to cross the border elsewhere. The National Guard, the army and customs service police the area between border posts to stop illegal crossings.<sup>31</sup> The National Guard has 105 outposts, including old

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<sup>26</sup> For more on the history of Tunisia's borders, see Mohamed Larbi Haouat, *Le problème frontalier de la Tunisie depuis l'époque ottomane jusqu'à nos jours* (doctoral thesis, Paris, 2004).

<sup>27</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents of the Kef governorate, Tunis, April 2013.

<sup>28</sup> See map of western Tunisia in Appendix A and map of southern Tunisia in Appendix B.

<sup>29</sup> Non-residents, tourists and staff at oil facilities must request a pass, renewable every three months, from the regional authorities.

<sup>30</sup> There are six on the Tunisian-Algerian border, respectively from north to south, Melloula-Oum Tebboul, near Tabarka; Sakiet Sidi Youssef-Haddada; Babouch-El Aïoun in the Ain Draham delegation (local authority); Haïdra-Bir Atir, 70km to the west of Kasserine as the crow flies; Bouchebka, at the foot of the Dernaya mountains, a few kilometres from Mount Chaambi; and Hazoua, in the south east, near Tozeur. On the Tunisian-Libyan border, there are only two border posts – Ras Jdir and Dhehiba-Wazen. The place names after the dashes are the names of the border posts on the Algerian/Libyan side of the border.

<sup>31</sup> The customs service often operates from the border posts and is responsible for the control of goods.

forts built by the French army,<sup>32</sup> from which it patrols the border, often reinforced by military units.<sup>33</sup> These outposts are located at an average of 15km from each other in the west and 70km in the south east.<sup>34</sup>

## B. *Contraband and the Informal Economy*

### 1. A parallel system

Although the increase in the amount of goods avoiding state controls poses a number of economic security problems, the way in which the authorities react (relative tolerance or clampdown) is an essentially social and political question.

The expression “contraband” describes a broad range of economic activities that should not be lumped together in a single category. There is a struggle between economic operators who operate in a “more or less” legal way and those who operate in a “not so legal” way.<sup>35</sup> While the government has to fight this phenomenon in order to maintain its legitimacy among operators in the formal sector,<sup>36</sup> it must avoid indiscriminately stifling individuals or groups in the informal sector.

Smuggling includes various informal and fraudulent activities of which the trafficking of arms and drugs is the most dangerous but smallest part. Hundreds of thousands, even millions of people, have no option but to participate in this system in order to survive,<sup>37</sup> often working with the state agents who are supposed to stop it. To a certain extent, these fraudulent practices act as a safety valve that defuses social violence, slows down the rural exodus, reduces unemployment and offers sources of income to people living in rebellious regions that are deprived of almost any public investment.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Crisis Group interviews, border guards, Tunis, Feriana, April-August 2013.

<sup>33</sup> These are normally joint army and National Guard patrols. Although the National Guard comes under the control of the interior ministry and the army under the defence ministry, they have practically identical structures, in terms of training, ranks and equipment. Both are military institutions. The army also has a Saharan brigade in the south, trained to operate in desert conditions.

<sup>34</sup> Crisis Group interviews, border guards, Tunis, Feriana, April-August 2013. To be more exact, four corps are responsible for controlling land borders. Although they are all trained to supervise the passage of people and vehicles, customs officers are responsible for the paper work. The army, the National Guard and the customs service patrol between border posts to monitor the movement of people and vehicles. The police force is present at border posts (border police). In general, it controls checkpoints on the main roads within the country. According to one of its members, the national guard's main mission is to combat terrorism and control the circulation of dangerous goods (arms and drugs), especially at the outposts. Crisis Group interview, border guard, Tunis, April 2013.

<sup>35</sup> Crisis Group interview, economist, Tunis, September 2013.

<sup>36</sup> Law 91-64 of 29 July 1991 on competition and prices protects the formal sector and severely sanctions practices considered to restrict or distort competition. See [www.intt.tn/upload/txts/fr/loi\\_193.pdf](http://www.intt.tn/upload/txts/fr/loi_193.pdf).

<sup>37</sup> See Hamza Meddeb, *Courir ou mourir: course à el khobza et domination au quotidien dans la Tunisie de Ben Ali* (doctoral thesis, Paris, 2012).

<sup>38</sup> See Hamza Meddeb, *op. cit.* The so-called “rebellious” regions cover the western part of the country that borders Algeria and Libya. Historically, these regions have opposed the central government. Protest movements in the second half of the 2000s, which culminated in the December-January 2010-2011 uprising, spread through these regions: a revolt in the mining basin of Gafsa in 2008, a riot in Ben Guerdane against closure of the Ras Jdir border post in August 2010, riots in the Sidi Bouzid governorate and then Kasserine in December-January 2010-2011.

Officially, some border control officials say that smuggling should not be tolerated at all.<sup>39</sup> In practice, strict application of customs procedures would in many cases paralyse the economy of entire regions.<sup>40</sup> In the words of one customs official, the informal economy, which occupies a grey area between the legal and the illegal, is “a necessary evil”.<sup>41</sup>

It is also an inevitable evil. Whether under Ben Ali's regime or today, the security services are incapable of controlling the flow of vehicles between Algeria and Libya, that pass through official border posts or illegally along other tracks. In 2013, customs officials and national guards interviewed by Crisis Group said they were only able to inspect a maximum of one in four vehicles crossing the border and detect one in two. An equal number cross the border illegally along tracks and legally at official border crossings.<sup>42</sup>

This parallel economy includes several more or less illegal and risky activities but all of them are at some stage illegal. The most widespread activity is carried out by people who transport goods on a small scale and bribe customs officials to accept false declarations and false papers in order to avoid paying taxes and fines. They generally cross the borders at official crossing points on the Libyan border and use unofficial tracks on the Algerian border.

Many smugglers cultivate contact with a protecting agent, a customs officer or junior police officer who, in return for a bribe (*rachoua*), guarantees that their goods will not be seized when being processed and that they will only pay a minimum tax.<sup>43</sup> According to a customs officer at the Dhehiba-Wazen border post on the Tunisian-Libyan border, these illegal commercial procedures are accepted and regulated by an unwritten code of practice.

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<sup>39</sup> “Smuggling challenges the authority and security of the state. People must observe the law. We cannot legitimise the illegitimate and tolerate the intolerable. All forms of smuggling, even of fuel, are prohibited. The same is true of everything that is within the state's domain, that is, the products over which the state has a monopoly”. Crisis Group interview, customs official, Tataouine governorate, April 2013. Many customs officials went on strike on 22 April 2013 in protest at attacks on their patrols. “Tunisie: 80 % des agents customs officiels en grève générale”, Afriquinfos (m.afriquinfos.com), 22 April 2013.

<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group interviews, customs officials and national guards, Ben Guerdane, Tataouine, Médénine, Kasserine, Feriana, Le Kef, border settlements, March-August 2013. During the 1980s, the economy of the south east of the country was suffocated. Tunisia openly accused Libya of being behind an armed nationalist group's incursion into the town of Gafsa in January 1980. Diplomatic relations between the two countries then deteriorated: Libya expelled 40,000 Tunisian immigrants and closed and militarised the border. The economic situation in the region continued to deteriorate until 1988 when the new government led by Ben Ali reopened the borders.

<sup>41</sup> Crisis Group interview, customs official, Tunis, June 2013.

<sup>42</sup> Crisis Group interviews, customs officials and national guards, Ben Guerdane, Tataouine, Médénine, Kasserine, Feriana, Le Kef, border settlements, March-August 2013.

<sup>43</sup> For informal traders, corruption in border control agencies, especially in the customs service, is an acknowledged feature of everyday life. In a very poor border village, one smuggler noted that some villagers were hesitating about accepting a role in the smuggling of electronic goods because they deemed the bribe they would have to pay to be too big in relation to what they expected to earn from the operation. Crisis Group interview, fuel and construction iron smuggler, Tunisian-Algerian border, March 2013.

“We accept that average citizens who are not authorised importers carry out occasional commercial operations, carrying goods in their “hand luggage”. We tolerate small-scale importing and tacitly treat the goods in their vehicles as personal property”.<sup>44</sup>

Trading is at a regional level. Medium and large companies often arrange for the delivery of containers by sea to the Libyan ports of Tripoli and Misrata in order to avoid customs duties.<sup>45</sup> These traders arrange for Libyan and Tunisian smugglers to deliver their goods across the border into Tunisia.<sup>46</sup>

## 2. Defining smuggling

Most people living in the border regions do not consider these small-scale transporters and handlers as real “smugglers” (*knatri*). They prefer to use the term “traders” or “entrepreneurs”.<sup>47</sup> The expression “smuggler” is reserved for the slightly mysterious and mythical figure known as “son of the border”,<sup>48</sup> who takes risks by crossing the borders and illegally importing goods that are banned or taxed heavily such as cigarettes, alcohol, raw materials (fuel, construction iron, copper) and dangerous merchandise, the possession of which is punishable under criminal law (stolen goods, drugs and arms).<sup>49</sup>

Smugglers are organised and have their own hierarchy. Some are assisted by lookouts, young people who keep a watch on the movements of the security services, and drivers of commercial vehicles or 4x4s to escort convoys. Some work for an employer and therefore receive a wage (*chauffeurs*), while others have their own car. At the top of the pyramid are the wholesale trade bosses (*patrons-grossistes*). They own warehouses in the west, where goods are traded on the Tunisian-Algerian border, and are members of business cartels in Kasserine, Kef and Sakiet Sidi Youssef. In the

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<sup>44</sup> Crisis Group interview, customs official, Tataouine governorate, April 2013. Informal trade also involves people who distribute goods in the interior of the country without licence or patent as well as thousands of impoverished young people from poor regions who become small-scale traders, illegal street vendors or offer these goods for sale on street stalls in major towns and cities.

<sup>45</sup> This is an old phenomenon and dates from the suspension of the embargo against Libya at the end of the 1990s and the subsequent gradual dismantling of customs barriers that allowed it to become a regional base for the re-export of Asian goods. It forms part of a global route that took shape in the 1990s. It begins in Hong Kong, Yiwu, Guangzhou (China), passes through Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia) and Dubai, crosses the Suez canal, continues towards Tripoli in Libya and then on to Ben Guerdane in Tunisia. See Hamza Meddeb, *op. cit.*

<sup>46</sup> A variation on this method is that the goods are unloaded in Tunisia at the ports of La Goulette, Radés and Zarsis. Instead of being sold there, they are re-exported by land to Libya, then, in order to avoid customs duties, smuggled back into Tunisia through official border crossings. The forms and licences authorising the entry of the goods are, in both cases, falsified thanks to the importers’ “political contacts” and connections in the customs service. Traders sometimes order goods from Algeria and smugglers deliver them to the person in question’s home after collecting them at pick-up points on the border, away from the official border crossings. Crisis Group interview, director of a maritime transport company, Tunis, June 2013. In Libya, they are generally assisted by partners or frontmen who deal with customs clearance procedures in exchange for a commission.

<sup>47</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents of western and southern border regions, Algerian and Libyan borders, February-August 2013.

<sup>48</sup> Crisis Group interview, resident of Kasserine, Kasserine, May 2013.

<sup>49</sup> In the south east, these smugglers, or *tayouts* as they are known from the name of their Toyota Land Cruiser vehicles, transport high-value and dangerous goods using powerful, all-terrain vehicles that are able to cope with the sandy and muddy tracks between Tunisia and Libya.



south east, they belong to tribal cartels from Ben Guerdane and Dhehiba, mainly controlled by the Touazine clan, which is part of the Ouerghemma confederation.<sup>50</sup>

### 3. A multitude of goods

Goods that are subsidised in Algeria, Tunisia and Libya were the first to be illegally traded between the three countries.<sup>51</sup> In Tunisia, the most prized product is fuel imported from Algeria and Libya.<sup>52</sup> Petrol stations line the main roads from the south-east across to the west of the country. Residents of many settlements along the national roads have felt the need to improvise speed bumps “to slow down the smugglers, who have been responsible for several fatal accidents”.<sup>53</sup>

Petrol smuggling works like this. The Algerian *trabendistes*,<sup>54</sup> of which there are many in the villages of the east of the country, obtain fuel from the tankers that supply the service stations or draw it directly at the pump. They then transport the fuel, generally in commercial vehicles, to multiple storage points at small trading centres. These are located along the border, in steep-sided valleys or the middle of fields between Tabarka and Kasserine, which are crossed by tracks along which fuel can be transported by donkey or car.<sup>55</sup>

Once the fuel reaches the border, donkeys are sometimes used to carry it across the few hundred metres that separate the two countries.<sup>56</sup> In some places, Tunisian

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<sup>50</sup> From Médenine to Ben Guerdane, near the Libyan border, there is a complex network of unofficial currency exchange markets that convert the Libyan and Tunisian dinars and supply the currencies (euros and dollars) needed to pay for imported goods. These networks are called *duleb* and are modern versions of traditional tribal economic networks. They are dominated by the Touazine, the Ben Guerdane clan, which maintains close tribal relations with the Nouayel in Libya. Until the end of the nineteenth century, the steppes of what is now south-eastern Tunisia were home to the nomadic tribes of the Ouerghemma confederation: the Touazine, the Khazour, the Ouderna, the Accara and the Jebelia. Tunisian society is no longer based on tribal power, but there is strong local solidarity between members of extended families and, rather than disappear, tribal solidarity has helped create the cross-border smuggling networks and develop and integrate them into today's globalised economy. See Rfaaa Tabib, *Effets de la frontière tuniso-libyenne sur les recompositions économiques et sociales des Werghemmas, de la possession à la réappropriation des territoires* (doctoral thesis, Tours, 2011).

<sup>51</sup> The three governments subsidise staple products (bread, sugar, oil, petrol, construction materials, etc.).

<sup>52</sup> The fact that the price of a litre of premium grade petrol is three times lower in Algeria (23 Algerian dinars, about €0.22) than it is in Tunisia (1.57 Tunisian dinars, about €0.77) explains the interest in this activity, which is well-organised on both sides of the border. In Algeria, fuel is subsidised by the government. According to an official at the Tunisian interior ministry, the security services have identified nearly 2,000 smuggled vehicles, most of which were Isuzu utility vehicles. However, the real figure is higher. Residents on the Tunisian-Algerian border estimated the figure at more than 3,500. Crisis Group interviews, interior ministry official, residents of Kasserine and western border settlements, March-June 2013.

<sup>53</sup> Crisis Group interviews, resident of a village near Kasserine, February 2013.

<sup>54</sup> *Trabendo* is derived from the Spanish *contrabando* and is the term used in Algeria to describe the practice of smuggling.

<sup>55</sup> These trading centres are often located in small settlements and hamlets such as Our Ali, Boudries, Srirat, Hydra, Sahraoui, Boudriez, Darnaya, Bouchebka, Mejel Bel Abez, Ouled Marzouk, Sakit Sidi Youssef. The steppes of the border regions, descending towards the south, from Kasserine towards Gafsa to Matrouha, are also crossed by tracks, but they are used less frequently. Crisis Group interviews, smugglers, Tunisian-Algerian border, March-May 2013; Crisis Group observations, Tunisian-Algerian border, March-June 2013.

<sup>56</sup> Crisis Group observations, Tunisian-Algerian border, May 2013.

smugglers enter Algeria along tracks. However, in general, they wait about twenty metres from the border.<sup>57</sup> The procedure is more or less the same for other goods,<sup>58</sup> some of which are more closely controlled than others, such as cigarettes and spirits, sold to hotels on the coast or re-exported to Libya;<sup>59</sup> drugs, especially cannabis; and firearms.<sup>60</sup>

Goods smuggled from Tunisia to Algeria along the tracks are equally diverse. For example, coral in the region of Tabarka, foodstuffs (most of which are subsidised by the government), livestock, construction materials (cement, reinforcing bars), clothes made at coastal factories and firearms.<sup>61</sup> Personal vehicles forbidden for sale in Tunisia are driven through border crossings and disappear into Algeria with the complicity of customs officials and border police officers.<sup>62</sup>

There is also a great diversity of goods smuggled across the Tunisian-Libyan border. Most go through the Ras Jdir border post and some through Dhehiba-Wazen. The rest, especially high-value and dangerous products, are transported along the much less practicable unofficial tracks crossing the border. Chemical fertilisers produced in Tunisia are exported to Libya, as well as phosphates extracted in the mining basin, ceramics, livestock and foodstuffs. Alcohol imported from Algeria and cannabis harvested in Morocco, a large proportion of which is transported through Algeria and Tunisia, use the border posts and the unofficial tracks. Trade is even more flourishing in the Libya to Tunisia direction and includes, fuel, foodstuffs, clothes and furniture, household and electronic appliances, vehicles,<sup>63</sup> cigarettes, pharmaceutical drugs (especially psychotropic drugs and Subutex and Tramadol tab-

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<sup>57</sup> According to a border police officer, few Tunisians venture into Algeria because of the risks. "They know that the military could open fire on them if they enter". Crisis Group interview, national guard, Tunis, May 2013.

<sup>58</sup> This is true of various goods: tyres, auto parts, furniture, cheap and gold-plated jewellery, perfume, cosmetics, Turkish carpets, rugs, clothes made in China, kitchen utensils, tiles, air-conditioners, plasma screens, construction iron, copper, fertilisers, coffee, chocolate, tuna, fizzy drinks, yogurt, powdered milk, bananas, apples, dry fruit, livestock, especially sheep, etc.

<sup>59</sup> Crisis Group interviews, smugglers, national guards, Tunis, Tunisian-Algerian border, March-June 2013. Cigarette smuggling is also very profitable. One smuggler said he could earn 500 dinars (€250) per day. Crisis Group interviews, smugglers, national guards, customs inspector, Kasserine, Tunis, March-June 2013. "Médénine: échec à la contrebande", *La Presse*, 16 March 2013.

<sup>60</sup> See Section III.C. Generally, small-scale smugglers, operating on their own behalf, and large-scale smugglers cross the border to Algeria at official crossings or send intermediaries carrying cash. They order goods at the wholesale or semi-wholesale markets, which the Algerians then transport to storage points on the border. They pass through border police controls, go a few metres to the storage points, pick up the goods that have been delivered to them or return to their home and wait for transporters to deliver the goods. Crisis Group interviews, smugglers, Tunisian-Algerian border, March-May 2013; Crisis Group observations, Tunisian-Algerian border, May 2013.

<sup>61</sup> See Section III.C.

<sup>62</sup> Crisis Group interviews, smugglers, Tunisian-Algerian border, March-April 2013. Algerian traders sometimes enter Tunisia to place an order, especially of used clothing that will then be smuggled across the border along the tracks away from the official border posts. Goods made in Tunisia even leave the country and are then imported back, for example, goods subsidised in Algeria, which are resold in Algeria to Tunisian smugglers who bring them into Tunisia along the tracks.

<sup>63</sup> The import of vehicles from Libya is strictly forbidden. Some are brought across the border and modified in Tunisia. People in the towns specialise in changing number plates and falsifying registration documents. Crisis Group interviews, residents of Ben Guerdane and Tunis, Ben Guerdane, April-May 2013.

lets) and military equipment.<sup>64</sup> Most of these goods, except for those that are prohibited, are sold in the markets of the trading town Ben Guerdane, where Tunisians come to buy goods at prices they would not conceivably find elsewhere.<sup>65</sup>

### C. *Relaxation of Security and a Massive Increase in Smuggling*

#### 1. The police vanish

All this informal activity has perverse effects that are denounced by economic operators in the formal sector, who maintain it is responsible for the increase in inflation,<sup>66</sup> and the security forces, which accuse it of weakening border security. However, contrary to conventional wisdom, smuggling dates back to before Ben Ali's overthrow.<sup>67</sup> It increased throughout the 1990s and even more so in the second half of the 2000s, a period during which the families of the president and his wife became infamous as corruption reached record levels.<sup>68</sup>

Trafficking in arms and drugs also already existed.<sup>69</sup> Foreign press reports highlighted the extraordinary wheeler-dealing of the reigning families as evidence of the existence of a border "mafia" economy that had ramifications in Europe. It was quick to label Tunisia as the "couscous connection".<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Subutex is a heroine substitute. Tablets are sold for about €125 for seven and are dissolved and injected by users. Samira Rekik, "Drogue en Tunisie: L'inquiétante montée de l'addiction", *Réalités Online* (realites.com.tn), 24 May 2013. Also see Section III.C.

<sup>65</sup> Some engaged couples buy their outfits in Ben Guerdane. They save a substantial amount, between 50 and 60 per cent. Crisis Group interviews, shopkeepers, Ben Guerdane, May 2013. Crisis Group observations, Ben Guerdane, May 2013.

<sup>66</sup> Smuggling into Libya and Algeria leads to shortages of subsidised products. Speculators profit by bringing them to market at prices higher than the subsidised price outside the control of the competent authorities. Crisis Group interviews, entrepreneurs, Tunis, February 2013. Also see Anis Ahmed, "Tunisie: la contrebande, un problème qui s'aggrave", *Business Flood* (businessflood.com), 15 April 2013.

<sup>67</sup> See Hamza Meddeb, *op. cit.*; Rafea Tabib, *op. cit.*; Mustapha Chandoul and Hassan Boubakri, "Migrations clandestines et contrebande à la frontière tuniso-libyenne", *Revue européenne des migrations internationales*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1991), pp. 155-162.

<sup>68</sup> See Robert F. Godec, U.S. ambassador in Tunisia, "Corruption in Tunisia is getting worse", 23 June 2008, as published by WikiLeaks. Also see the report by the National Commission of Investigation into Corruption and Embezzlement, October 2011, [www.cnicmtunisie.tn/](http://www.cnicmtunisie.tn/). These allegations of corruption were rejected by the deposed president after he was tried in his absence. See "Ben Ali slams fast-track corruption conviction as 'insane'", *Agence France-Presse*, 21 June 2011.

<sup>69</sup> A smuggler near Tala, not far from the Algerian border reported that "dangerous operations" or "quality operations" were commonplace under Ben Ali. "At that time, I used to drive to the border to meet up with another car that would have a boot full of goods. I changed cars without knowing what was in the boot of the second car and I delivered the goods to Sousse". Crisis Group interview, smuggler, Tala, May 2013.

<sup>70</sup> See "La 'couscous connection'", *Le Monde*, 3 November 1995. Also see Zined Dryef, "Yachts volés: les neveux de Ben Ali seront-ils jugés un jour?", *Rue 89* (rue89.com), 9 August 2009. Despite their criminalisation (which, is still in the news, by the way), cocaine and cannabis were commonplace at the parties of wealthy young people in the capital's northern suburbs and along the east coast. In May 2013, about 15,000 people were serving prison sentences for smoking cannabis. Possession of a "joint" or "fusée" was punishable by a nine-month custodial sentence with no remission. Crisis Group interviews, police officer, residents of Tunis suburbs, Tunis, May 2013. People in the suburbs consumed a wide range of drugs. Petty criminals sometimes owned 9mm calibre pistols, although this was less common. Smuggling of hunting rifles was also widespread, although some farmers used this weapon for self-defence. In the region of Tataouine, several residents admitted to hunting with Kalashnikov submachine guns imported from Libya, where this type of weapon already circu-

The context has changed since the 2010-2011 uprising and the fall of Muammar Qadhafi. Some smugglers working the Algerian border say that trade has increased in an anarchic way. As one of them said: "Previously, everything was structured, each person had a role. Now, it is anarchy. The quantity of goods has increased. Everybody wants a share of the action".<sup>71</sup> Another said: "The traffic has increased three or four fold since the time of Ben Ali and that is true of all the borders".<sup>72</sup>

It is the withdrawal of the police force, especially in the regions of Kasserine and Tala, that led to this massive increase in smuggling.<sup>73</sup> The police force used to keep a close eye on the activity. It regulated the trade and levied, in the form of bribes, part of the profits earned by small-scale transporters, which helped to reduce the overall volume and number of transactions. Some hardened smugglers recall the first months following the uprising as a golden age, despite the insecurity that made travel along the tracks much more risky.<sup>74</sup>

During 2011, the drastic reduction in control operations conducted by the National Guard, the customs service and the police force along the main roads facilitated the entry of goods that were banned under the previous regime. In that year, prosecutions of smugglers and seizures of goods by the customs service were very rare. They increased threefold during 2012 to 2010 levels.<sup>75</sup> According to the interior ministry, smuggling operations thwarted by the National Guard numbered only 91 in 2011 and 441 in 2012, compared to 3,650 in 2010.<sup>76</sup>

This relaxation in security attracted smugglers from the western border regions to the tourist regions along the eastern coast.<sup>77</sup> Until then, they had not ventured along the roads connecting the major cities, because of the greater controls. It also attracted small-scale transporters from the interior of the country to border regions that were previously considered to be the preserve of the "sons of the borders". The weakened security also encouraged some smugglers in the west to equip themselves with arms for self-defence, which contributed to developing networks for smuggling handguns and hunting rifles.

## 2. Drug trafficking

Drug trafficking is on the rise and this could intensify the struggle for control of trafficking routes and increase the level of corruption in security services.<sup>78</sup> The consumption of drugs has increased in the border regions and in urban suburbs despite its criminalisation.<sup>79</sup> Some traffickers acknowledge that the trade in cannabis is a

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lated, following the government's policy of arming the people at the end of the 1980s. Crisis Group interviews, residents of Tataouine, Tataouine, May 2013.

<sup>71</sup> Crisis Group interview, smuggler, Algerian border, May 2013.

<sup>72</sup> Crisis Group interview, smuggler, Kasserine region, May 2013.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Nocturnal attacks on isolated roads were commonplace.

<sup>75</sup> "Retour en force de la contrebande en Tunisie: +330 %", Webdo (webdo.tn), 19 January 2013.

<sup>76</sup> "Opérations de contrebande déjouées par les unités sur le terrain de la garde nationale (2008/01/01-2013/03/31)", Ministry of the Interior (interieur.gov.tn), first quarter, 2013.

<sup>77</sup> A small-scale transporter said he sold cigarettes and bottles of alcoholic drinks from Algeria to hotels in the Sousse region. Crisis Group interview, smuggler, Tunisian-Algerian border, April 2013.

<sup>78</sup> Crisis Group interviews, smugglers, Kasserine, Hydra, March-May 2013. Several seizures demonstrate the availability of this product. "Tunisie: Arrestation de deux personnes en possession de 17 kg de cannabis", WMC Direct Info (directinfo.webmanagercenter.com), 4 April 2013; "Kasserine: Arrestation de deux membres d'un réseau de drogue", Mosaique FM, 22 April 2013.

<sup>79</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents of Kasserine, Kasserine, June 2013.

profitable business in the west. They claim that less than 20 per cent is consumed locally and that they are able to meet the growing demand. Most of it is exported to Libya, with western Tunisia's role being mainly to act as a transit point between Morocco, Algeria, Libya and Egypt.<sup>80</sup>

According to some smugglers, cannabis is generally taken across the border at the same time as other goods. Trafficking is controlled by wholesale trade bosses who are the first to take a cut from the profits.<sup>81</sup> Small-scale transporters do not generally know what goods they are carrying so that they do not get "stressed when talking to the police" in the event of them being stopped for checks.<sup>82</sup> Much higher bribes are required to get drugs through. The ideal arrangement is to "buy the road",<sup>83</sup> that is, pay the senior officer at the checkpoint to let goods through, escorted by two vehicles not carrying any prohibited goods, one in front and one behind.<sup>84</sup>

The quantity of cannabis traded has also increased in the south east. However, it is particularly the increase in the trafficking of pharmaceutical tablets (Subutex and Tramadol) from Libya that most concerns officials.<sup>85</sup> According to a Tunisian diplomat in Libya, in 2012, the Libyan police confiscated 61 million tablets of synthetic drugs manufactured in India, a proportion of which was for delivery to Tunisia.<sup>86</sup> Business was booming.<sup>87</sup>

The increase in trade in this high-value product could lead to disputes and make the borders even more porous in a context characterised by the continued weakness of the security forces, growing instability in Libya and increasing demand for firearms in Tunisia.

### 3. Tunisia: A corridor for Libyan arms?

Although the trafficking of firearms into Tunisia is a worrying development, it would be unwise to exaggerate the phenomenon. Rumours about the trafficking of military equipment from Libya are rife right across the political spectrum and increase the climate of suspicion between Islamists and secularists.<sup>88</sup> The most common hypotheses focus on plots and manipulation. Opponents of An-Nahda often hold the gov-

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<sup>80</sup> "Cannabis: en 2013, l'Algérie a saisi plus de 127 tonnes de kif marocain", *Jeune Afrique*, 2 November 2013. Crisis Group interviews, smugglers, customs officials, Tunis, Kasserine, Tataouine, February-June 2013. "Army foils arms, drug smuggling near Libya border", *Egypt Independent* (egyptindependent.com), 11 June 2013.

<sup>81</sup> Crisis Group interviews, smugglers, Kasserine, April 2013. A resident of Kasserine said: "you recognise the drugs traffickers because of their wealth. You can see their villas suddenly appearing like mushrooms". Crisis Group interview, resident of Kasserine, Kasserine, March 2013.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Crisis Group interview, resident, Tunisian-Algerian border, May 2013.

<sup>84</sup> The mechanism seems to be the same for arms. Crisis Group interview, resident of Médenine, Médenine, March 2013.

<sup>85</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Tunisian diplomat, adviser to the presidency of the republic; adviser to the prime minister, Tunis, Tripoli, May-June 2013.

<sup>86</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tunisian diplomat, Tripoli, May 2013.

<sup>87</sup> According to an international official working in Tripoli, Libya is becoming a key link in international drugs trafficking: "The presence of Nigerian groups in the coastal towns and several operations by anti-drugs units suggest that Libya is becoming a point of transit for drugs exported through West Africa to Europe. The trade has not been consolidated but there is a risk it will be. That will further destabilise the country and certainly have repercussions for Tunisia". Crisis Group interview, international official, Tripoli, May 2013.

<sup>88</sup> See Mohsen Zribi, "La frontière de toutes les menaces", *La Presse*, 21 October 2013.

erning party responsible for the increase in trafficking.<sup>89</sup> Meanwhile, the Islamist party's activists accuse the Salafi-jihadis, who they say are being manipulated by foreign secret services and supporters of the former regimes of Ben Ali and Qadhafi, to stockpile arms in order to cause trouble and bring down the Islamist government.<sup>90</sup>

Whatever the truth of these mutual accusations, there has been an increase in seizures of military equipment since the start of 2013, although the quantities involved are small. The most noteworthy seizures took place on 17 January near Médenine in the south east and on 20 February in Mnihla, a few kilometres from the town of Ettadhaman, close to Tunis, a Salafi-jihadi stronghold. The army seized a few surface-to-air missiles, Kalashnikov guns, Russian RPG rocket launchers, anti-personnel mines, grenades, 9mm pistols, ammunition, material to make improvised explosive devices, detonators and Tunisian military uniforms.<sup>91</sup> In August, the Anti-Terrorist Brigade (BAT) searched the homes of several alleged terrorists and, in each case, the searches ended in exchanges of fire and the seizure of Kalashnikovs and explosives.<sup>92</sup> This showed that mixed groups of traffickers and jihadis do exist and are armed.<sup>93</sup>

Although most security service officers and experts question the conspiracy theories, they agree that most firearms entered the country during the first half of 2011, when the security vacuum was most pronounced and when the Libyan conflict was at its height. Although the transitional governments adopted a position of neutrality in the conflict – their priority was to protect the borders and avoid fighting spilling

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<sup>89</sup> Some, including a trade unionist from the Tataouine region in the south of the country, go so far as to say that the trafficking of firearms will help to destabilise Algeria and maintain An-Nahda in power. "Under the government of Béji Caïd Essebsi between April and December 2011, there was a serious security vacuum. A lot of arms were circulating. Some came from the arsenals of Qadhafi's army, looted after his fall. When An-Nahda assumed leadership of the government after the elections on 23 October 2011, the authorities did not give instructions to stop this trafficking. On the contrary, An-Nahda facilitated it. Thanks to its efforts, Tunisian jihadis were able to store some of these arms close to the Tunisian-Algerian border so that the Algerian jihadis could use them if the "Arab spring" spread to Algeria. As nothing happened in Algeria, Tunisian jihadis moved the arms to locations around the major towns and cities so that they would be able to defend An-Nahda if it were to be ousted from power by a coup or following the next elections". Crisis Group interview, trade unionist close to the left-wing opposition, Tataouine region, April 2013.

<sup>90</sup> Crisis Group interview, An-Nahda activists, Tunis, Tripoli, March-June 2013.

<sup>91</sup> "En vidéo et photos: L'arsenal d'armes saisies à la Mnihla", Tuniscope (tuniscope.com), 21 February 2013. Crisis Group interviews, witness to the seizure of arms in Médenine, members of the security forces, Tunis, June 2013. According to police officers, many pistols stolen from police stations during the uprising have still not been recovered. Crisis Group interviews, police officers, Tunis, north west of the country, April-May 2013.

<sup>92</sup> See Crisis Group report, *Violence and the Salafi Challenge*, op. cit. Also see "Tunisie: Bilan des opérations sécuritaires anti-terrorisme", Babnet Tunisie (babnet.net), 5 August 2013.

<sup>93</sup> Several arms caches were discovered in the mountainous and forested regions that run along the Algerian border. In addition, smugglers in possession of firearms and ammunition were arrested by the National Guard in the west, at Fernana on 5 December 2012, near Sakiet Sidi Youssef on 1 August 2013 as well as in the south-east. See "Découverte d'une cache d'armes et de munitions à Jebel Ourgha", News of Tunisia (newssoftunisia.com), 22 September 2013. The UN Security Council Panel of Experts responsible for implementation of resolution 1973 (2011) concerning Libya and, especially, the section dealing with the arms embargo, mention this in its final report dated 16 April 2013. "Tunisia also faces considerable internal security challenges. Some material brought in from Libya remains there, further fuelling those problems. The authorities have discovered several caches over the past year, including along the border with Algeria, possibly for onward transfer to Algeria". See Final Report of the Panel of Experts pursuant to resolution 1973 (2011) concerning Libya, UN Security Council, 9 March 2013.

over into Tunisian territory – the border zone nevertheless became both a refuge and a supply base for the warring parties. During the war, Libyan refugees brought military equipment into south-eastern Tunisia. Four refugee camps (Choucha, el-Hayet, Remada, Tataouine) gave shelter to tens of thousands of Libyans. Between 500,000 and 1,000,000 Libyans crossed into Tunisia during the hostilities, 200,000 of which were housed by Tunisian families.<sup>94</sup>

Several members of the security forces and residents of Tataouine affirm that among the large number of refugees that entered the country through the Ras Jdir and Dhehiba-Wazen border posts, several thousand (mostly pro-regime combatants<sup>95</sup>) sold off their possessions of value. This apparently included components of automatic 9mm pistols and AK-47 assault rifles that they brought into the country for re-assembly.<sup>96</sup> Salafis who answered appeals for reinforcements made by associations in Ben Guerdane to help distribute food in the refugee camps<sup>97</sup> reportedly used preaching tents to buy and sell military equipment.<sup>98</sup> Similarly, Tunisian volunteers who went to help anti-Qadhafi forces in Libya, allegedly brought back and stored arms in Tunisia before, in the case of some of them, leaving again to fight on the Syrian front line.<sup>99</sup>

In addition, according to a former defence ministry spokesman, the area of desert between Dhehiba-Wazen and Borj el-Khadra-Ghadames, 900km to the north of Erg Marzouk, was an important point of access for Libyan military equipment on its way to Algeria and Tunisia, as well as Mali.<sup>100</sup> A customs official in Tataouine added that arms continued to enter Tunisia through the Dhehiba-Wazen border post and along tracks in the surrounding area.<sup>101</sup>

Although experts in the circulation of arms exclude the scenario of a massive transfer of military equipment to Tunisia as a result of the break-up of the Libyan army,<sup>102</sup> small quantities of firearms and explosive materials seem to have regularly entered the country on board smugglers' vehicles since Ben Ali's fall. The quantities seized and those circulating within the country, which they estimate to be ten times

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<sup>94</sup> Two years later, about 500,000 are still there. "Que faire des 500 000 Libyens réfugiés en Tunisie?", Kapitalis (kapitalis.com), 9 August 2013; Crisis Group interviews, residents of Ben Guerdane and Médenine, former senior defence official, Ben Guerdane, Médenine, Tunis, February-June 2013.

<sup>95</sup> Crisis Group interview, representative of human rights association, Ben Guerdane, June 2013. Also see Moncef Kartas, *Tunisia and the security corollaries of the Libyan Revolution*, Small Arms Survey (unpublished).

<sup>96</sup> Crisis Group interview, interior ministry official, Gabès, May 2013.

<sup>97</sup> Crisis Group interview, representative of human rights association, Ben Guerdane, June 2013.

<sup>98</sup> Crisis Group interview, interior ministry official from the south east, Tunis, May 2013.

<sup>99</sup> Crisis Group interview, journalist, February 2013. Also see Moncef Kartas, *op. cit.*

<sup>100</sup> He added: "as the desert cone becomes narrower, the more they try to cross Tunisia to reach Algeria". The Tunisian air force destroyed a convoy of traffickers about 60km to the south of the town of Dhehiba. Crisis Group interview, former defence ministry spokesman, Tunis, July 2013.

<sup>101</sup> That said, this traffic is much less than during the Libyan conflict and the months that followed the looting of the arsenals of the deposed regime's army. Crisis Group interview, customs official, Dhehiba, Tataouine, May 2013.

<sup>102</sup> At the start of 2013, the president said: "the situation in Mali has always worried us because we are finding out that our own jihadis are in touch with those terrorist forces. One has the impression that Tunisia is in the process of becoming a corridor for the transport of Libyan arms to those regions of Mali". Interview with Moncef Marzouki, France 24, 12 January 2013. Also see Crisis Group report, *Violence and the Salafi Challenge*, *op. cit.*

as much, are hardly massive.<sup>103</sup> On the other hand, they are enough to show that there is a demand for arms and the phenomenon should not be under-estimated.<sup>104</sup> Some observers are concerned about this development.<sup>105</sup> As an adviser to the presidency said, it is not so much the quantity of arms that have entered the country that is so alarming but rather the existence of arms caches around the capital and the consequences if terrorists were to use them.

The entry of firearms into the area around Tunis is a dramatic new development. Just imagine if the people who have stockpiled these arms were to choose a favourable moment to go on the offensive, such as the day of the assassination of Chokri Belaïd, 6 February 2013, when the political and security situation would have been problematic. We are obsessed about the possibility of this happening and it stops those of us at the presidency of the Republic and in the government from sleeping. We must do more to mobilise the security forces to prevent terrorist strikes that risk bringing the country to its knees. This would frighten investors, which would aggravate the economic situation, reinforce political polarisation and lead to an explosion of violence.<sup>106</sup>

Whatever the volume of arms in circulation, they seem to be becoming more diverse and more common. The northern half of the Tunisian-Algerian border has become a trafficking area. According to a senior army officer, some arms traffickers prefer to

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<sup>103</sup> According to a member of a Swiss NGO that specialises in the study of the arms trade, “the volume of firearms intercepted by the security forces in Tunisia since the departure of Ben Ali would scarcely fill a few commercial vehicles from top to bottom. You could say a few tonnes. It is a tiny quantity in relation to what is circulating in Libya, even when the latter’s population and the extent of Tunisian territory is taken into consideration. There is also the problem of ammunition, which is even more scarce than arms”. Crisis Group interview, Tunis, September 2013. Also see Crisis Group interviews, ex-Tunisian chief of staff, French expert on terrorism, former official of the Department for the Prevention of Terrorism (DPAT), Tunis, April–July 2013.

<sup>104</sup> Hunting rifles seem to be much sought after. To deal with the increase in the theft of livestock, farmers try to obtain arms of this type, especially 12 and 16mm calibre. Hunting rifle cartridges are often seized. See “Arrestation des deux personnes en possession de 9 000 balles”, *Tuniscopie* (tuniscopie.com), 13 September 2013. A police officer in the region said that the armed theft of livestock has noticeably increased since the fall of the last government. Crisis Group interview, north-west of the country, March 2013. Several Libyan nationals settled in the Sfax region reportedly also offered to sell machine guns but the Tunisians value them a lot less because of the penalties for their possession. Crisis Group interviews, village residents, Sfax region, April 2013. In order to satisfy demand, smugglers import guns from Europe, especially Italy but also from Algeria. Crisis Group interview, trafficker of hunting weapons, south east of the country, April 2013. Although the demand for self-defence arms seems to be on the rise, 9mm pistols and electric batons are on sale now at some clandestine alcohol outlets, which some Tunisians say is a completely new development compared to the time of Ben Ali. In fact, the possession of firearms was strictly regulated under the old regime. The whole issue of arms trafficking is still taboo for many people.

<sup>105</sup> As a young small-scale transporter from Kasserine said, “people talk amongst themselves and they know there are arms in circulation. That makes them afraid. In fact, they are much more frightened of arms than they are of the jihadis. They are afraid of the arms themselves. They do not fear the people who possess them, whether they are jihadis or not”. Crisis Group interview, Kasserine, June 2013. The commanding officer of a Libyan army brigade passing through Tunisia added: “Tunisian society is very different from Libyan society. In Libya, there is a sort of balance between the tribes, although this is certainly precarious. In addition, we are used to arms. In Tunisia, that is not the case, so even a small quantity could represent a significant risk”. Crisis Group interview, Tunis, March 2013.

<sup>106</sup> Crisis Group interview, presidential adviser, Tunis, May 2013.



use the forested areas where they are less visible, rather than the desert and steppes of the south where they can be spotted by aircraft.<sup>107</sup>

Although senior security officials received reports of the passage of arms from Tunisia to Algeria throughout 2012, confirming the widely shared hypothesis that a corridor existed at that time,<sup>108</sup> the quantity of arms moving in the opposite direction has since increased.<sup>109</sup> Residents of border regions even mention the names of small settlements that they believe are used as transfer points, in one direction or the other, such as Tajerouine, Koudit Larneb, Sahdine, Garn Helfaya, Skhirat, Kaalat Sinan and el-Felta.<sup>110</sup>

The flow of military equipment seems to call for a rapid response, all the more so as the security services (except the army) are still weak since the uprising and face hostility from local populations.

#### 4. Anger on the borders

Although the police have returned to the major towns and cities, notably the capital, and the security situation has improved considerably since 2011, the security services often seem to be out-manoeuvred by the smugglers in the border regions. First, after the fall of Ben Ali, police officers and customs officials were transferred to other regions of the country. Most have not been replaced. In addition, relations between members of the security services and smugglers have become increasingly violent. According to a small-scale transporter in this region:

It is the toughest smugglers who do not suffer so much control, not because they pay bigger bribes or know the police officers and customs officials better, but because they are able to mobilise their family clan and attack the officers or the police stations where they are being held if they are detained.<sup>111</sup>

The president of an association in Kasserine added that: “The authorities are no longer in charge of the rules of the game. [They] are still in shock from the revolution. [They] fear for their own safety”.<sup>112</sup> A young national guard patrolling the Tunisian-Algerian border explained that it is difficult to decide whether to arrest someone and risk the situation degenerating or be content to “go through the motions”:

The smugglers call us “the good morning patrols”. Our superiors tell us “do a bit of control, check for arms and drugs, that’s all. And, more than anything else, take care of yourself”. Every now and then, we arrest a trafficker. The problem is they call the family. They get everybody to go down to the police station. They all start throwing stones and threatening to throw Molotov cocktails and burn the

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<sup>107</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Tunisian army officer, Tunis, August 2013.

<sup>108</sup> Crisis Group interviews, elite brigade officer, former DPAT senior official, Tunis, December 2012. Also see Crisis Group report, *Violence and the Salafi Challenge*, op. cit.

<sup>109</sup> The Tunisia/Algeria flows have not dried up much, as the arrest of several Tunisian traffickers on Algerian territory testifies. See “Tunisie: Arrestation du “Big Boss” de la contrebande d’armes avec la collaboration des services Algériens”, Web Radar (webradar.me), April 2013; M. Bellakhal, “Tunisie-Algérie; trafiquants d’armes arrêtés à la frontière”, Investir en Tunisie (investir-en-tunisie.net), 18 April 2013.

<sup>110</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents of Kasserine, Kef and Sakiet Sidi Youssef, Kasserine, Kef, Sakiet Sidi Youssef, February-June 2013.

<sup>111</sup> Crisis Group interview, small-scale transporter, Kasserine, June 2013.

<sup>112</sup> Crisis Group interview, president of an association, Kasserine, September 2013.

place down. The chief tells us: “you don’t know how to handle things!” If we don’t arrest anybody, he says, “it’s not good enough”. He says the same thing if we arrest someone.<sup>113</sup>

Even the National Guard, which is a military corps, seems to find it difficult to contain the aggression of people on the Algerian border. For example, local people on a road near Feriana stoned patrol vehicles.<sup>114</sup> Residents are expressing their hate for the central government and the capital. They say they are Algerians and not Tunisians.<sup>115</sup> They say that the government has never done anything for them, so they “will stop at nothing”.<sup>116</sup>

The situation is more or less the same in the south east. Many people believe “the system has forgotten them”<sup>117</sup> and express their frustration towards anyone who stops them going about their business. As a resident of Ben Guerdane said, recalling the difficult period suffered by the region in the period when the Tunisian-Libyan border was closed in the 1980s:

When we needed the government, it was not there for us. We just had to manage with our own resources. So it should not now hold us to account! Everybody here remembers the difficult years when the border was closed because of diplomatic problems with Libya. Old people had to work on building sites to earn enough to survive. We will never go back to living like that.<sup>118</sup>

Despite the social tensions, the government is tightening its grip. Since the appointment of the new interior minister, Lotfi Ben Jeddou, in March 2013, members of the security services have spoken of cracking down on smuggling.<sup>119</sup> Officers have been told to increase patrols and seizure operations.<sup>120</sup> Meanwhile, service stations and transport companies threatened to go on strike because of the rising price of fuel and “the increase in the scourge of hydrocarbons smuggling”.<sup>121</sup> Smugglers talk of a tightening of controls.<sup>122</sup>

However, firm action was taken in response to the deadly attacks on the army on Mount Chaambi, on 29 July 2013. Since then, residents of Kasserine say there has been a noticeable increase in controls and a major security operation on the Algerian

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<sup>113</sup> Crisis Group interview, National Guard member, Tunis, May 2013.

<sup>114</sup> Crisis Group observations, Feriana region, August 2013.

<sup>115</sup> Some residents of settlements on the border with Algeria often say they identify more with Algeria than Tunisia. Moreover, many Tunisians remember that under the old regime, residents of a border village crossed the border carrying Algerian flags and calling for integration into Algeria. This initiative was partly taken in protest at the level of unemployment and the lack of basic infrastructure on the Tunisian side of the border. See “200 Tunisiens manifestent avec des drapeaux algériens”, *Le Quotidien d’Oran*, 21 October 2007; Crisis Group interviews, residents of Tunis and border regions, March–September 2013.

<sup>116</sup> Crisis Group interview, resident of the Jendouba region, Jendouba, May 2013. More residents seem to live from trafficking, whether by handling goods themselves or acting as lookouts on the tracks. Crisis Group observations, Tunisian–Algerian border, August 2013.

<sup>117</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ben Guerdane resident, Ben Guerdane, May 2013.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Crisis Group interview, customs official, Tataouine, May 2013.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> “Tunisie: Les stations-services et sociétés de transport menacées par la hausse des prix des hydrocarbures”, *Kapitalis* (kapitalis.com), 11 March 2013.

<sup>122</sup> Crisis Group interviews, smugglers, Tunisian–Algerian and Tunisian–Libyan borders, March–April 2013.

side resulting in the provisional closure of the main tracks used for smuggling.<sup>123</sup> The price of smuggled fuel has also significantly increased.<sup>124</sup> According to a small-scale transporter, “the region is feeling the pressure; only a spark is required for people to explode.”<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents of Kasserine region, Kasserine, August 2013.

<sup>124</sup> Crisis Group observations, Feriana, August 2013.

<sup>125</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, smugglers, Tunis, September 2013.

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## IV. Inclusion of Local Communities in Border Management

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### A. *New Players*

Although smuggling, especially in dangerous products, seems to diminish when the security situation improves and increase when the security situation deteriorates, the reality on the ground is more complex. Participation of local people and especially the cartels that organise much of the trafficking is indispensable for managing the borders. Whatever the extent of control operations, border communities are still in a position to facilitate or prevent the passage of goods and people.

It would therefore be wrong to say that the anarchic growth of smuggling is due to a relaxation in security and the security forces' fear of provoking riots. The increase in smuggling and, therefore, the increased porosity of the borders, is also related to the reorganisation of the cartels that organise illegal trading. The cartel leaders have a vested interest in perpetuating the lucrative informal economy along the Algerian and Libyan borders. But relations between the government and the smugglers were affected by the consequences of the 2010-2011 uprising and the fall of Qadhafi.<sup>126</sup> In other words, the cartels seem to be less effective in managing the borders, a task devolved to them under the previous regime. The circulation of drugs, arms and jihadis in the border regions is the main manifestation of this change.

The period immediately following the uprising saw a drastic reduction in the sea-borne flow of goods from Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and south-east Asia, trade that was mainly controlled by close associates of the government.<sup>127</sup> The uprising also destabilised smuggling operations along the Algerian border controlled by the business cartels reportedly linked to the reigning families.

During the months that followed Ben Ali's flight, the regional authorities accused the local smuggling bosses of practising a scorched-earth policy and causing chaos in the region. Some of them were sent to prison.<sup>128</sup> Others fled the country. However, most of them continued their activities, although weakened by the fall of their protectors. Entry into the smuggling networks was no longer being regulated by the higher echelons of the government, so there was an increase in the number of participants in these lucrative activities, a process described by one smuggler as the "democratisation of smuggling".<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> See the report by the National Commission of Investigation into Corruption and Embezzlement op. cit. Also see "Saisie de marchandises appartenant aux Trabelsi et Ben Ali d'une valeur de 750 mille dinars", Tuniscope (tuniscope.com), 22 May 2013. Under the old regime, the two reigning families, those of the president and his wife, avoided involvement in commerce, even though they had excellent links with Qadhafi. Even today, although it is weaker since the fall of the Libyan regime, it is the Touazine clan, from the Ben Guerdane region, which still controls the main levers on the Tunisian coast, especially the unofficial currency exchange market. However, this situation is on the point of changing. See Section IV.B.

<sup>127</sup> This cartel delivered goods to the *souks* (markets) in Moncef Bey, the shops of the Medina in Tunis and the trading town of El Jem on the east coast. To a certain extent, it competed with commerce on the Tunisian-Libyan border.

<sup>128</sup> This was especially the case in the town of Kef at the start of February 2011. See Habib Missaoui, "Justice: Béchir Jelassi entendu par le juge d'instruction du Kef", Tunisia Today (tunisia-today.com), February 2011; Crisis Group interviews, Kef governorate residents, Kef, May 2013.

<sup>129</sup> Crisis Group interviews, smugglers, Tunisian-Algerian border, March 2013.

Two years after the uprising, these second-tier intermediaries have established themselves as the new bosses of the traffic. As residents on the western borders have noted, these intermediaries have awakened and become more powerful. They have become wealthy and form part of the very discreet inner circles of the wholesale trade bosses<sup>130</sup> who continue to control trafficking even though some “young people have entered the business”.<sup>131</sup>

### B. *The Cartels and Border Control*

Whether under the regime of Ben Ali or today, these cartels, business-like in the west and more tribal in the south east, have an astonishing capacity to control movements across the borders. For example, in the north west, on a narrow border track, neglected by the security services, a shepherd watches the vehicles go by and reports any strange vehicles to the local boss who will warn customs if the vehicle is unknown to him.<sup>132</sup>

In other places, National Guard patrols work closely with the smugglers. The latter play the role of inspectors and informers. As soon as they notice a “suspect activity”,<sup>133</sup> such as the presence of strangers, they intervene directly or warn the authorities.<sup>134</sup> In the south east, except for the desert cone that leads into the Sahara, south of Remada and Dhehiba, not much escapes the attention of the smuggling networks.<sup>135</sup> Several customs officials say they rely on informers.<sup>136</sup>

The bigger traffickers have a vested interest in maintaining social peace in the region, if only to protect their own affairs. They were therefore unhappy about the attacks on Mount Chaambi. One of them went so far as to say he was ready to fight the “terrorists”.<sup>137</sup> As one customs official in the south-east said: “the smugglers have a monopoly, they know each other very well, they have an interest in letting us know about the goods we are most interested in. Everything that attracts attention to their work, such as terrorism, is not welcome”.<sup>138</sup> “Peaceful trade is the top priority”,<sup>139</sup> said a wholesaler boss.

This more or less tacit pact between government and the cartels therefore plays an important regulating role. Under the previous regime, the authorities avoided direct confrontations with illegal traders and prevented competitors challenging the monopoly of the cartels. In exchange, the heads of the networks did their best to steer clear of trade in certain goods and controlled the flow of people across the borders, especially armed groups.<sup>140</sup> As an adviser of the leader of the government put it:

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<sup>130</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents along the Algerian border, Kef and Kasserine, February-May 2013. See Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report N°124, *Tunisia: Confronting Social and Economic Challenges*, 6 June 2012.

<sup>131</sup> Crisis Group interview, smuggler, Kef, May 2013.

<sup>132</sup> Crisis Group observations, north west of the country, May 2013.

<sup>133</sup> Crisis Group interviews, smugglers, Kef and Kasserine, February-May 2013.

<sup>134</sup> Crisis Group observations, Feriana, August 2013.

<sup>135</sup> Crisis Group interview, resident, Ben Guerdane, May 2013. Also see Moncef Kartas, *op. cit.*

<sup>136</sup> Crisis Group interviews, customs officials, Tataouine, May 2013.

<sup>137</sup> Crisis Group interview, smuggler, Kasserine, July 2013.

<sup>138</sup> Crisis Group interview, customs official, Tataouine, May 2013.

<sup>139</sup> Crisis Group interview, wholesaler, Haïdra, Tunisian-Algerian border, April 2013.

<sup>140</sup> Crisis Group interviews, historian, residents, Ben Guerdane, Tunis and Médenine, February-June 2013. See Moncef Kartas, *op. cit.*

The borders were managed using “travel cards”. The authorities and the “trafficking bosses” understood each other. Together, they drafted a map of all the goods that were circulating. For a long time, the contract was clear: “we will not intervene in your activities even if they are illegal but in exchange you agree to not allow the circulation of drugs, arms and jihadis”.<sup>141</sup>

The circulation of firearms and drugs and the lethal attacks against the army and the National Guard could therefore be partly interpreted as a rupture of this pact. In the west, some of the actors have changed. The government circles that controlled significant part of the business cartels no longer exist. The police have lost contact with many of the networks of informers because of the hostility with which it is viewed since the uprising. The tacit agreement has therefore not been renewed and the cartels are focusing more on the struggle for control of sectors of the market.<sup>142</sup>

A security adviser to the prime minister's cabinet explained that the terrorist threat cannot be contained if “contact with local actors is not resumed”.<sup>143</sup> According to one army officer, even with reform of security institutions and sophisticated surveillance technologies, “we will not be able to do anything about the ‘sons of the borders’”.<sup>144</sup>

The more that residents of the small towns along the border, who are among the most deprived in the country, are thwarted on the social and economic fronts, the more their willingness and therefore their capacity (which is significant) to control the border, dwindles. The views of an agricultural village chief near the Algerian border reflects this relationship between social and economic frustration and the lack of cooperation on security matters:

The government, that's to say, the people in the capital and the Sahel (the coast), have never done anything for us and, what's more, they want to stop us using trade with Algeria to survive? So what if arms are being transported through our region. It's nothing to do with us. They are not for use against us, but against them. Moreover, the only thing that interests them about what goes on down here is the security of their borders. The more they disregard us, the more we will close our eyes to what comes in and end up in their backyard.<sup>145</sup>

Integration of local people is also needed on the Tunisian-Libyan border. Although economic and social frustration does not seem to be so pronounced there and the flight of Ben Ali has done little to destabilise the local social hierarchy, Qadhafi's fall weakened the main tribal cartel: the Touazine clan from Ben Guerdane. If it loses its exclusive rights over the border region, it will be more inclined to turn a blind eye to the trafficking of drugs and firearms and the movement of jihadi fighters across its territory.

During the war in Libya, south-eastern Tunisia was a sanctuary for both the rebels and Qadhafi's forces. In general, Qadhafi's forces were supported by Ben Guerdane, while Qadhafi's opponents in the west of the country, most of them from

<sup>141</sup> Crisis Group interview, adviser to the head of the government, Tunis, July 2013.

<sup>142</sup> Residents of western and south-western Tunisia speak of a kind of race to become rich, a search for profit at any price, a process that began with the fall of the regime. Under the Ben Alis and the Trabelsis, entry into the circle of the leaders was strictly regulated by the reigning families. Crisis Group interviews, February-August 2013.

<sup>143</sup> Crisis Group interview, security adviser to the prime minister, Tunis, August 2013.

<sup>144</sup> Crisis Group interview, army officer, Tunis, August 2013.

<sup>145</sup> Crisis Group interview, resident, border village, Jendouba, March 2013.

the Jbel Nefoussa mountains, used Médenine, Tataouine, Dhehiba and Remada as a refuge and supply point.<sup>146</sup> The Touazine of Ben Guerdane ensured the supply of Qadhafi's forces in Tripoli, even after the regime lost control of its ports. Some traders in this trading town became wealthy by supplying pharmaceuticals and staple goods to the Jamahiriya.<sup>147</sup>

Since Qadhafi's fall, the Touazine, often called "Qadhafi's sons" in Libya, are no longer able to safely penetrate further than 30km into Libya – that is, they are no longer able to venture beyond the town of Zaltan.<sup>148</sup> In addition, shortly after the end of the conflict, the Libyan National Transitional Council (CNT) appealed to the anti-Qadhafi mountain tribe militias of the Jbel Nefoussa for reinforcements in order to secure the Tunisian-Libyan border. Little by little, the Nouayel from the Riqdalin region and al-Jamil, pro-Qadhafi and tribal allies of the Touazine of Ben Guerdane, lost control of most of the trafficking routes into Tunisia to the Jbel Nefoussa tribes, such as the Nalouti and especially the Zintani, the most powerful, who now control the border posts on the Tunisian-Libyan border.<sup>149</sup>

On the Tunisian side of the border, the Touazine have partly ceded control of the region around the Dhehiba-Wazen border post. The various Ouderna sub-clans, another tribe in the Ouerghemma confederation, from the Médenine region, are competing with the Touazine for control of the region, while the traffic is increasing.<sup>150</sup>

Therefore, with competition increasing because of the changed balance of power between the tribes in Libya, the Touazine are tempted to renegotiate their tacit pact with the Tunisian government by using the spectre of arms, drugs and jihadis. As a sociologist noted:

They are blackmailing the government, saying help us keep our monopoly, otherwise we will do nothing when groups linked to AQIM come looking for arms or when Tunisian fighters with hostile intentions return from Syria across the Tunisian-Libyan borders.<sup>151</sup>

The security situation on the Tunisian-Libyan border does indeed appear a cause for worry. In Libya, members of the security services are both officials and militia men. They defend their economic and tribal interests and participate directly in the transport of dangerous goods.<sup>152</sup> A significant presence of the Tunisian army on the border is indispensable to stopping convoys transporting military equipment. These incursions into the desert were occurring on an almost daily basis during the conflict and in its wake. They have since become less frequent, but regular incursions could resume,<sup>153</sup> all the more so as the Tunisian army no longer has relations with its Libyan counterpart.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> See Moncef Kartas, *op. cit.*

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.* Crisis Group interviews, sociologist and specialist on Tunisian-Libyan border issues, journalist from Ben Guerdane, Tunis, September 2013.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>150</sup> Trading in non-dangerous goods is still more profitable using the Ben Guerdane-Ras Jdir border crossing.

<sup>151</sup> Crisis Group interview, sociologist and specialist on Tunisian-Libyan border issues, Tunis, September 2013.

<sup>152</sup> Crisis Group interviews, international officials, Tripoli, August 2013.

<sup>153</sup> Crisis Group interviews, army officer, French military expert, Tunis, Tataouine, April-June 2013. Most incursions occur when smugglers want to avoid military checkpoints. See "Tunisia closes Lib-

Although a tightening of security controls in the west may contribute to regulating the traffic<sup>155</sup> and strengthening military control in the south east seems indispensable given the rapid changes in tribal alliances in Libya, the integration of local people is still necessary for effective border control and there should be a negotiated settlement in the long term. The lack of a political centre and the increase in tribal conflicts for the control of smuggling routes in Libya shows that without a strong government, the tacit pact no longer has any sense, as no authority has enough power to impose respect.

The situation in Tunisia is practically the opposite. The government seems strong enough to negotiate and manage such a pact but its interlocutors have been weakened. The challenge consists, above all, of ensuring military protection of the Tunisian-Libyan border, but also of avoiding a return to repression, which would increase the distance between the government and the local population.

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yan border post after smugglers kill soldier", Reuters, 11 March 2013. Exchanges of fire took place on 20 June 2012 in this desert zone where an armed convoy was transporting a portable anti-air defence system from Libya to Mali. Traffickers opened fire on an army unit after crossing into Tunisia. The convoy was quickly destroyed by the Tunisian air-force. Crisis Group interview, former defence ministry spokesman, Tunis, July 2013. "Tunisie: Affrontements entre l'armée et des groupes armés", Tixup (tixup.com), 21 June 2012; Final Report of the Panel of Experts Pursuant to Resolution 1973 (2011), op. cit.

<sup>154</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior army official, French military expert, Tunis, March-June 2013.

<sup>155</sup> Before the security services tightened their grip after the events of Chaambi, several smugglers in the west declared that a slight increase in controls would be to their advantage. They said that such an increase in control would be more likely to harm "people from elsewhere" and therefore new competitors who had entered the trade after the fall of the former regime. Crisis Group interviews, smugglers, Kasserine region, May-June 2013.



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## V. Jihadism and Smuggling: A Dangerous Mixture

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### A. Jihadis Return from the Syrian Front

The country faces two main security challenges in the near future. First, the return of Tunisian fighters from Syria, some of whom will come back into the country across the Tunisian-Libyan border. Second is the emergence of “Islamogangsterism”,<sup>156</sup> that is, the tendency for criminals in the urban periphery to use the Salafi identity to control, through violence, lucrative trafficking in their area.

Tunisians have traditionally played a major role in the international jihadi movement and the trading town of Ben Guerdane is a historic recruitment centre for supporters of national, Arab and Islamist liberation causes.<sup>157</sup> More generally, Tunisia has proved to be a significant source of jihadis at the international level.<sup>158</sup> During the last two years, they are reported to have organised several terrorist attacks against French interests in Mali and Libya.<sup>159</sup> Eleven of the 32 militants who took control of the In Amenas gas installation in Algeria at the start of 2013 were Tunisians.<sup>160</sup>

Since the flight of Ben Ali and the start of the war in Syria, the return of Tunisian jihadis from Syria has become an ideological issue that has strongly polarised society and fuelled the worst fears of secularists.<sup>161</sup> On 12 February, less than one week after the assassination of Chokri Belaïd, a rumour circulated to the effect that 12,000 Tunisians – a completely unrealistic figure – were on the point of returning from Syria on the instructions of Abou Ayadh, the leader of Ansar Sharia.<sup>162</sup> Similarly, on 21 March 2013, a “bearded man” returning from the front line in Syria said on national

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<sup>156</sup> See Section V.B.

<sup>157</sup> The role of Tunisian volunteers in the Middle East is a very sensitive subject. According to residents of Ben Guerdane, in 1947-1949, out of a population of 5,000, 100 volunteers travelled to defend Palestine during the first Arab-Israeli conflict. Similarly, during the war in Algeria, 100 people joined the National Liberation Front (FLN). Between 1991 and 2008, several hundred Tunisians from Ben Guerdane fought in Iraq. In 2006, during Israel's conflict with Hezbollah, close to a hundred went to Lebanon. Finally, in 2012-2013, between 100 and 150 went to fight in Syria. Crisis Group interviews, residents of Ben Guerdane, May 2013.

<sup>158</sup> Crisis Group interviews, French military experts, Tunis, March 2013. At the start of the 2000s, the Tunisian Combatant Group (GCT), whose first leader was Seifallah Ben Hassine, known as Abou Ayadh, the current leader of Ansar Sharia, helped to organise the assassination in Afghanistan, on the eve of 11 September 2001, of Cheikh Massoud, an important figure in the Afghan resistance against the Soviet Union in the 1980s. See Crisis Group report, *Violence and the Salafi Challenge*, op. cit.

<sup>159</sup> Crisis Group interview, French military experts, Tunis, March 2013.

<sup>160</sup> See Crisis Group report, *Violence and the Salafi Challenge*, op. cit. According to a former DPAT official, they left Tunisia during the 2000s to build networks in the African Sahel. Crisis Group interview, former senior DPAT official, Tunis, May 2013.

<sup>161</sup> Although Arab and Islamist causes have become ubiquitous since the end of the 1960s, especially on university campuses, the Syrian conflict seems to divide Tunisians more than ever, even in the cafés and within families. Some support Bashar al-Assad's regime and others defend the armed opposition. Crisis Group interviews, supporters and opponents of Bashar al-Assad, various places across the country, February-August 2013.

<sup>162</sup> “12,000 combattants tunisiens en Syrie reviennent en Tunisie sur demande d'Abou Iyadh”, shems FM (shemsfm.net), 12 February 2013. At the end of September, a rumour of the same order of magnitude spread through the social networks and electronic journals. See “Abou Iyadh se prépare à envahir la Tunisie à la tête de 10 000 terroristes”, Tunisie Focus (tunisiefocus.com), 27 September 2013.

television that he was ready to fight again if a “secular” party were to take power in Tunisia.<sup>163</sup>

In any case, there seems to be an abundant enough supply of jihadis to prompt the government into taking measures to try to break up their networks. Residents of suburbs close to Ansar Sharia estimate the number of Tunisians in Syria at between 1,000 and 2,000. Some jihadis see their experience in Syria as a military training exercise and travel back and forth between Tunisia and Syria.<sup>164</sup> Supporters of the government coalition put the figure at between 400 and 600 as if to play down the danger that their definitive return would represent.<sup>165</sup> On the other hand, the potential threat posed by these fighters is heavily exploited by the secularist opposition, which accuses An-Nahda of playing the role of sorcerer’s apprentice to the detriment of national security, especially given that some preachers are calling for a holy war against Bashar al-Assad’s regime.<sup>166</sup>

In April 2013, security was tightened at Tunis airport and the Ras Jdir border crossing.<sup>167</sup> Several recruitment organisations were dismantled and hundreds of people were arrested in the wake of an inquiry opened by the public prosecutor in Tunis.<sup>168</sup> The interior minister said that the organisations in question belonged to radical Salafi groups and criminal networks. His statements confirmed what several researchers, investigative journalists and witnesses had been saying.<sup>169</sup>

They said there are two main flows of fighters entering Libya across the south-eastern border. First, one organised by Ansar Sharia, which is supplying jihadis to the Front for the Victory of the People of the Levant (Jabhat al-Nusra) and to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham).<sup>170</sup> The volunteers are quality personnel, carefully selected by the organisation, after spending a period in a training camp in Libya. They reportedly cross the Tunisian border to attend these training camps and are then flown from the Libyan capital to Istanbul in Turkey before travelling to the front.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> See Yasmin Najjar and Monia Ghanmi, “Tunisia frees controversial salafist imam”, Magharebia (magharebia.com), 9 April 2013.

<sup>164</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents of Tunis suburbs where support is strong for Ansar Sharia, Tunis, May 2013.

<sup>165</sup> On 12 May 2013, the foreign minister said that 800 citizens were helping the rebels. On 19 September, the interior minister said that it had managed to stop the departure of 6,000 young people to Syria. See Lilia Blaise, “Les Tunisiens prisonniers du Jihad en Syrie”, Nawaat (nawaat.org), 21 June 2013. Also see “Ben Jeddou: ‘Le MI a porté un coup dur au terrorisme’”, WMC Direct Info (directinfo.webmanagercenter.com), 19 September 2013.

<sup>166</sup> Crisis Group interviews, secularist opponents, May-August 2013.

<sup>167</sup> Crisis Group interview, residents, Tunis, April 2013; Also see “Restrictions aux voyages à l’étranger des femmes tunisiennes de moins de 35 ans”, Actuune (actuune.com), 27 August 2013. “Les autorités tunisiennes renforcent le contrôle aux frontières des candidats au jihad en Syrie”, Kapitalis (kapitalis.com), 1 April 2013.

<sup>168</sup> Jamel Arfaoui, “Arrestation de centaines de personnes en Tunisie en liaison avec la Syrie”, Magharebia (magharebia.com), 29 April 2013.

<sup>169</sup> Crisis Group interviews, investigative journalists, residents of Tunis, Kasserine, Médenine and Tataouine suburbs, February-August 2013.

<sup>170</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report N°141, *Too Close For Comfort: Syrians in Lebanon*, 13 May 2013.

<sup>171</sup> According to a young Ansar Sharia leader, volunteering to fight in Syria is done on an individual basis and the organisation is not involved in their preparation or travel. Crisis Group interview, young Ansar Sharia leader, Tunis, June 2013.

There is also said to be a more diverse group that is closer to “Islamogangsterism” networks. This recruits Tunisians in mosques and while they are attending religious education courses at Islamic cultural associations.<sup>172</sup> These Tunisians, who have a similar sociological profile to people wanting to illegally emigrate to Western Europe, travel through Libya, Turkey, Jordan and even to Malta before travelling on to the front. They prefer to help the armed opposition in Syria rather than go to Western Europe.<sup>173</sup>

However, since the spring of 2013, the outwards flow seems to have reduced. A representative of a human rights organisation in Ben Guerdane affirms that no young people have left to fight since April.<sup>174</sup> A Salafi in Médenine also said that people should not go running off to the front. “Many young people think that the Messiah is going to appear in Syria and that they should go there. But they should be careful because there is a danger that the country will become a graveyard for jihadis”.<sup>175</sup> Even the supposedly more belligerent Abou Ayadh and AQIM expressed reservations in March 2013. They both said it was preferable to remain “at home”, to strengthen Ansar Sharia in Abou Ayadh’s case and to combat secularism, according to AQIM.<sup>176</sup>

However, even though the number of fighters leaving for Syria seems to be decreasing, the challenges remain. The main flow to and from Syria crosses the Tunisian-Libyan border, especially through the Ras Jdir and Dhehiba-Wazen border posts.<sup>177</sup> Upstream, the challenge is to identify these experienced fighters. Downstream, there is the question of their reintegration into Tunisian society. In fact, they may strengthen the mixed groups of traffickers and jihadis that are becoming more numerous in the urban peripheries and that could, in the future, increase their role in the smuggling networks.

### B. *The Emergence of “Islamogangsterism”*

Contrary to what some people in the capital fear,<sup>178</sup> the country’s borders are a long way from being peopled by Salafi extremists. For the moment, most informal trade in the border regions is not controlled by jihadi groups or individuals adopting a jihadi identity, which does not mean that links between these groups and the border cartels will not get stronger.

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid. For example, this was the case of a young girl arrested during an investigation into the terrorist attacks in Chaambi, who had attended religious education courses in the suburbs of Zouhour in Kasserine. Her teacher is said to have suggested to her that she go to Syria. Crisis Group interview, member of the family of a young woman, Kasserine, August 2013.

<sup>173</sup> According to a Tataouine resident, “at the moment, people wanting to emigrate illegally (*hargas*, literally border-burners) want to go to Syria”. Crisis Group interview, Tataouine resident. Several Tunisians imprisoned in Syria by Bashar al-Assad’s forces told a delegation of journalists and members of Tunisian associations who visited them that they were paid to fight. Lilia Blaise, op. cit.

<sup>174</sup> He said: “In Syria, it is a civil war and not a revolution. The recruitment networks are not very clear. There is an international agenda. Young men go there without having any understanding of Syrian politics. They do not even know the president’s name. I have talked with young people at the mosque and explained that it is a complex situation. I have managed to persuade some of them not to go”. Crisis Group interview, representative of a human rights organisation, Ben Guerdane, op. cit.

<sup>175</sup> Crisis Group interview, Salafi, Médenine, Tunis, August 2013.

<sup>176</sup> Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, “Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia’s Long Game: Dawa, Hisba, and Jihad”, The Hague Research Paper, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, May 2013.

<sup>177</sup> Crisis Group interview, Salafi, Médenine, Tunis, September 2013.

<sup>178</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents of Tunis, February-November 2013.

Most people who live in the western border regions seem to think that the authorities are knowingly exaggerating the threat from AQIM.<sup>179</sup> They are more concerned about the impact of the increased presence of the security services on their “business”. When mines exploded on the mountains between 29 April and 20 June 2013, some residents of Kasserine questioned the official version according to which jihadis hiding in the mountains planted the mines to protect their training camp. One of them described the Chaambi jihadis as “ghosts”.<sup>180</sup>

The lethal attack against the army certainly came as a shock to many people. Some even began to form self-defence committees to protect themselves from possible Islamist commando operations.<sup>181</sup> However, most of them still say that national television portrayals of the radical Islamists of Chaambi as guerrilla fighters moving around the countryside at will, protected and supplied by the local population, are not a true reflection of what is happening in their region.<sup>182</sup>

Smugglers seem to have few political and religious convictions. In the west, they live according to a rigorous code with its associated rules, culture and myths.<sup>183</sup> Some of them listen to folk music (*mezwood*) and some drink alcohol “to give themselves courage to carry out risky operations”.<sup>184</sup> The austere lifestyle proposed by Salafism does not seem to attract them, especially the wholesale trade bosses, who are not known for their strict morality. Experience of the Algerian civil war experience of the 1990s had a negative impact on some of them. One of them said he had been “vaccinated against religious extremism”.<sup>185</sup>

In the south east, the networks are controlled by the tribes. Jihadis rarely make an appearance in such circles. A person cannot become a smuggler overnight. It depends on clan membership rather than religious or political contacts. Salafis certainly participate in informal trade. Some people in Ben Guerdane, recognisable by their beard and *kamis*,<sup>186</sup> work in the unofficial currency exchange market. They sometimes act as small transporters, just like many other people in these areas.<sup>187</sup> However, there are relatively few in number. Some will not join the major networks and become a “real smuggler”<sup>188</sup> on religious grounds.<sup>189</sup> Besides, they do not believe they would be accepted, at least for the moment.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Despite its geographical proximity, jihadi terrorism in Kasserine (the nearest town of any size close to Mount Chaambi) seems a distant phenomenon to residents. National television channels broadcast some sensationalist reports in May, June and August.

<sup>180</sup> Crisis Group interview, resident, Kasserine, June 2013. Kasserine residents have a number of theories about the attacks on Mount Chaambi. The most common explanation given is that it was all about score-settling within the army. They say that it was the army itself that exploded the mines and not jihadis. Crisis Group interviews, residents, Kasserine, May-July 2013.

<sup>181</sup> Crisis Group interview, resident of Kasserine, Tunis, August 2013.

<sup>182</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents of Kasserine, Tunis, October 2013.

<sup>183</sup> Crisis Group observations, Tunisian-Algerian border, March-May 2013. Like sailors, they sometimes tell fantastic stories. They admire smugglers “who have been successful” and become local figureheads who make it their business to help the community.

<sup>184</sup> Crisis Group interview, smuggler in Kasserine region, Kasserine, June 2013.

<sup>185</sup> Crisis Group interview, smuggler, Le Kef, June 2013.

<sup>186</sup> The *kami*, *jellabah* or long white robe is the usual clothing of Salafis. It was made popular among Islamists by Afghan jihadis in the 1980s and is worn either directly over the body or over jeans and generally at ankle-length.

<sup>187</sup> Crisis Group observations, Ben Guerdane and Médenine, June 2013.

<sup>188</sup> Crisis Group interview, residents of Ben Guerdane, Ben Guerdane, June 2013.

However, a complex and worrying evolution is taking shape. There is an increase in “Islamogangsterism” in the suburbs of the country’s major towns, which could, in the long term, create the conditions for increased jihadi participation in smuggling networks and even see active cooperation between the cartels and jihadis.

“Islamogangsterism” is growing quickly in the suburbs of the country’s major towns and cities. Most illegal goods, particularly drugs and firearms, are traded in these places. Most Salafi-jihadi sympathisers are young people between the ages of 18 and 25 who grow up in a crime-ridden environment.<sup>191</sup> It was in such a neighbourhood in the south of the capital that, in March 2013, a police officer was found with his throat cut and his left foot amputated. The crime was committed by radical Islamists extorting money from “infidels”, which they justified on theological grounds (*ihtibab*). The group apparently executed the police officer, who was drunk, for swearing.<sup>192</sup>

Some Ansar Sharia members distance themselves from such acts of violence and say they are in fact fighting crime.<sup>193</sup> According to one of them: “many neighbourhoods are now peaceful and united thanks to us. There are no more thefts and murders there”.<sup>194</sup> However, the external signs of piety (beard, salafi clothing) is sometimes used as a pretext to claim a share of the most lucrative trafficking in the neighbourhood.<sup>195</sup> This is what seems to have happened in some city suburbs and villages in the interior of the country and along the coasts.<sup>196</sup> The Salafi-jihadi identity seems to be increasingly used as a cover for crimes so much and so well that the existence of Ansar Sharia activists engaged in peaceful preaching, jihadi groups using violence against the security services but disguising themselves by not showing any visual sign of their religiosity and ordinary criminals who are sympathetic to religious extremism all form part of this mixture of Salafi-jihadism, violence and smuggling.

Mixed groups of traffickers and jihadis are starting to appear in the cross-border trade and this could lead to the development of new competitive or cooperative relationships with the cartels. Some residents in the suburbs note that criminals with a Salafi appearance are now involved in the trafficking of drugs and firearms.<sup>197</sup> Residents of Jendouba governorate in the north west say bearded and non-bearded indi-

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<sup>189</sup> Crisis Group interview, Salafi from Médenine, young Ansar Sharia representative, Tunis, June-August 2013. This is also true of Kasserine. Crisis Group interview, Salafi from Kasserine, Tunis, June 2013.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> See Crisis Group report, *Violence and the Salafi Challenge*, op. cit.

<sup>192</sup> See Walid Mejri, “Dubosville ... victime de la mafia, du ‘jihad’ et du meurtre de sang-froid”, Nawaat (nawaat.org), 30 May 2013. The murder deeply shocked the police force. It made some interior ministry officials anxious to pick a fight with the Salafi-jihadi movement. Crisis Group interviews, representatives of the security forces’ trade union, Tunis, May 2013.

<sup>193</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Ansar Sharia activists in Tunis, Tunis, June 2013.

<sup>194</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ansar Sharia representative in Tunis, June 2013.

<sup>195</sup> After Ben Ali fled, many petty criminals sought impunity by growing beards. During 2011, for fear of reprisals, the much-weakened security forces avoided approaching anyone who looked like they may belong to organised groups. See Crisis Group report, *Violence and the Salafi Challenge*, op. cit. Crisis Group interview, police officer, Tunis suburb, June 2013.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents of Tunis suburbs, Tunis, March-October 2013. One interviewee explained: “In the hilly areas outside Tunis, ‘bearded men’ exchange wads of notes. They load and unload goods into and from luxury all-terrain vehicles. A whole network has been built up. Some prisoners who became Salafis manage their affairs from their prison cell. They are interested in everything, especially drugs and, to a lesser extent, firearms. They have contacts in the border regions and in the suburbs”, June 2013.

viduals with Salafi beliefs are starting to dominate the trade in cannabis, especially in the border triangle formed by Ghardimaou, Sakiet Sidi Youssef and Jendouba.<sup>198</sup> Jendouba residents say that jihadis in the town have issued a *fatwa* legalising the smoking of cannabis.<sup>199</sup> Moreover, the smuggling of tobacco grown in West Africa and packaged in the border regions of southern Algeria is increasingly organised by people close to the Salafi-jihadi movement.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents of Jendouba, Tunis, February-November 2013.

<sup>199</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents of Jendouba governorate, Tunis, February 2013.

<sup>200</sup> Crisis Group interviews, economic control inspector, resident of Kasserine, Tunis, Kasserine, June-August 2013.

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## VI. Conclusion: Security, Dialogue and Consensus

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Popular perceptions of the border regions do not often correspond to reality, but the borders certainly raise security concerns. However, political forces of all stripes hardly ever discuss them. The result is a vicious circle: the lack of political consensus weakens the government's capacity to strengthen its credibility by ensuring security and every security problem that emerges immediately fuels political controversies, with each side accusing the other of being directly or indirectly responsible.

The search for political consensus goes hand-in-hand with attempts to reach a consensus on the security question. However, that does not mean that Tunisian leaders cannot make progress on these two fronts at different speeds.

The key elements in the search for political consensus remain the same: annulling the amendments to the NCA's internal rules; discussing appointments to the administration felt to be partisan by the opposition; finalising the constitution; reaching agreement on the electoral law (voting system, political party funding, electoral campaign, etc.); creating an independent electoral commission (ISIE); organising municipal and presidential elections; discussing the arbitrary dismissal of senior security officials and judges after Ben Ali's fall; and settling the cases of those killed or injured in the revolution.

However, it is also high time to concentrate on security issues. The government's first objective must be to promote the minimum social consensus necessary to improve its intelligence capabilities.<sup>201</sup> This is a crucial issue that bears repeating: regaining control of the borders will be much more difficult without cooperation from the local populations. That is why the authorities must take into account the economic and social reasons for the porosity of the borders when devising their security arrangements. The government should consider setting up working groups composed of elected representatives and representatives of political parties and local communities as well as security experts. They could develop a consensual approach to border control in order to depoliticise the question and present their conclusions to regional and national authorities.

In this respect, it is important to note that, even though some of them are conducting completely illegal operations, the great majority of those involved in informal cross-border trade, from the small-scale transporters to the wholesale trade bosses, seem to be favourable to the creation of free trade zones in the west and south east of the country.<sup>202</sup> Free trade zones would allow the authorities to record the goods being traded and increase their control over the local cartels, which would

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<sup>201</sup> All the more so as sensitive information will come from an increasing diversity of sources. One security official commented that the problem of information exchange can be found "in the various departments of the interior ministry itself". Rivalry between clans and corps within the ministry reduces its capacity to react. Crisis Group interview, police officer, Tunis, July 2013. In addition, some former defence ministry officials speak of the lack of cooperation between security services, especially between the police and the National Guard on the one hand, which reports to the interior ministry, and the army, which reports to the defence ministry. This opposition, this kind of cold war, apparently goes back a long way but got worse after the former regime collapsed. Crisis Group interview, former defence ministry officials, Tunis, May 2013.

<sup>202</sup> Crisis Group interviews, smugglers in the border regions, border regions, February-October 2013. Free trade zones are areas within which trade is not subject to customs duties and which contain warehouses for the storage and distribution of goods for sale on the spot or for export. See "Incentives and Free Zones in the MENA Region: A Preliminary Stocktaking", Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development in Europe, 2008.

be given responsibility for managing some commercial activities, by restricting them within a demarcated area. They would also help to open up the interior by encouraging road building, property development and agricultural and industrial development.<sup>203</sup> The trade ministry would be wise to arrange feasibility studies of such an initiative in cooperation with the Algerian and Libyan authorities.<sup>204</sup>

Reform of the security sector has been a priority for Tunisia since the fall of Ben Ali and has a direct influence on border control. It is essential to create a national agency that would integrate intelligence services and counter-terrorism forces within the same structure,<sup>205</sup> increase the response capability of anti-terrorist brigades and improve coordination between the security services. In addition to increasing the frequency of joint education and training sessions, especially for the army and the National Guard, it would be useful to increase the number of mixed military-led patrols.<sup>206</sup> This would have particular significance for the battle against corruption, which is both fuelled by, and encourages, firearms and drugs trafficking. An increase in joint patrols could help the government to reduce corruption by encouraging these institutions to engage in a kind of “mutual supervision”.<sup>207</sup>

Strengthening security is certainly feasible because, unlike Libya, the Tunisian state is strong enough to secure its borders and control smuggling. It would also seem to have the capacity to improve control over the most vulnerable points on its borders. It has the structures required for control and intervention: border posts, outposts, border police, customs service, the National Guard, army and anti-terrorist brigades.

Inter-Maghreb security cooperation should also be intensified. The meeting at Ghadamès in Libya between the Libyan, Algerian and Tunisian heads of state on 12 January 2013 has already put down markers for a series of measures, including joint border control posts, joint patrols, information exchange and the creation of a tripartite commission to monitor implementation of these measures.<sup>208</sup> That said, some Tunisian officers believe that the lack of reciprocity from Libya would make such cooperation difficult.<sup>209</sup> Although joint Algerian-Tunisian patrols have been taking

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<sup>203</sup> See Crisis Group report, *Tunisia: Confronting Social and Economic Challenges*, op. cit.

<sup>204</sup> The idea of creating free trade zones was discussed many times by the former regime. The trade ministry drafted several documents on the issue. However, there are currently no plans to take this economic and commercial proposal further. Crisis Group interviews, trade ministry officials, customs official, Tunis, June-August 2013.

<sup>205</sup> See “Le projet sur la création d’une agence de renseignement verra le jour dans trois mois”, *Tunisie numérique* (tunisienumerique.com), 21 October 2013.

<sup>206</sup> Since the end of August 2013, the army has coordinated the activities of other security services in the desert buffer zones. In these areas of low population density, joint patrols are led by the army, which, if the security situation demands it, can stop the movement of people through all or part of the area. See Order 2013-230 of 29 August 2013 proclaiming a buffer border zone, *Journal officiel de la République tunisienne*, n°71, 3 September 2013. Crisis Group interview, senior army officer, Tunis, August 2013.

<sup>207</sup> Crisis Group interview, interior ministry official, Tunis, June 2013. One officer suggested the creation of permanent brigades that would include members of the customs service, the police force, the National Guard, the army and intelligence specialists. Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> See “Tunisie/Ghadamès: Sommet tripartite pour sécuriser les frontières”, *Global Net* (gnet.tn), 11 January 2013. A follow-up meeting, attended by representatives of nine Maghreb countries (Algeria, Egypt, Mali, Morocco, Mauritania, Niger, Sudan, Chad and Tunisia) was held on 11-12 March 2013 in Tripoli. See *Rapport d’Information n°720* registered with the presidency of the French Senate on 3 July ([www.senat.fr/rap/r12-720/r12-7201.pdf](http://www.senat.fr/rap/r12-720/r12-7201.pdf)).

<sup>209</sup> Crisis Group interviews, army officers, Tunis, June 2013.



place since the beginning of the 1980s within the framework of bilateral accords<sup>210</sup> and the two countries regularly exchange information, this is far from being the case between the Tunisian and Libyan armies.<sup>211</sup> Weak security in Libya increases the porosity of the south-east border, which is the border most used by experienced Tunisian fighters returning from Syria. However, intensification of controls at border crossings should make it easier to monitor their movements.<sup>212</sup> They should also be invited to attend deradicalisation programs, which would use dialogue and persuasion to help their reintegration into the economy and society.<sup>213</sup>

In the absence of such measures, particularly the establishment of trust between the political forces, the authorities in the capital and residents of the border regions and the strengthening of inter-Maghreb security, jihadi forces could, in the medium term, obtain greater quantities of military equipment and fund their activities from the proceeds of smuggling high-value goods. It would then be impossible to differentiate political violence from trafficking-induced violence, with all the harmful consequences that Tunisian political forces of all tendencies should be able to imagine.

**Tunis/Brussels, 28 November 2013**

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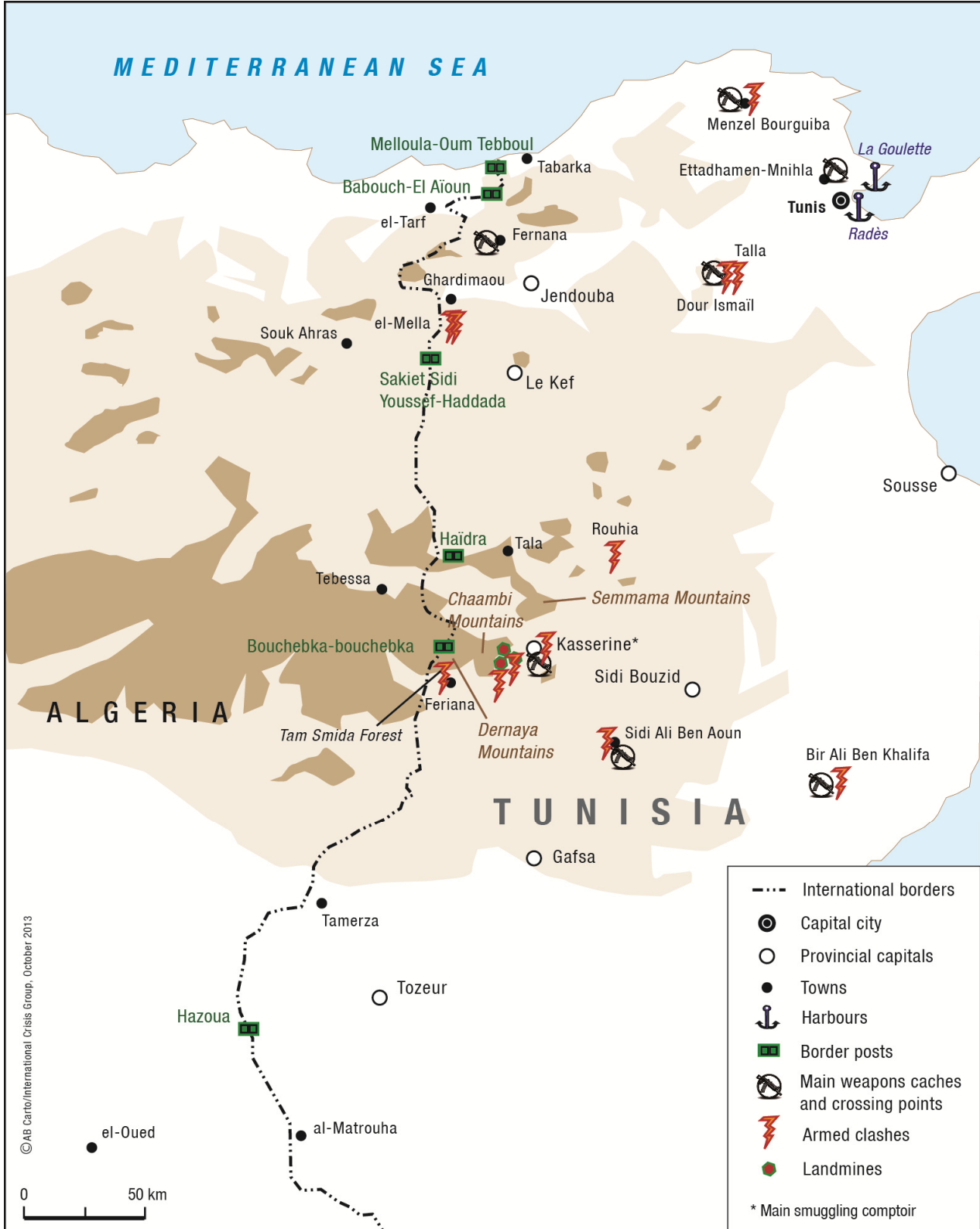
<sup>210</sup> Algerian-Tunisian military cooperation is regulated by a bilateral accord signed in 1983 and updated in 2001. See “La lutte contre le terrorisme au menu des discussions Guenaizia à Tunis pour relancer la coopération militaire”, Algérie-dz (algerie-dz.com), 5 March 2007.

<sup>211</sup> A Tunisian officer said: “Before we can reach a cooperation agreement with Libya, we need a counterpart with who to communicate. In fact, members of the security services that are supposed to control the borders change frequently. Some also belong to the revolutionary brigades. The security vacuum in Libya prevents us having stable interlocutors. We are unable to begin genuine military cooperation. This is detrimental because we would otherwise get advance warning of the approach of any enemies”. Crisis Group interview, senior Tunisian army officer, Tunis, August 2013.

<sup>212</sup> Libya would improve its strategic planning for border control if it had a more detailed inventory of its human and material security resources. Crisis Group interviews, members of an NGO operating in Libya, Tunis, October 2013.

<sup>213</sup> See Richard Barret and Laïla Bokhari, “Deradicalization and rehabilitation programmes targeting religious terrorists and extremists in the Muslim world: an overview”, in Tore Bjorgo and John Horgan (dir.), *Leaving Terrorism Behind, Individual and Collective Disengagement* (London/New York, 2009).

Appendix A: Map of Western Tunisia



Appendix B: Map of Southern Tunisia

