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## FUTURE NOTES

# PRECARIOUS RESILIENCE: TUNISIA'S LIBYAN PREDICAMENT

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## PRECARIOUS RESILIENCE: TUNISIA'S LIBYAN PREDICAMENT

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The chaos engulfing Libya is proving to be particularly destabilizing for its neighbouring country, Tunisia. Currently, the country's ongoing democratic transition is at risk of faltering due to the disorder emanating from its south-eastern neighbour, which threatens to further exacerbate tensions in the border region. Tunisia is trying to contain the risk of instability through active participation in a diplomatic initiative involving Libya's neighbouring countries, aimed at reconciling the various groups and resolving the long-standing polarization and fragmentation within Libyan society. However, economic hardships, the emerging conflict economy proliferating across the Tunisia–Libya border and the backlash of increasing securitization of the border regions, intended to contain the terrorist threat and the risk of violent spillover from Libya, are threatening to worsen the pre-existing fault lines in the border regions and weaken Tunisia's resilience, namely the ability of the state and society to manage external crises and to implement much-needed reforms to address the long list of social grievances, economic alienation and political disillusionment in the periphery. The Libyan predicament is impacting Tunisia's weak economy and its precarious political arrangements, as the increased polarization within the country is fuelled by the actions of regional and international players who threaten to spread their proxy war across North Africa and, with regard to Libya, limit Tunisia's efforts to find a diplomatic solution.

### POLITICAL CRISIS AND DIPLOMATIC ACTIVISM

Since 2014, Libya has been a thorn in Tunisia's side. Finding reliable interlocutors and establishing a mutual framework for cooperation in security have proved challenging. Furthermore, in a context marred by a fragmented military situation and the absence of any central authority strong enough to establish a monopoly on power, outside regional powers have found enough space to intrude upon the situation and fan the flames of conflict between belligerent groups. In this light, Libya's stabilization remains vital for Tunisia, not least because of the risk posed to Tunisia's national security by the chaos within the country. So far, the perpetrators of the various attacks targeting Tunisia (the 2015 attack at the Bardo Museum in February, the Sousse attack in June 2015, the bombing of the Presidential Guard in Tunis in November of the same year and the attack on the border town of Ben Guerdane in March 2016) had all travelled to, and trained at, the Islamic State camps in Libya. There is no denying that both the security vacuum and the country's fragmentation have offered an opportunity for jihadi groups to strengthen their footprint in Libya, which in turn poses a risk to Tunisia's stability.

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The role of the Libya-based jihadi groups is amplifying an already existing problem in Tunisia, which is the violent radicalization of young people. Since 2011, violent extremism remains unresolved. Tunisia has been home to a growing jihadi movement since the fall of Ben Ali's regime in January 2011. The monopolization of the religious sphere by the former regime and its neglect of the socioeconomic grievances in the 2000s paved the way to the radicalization of young people. These factors, combined with the worsening of the socioeconomic situation and the vacuum within religious sphere following the fall of the regime, allowed radical groups to preach their ideas and recruit new members among the disenfranchised youth, provoking an escalation of violence in Tunisia and the export of jihadists to Syria and Libya. The failure of the authorities to design and implement a national strategy to organize and coordinate the work of different state agencies and civil society organizations to prevent violent extremism has exacerbated the phenomenon of radicalization against a backdrop of a lack of economic opportunities, a general disillusionment with politics and a vacuum in the religious sphere. These factors explain why Tunisia ranks high among the countries that have become breeding grounds for jihadists, with some 5,500 Tunisians fighting in Syria, Libya and Mali.

Unable to cope with the proxy war raging in Libya, since 2015 Tunisia has been working closely with Algeria, and to some extent Egypt, to coordinate their actions in a bid to help Libya stabilize its internal dynamics.<sup>2</sup> Though greatly lacking in detail, the Tunisian–Algerian initiative seeks to counteract the destabilizing role played by regional and international powers, namely the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Turkey, Qatar and Russia, in Libya. To this day, it only makes mention of achieving a ceasefire between Libyan militias and rejecting any foreign intervention, initiating an inclusive dialogue process that would involve prominent Libyan actors, the House of Representatives (HoR), the state council, the Government of National Accord (GNA) and General Khalifa Haftar's army, and ensuring the participation of the "Greens", namely the representatives of the Qaddafi regime. This search for a political solution has been motivated by the blocking of the Skhirat process and the failure of regional organizations, such as the Union for the Arab Maghreb, the Arab League and the African Union, to assume a significant role in brokering a solution. Meant to stop the two governments and parliaments based in Tripoli and in Tobruk from breaking the country apart, the GNA, which derives from the Skhirat agreement, has failed to put an end to political fragmentation, as Libya is now divided between three governments and clashes take place periodically in the west, the east and also the southern part of the country. Despite being backed by the United Nations (UN) and the international community, the GNA has barely established its authority in Tripoli, and it is failing not only to assert its power over the rest of the country, but also to stop the fighting, to avoid the collapse of the Libyan economy and finally to improve the security situation within the country. Militias are still calling the shots throughout Libyan territory, and clashes intensified in March 2017 around the oil installations in Tripoli and the Gulf of Sirte. The Tunisian–Algerian initiative has been harshly tested by the intensified struggles between armed

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2 This initiative that aims at stabilizing Libya has taken place in an uncertain regional context. The ambiguity surrounding the succession of Algerian president Abdel Aziz Bouteflika is making the stabilization of Algeria's neighbourhood a priority. Existing tensions between Algeria and Morocco, the fragile political transition in Tunisia and the crisis in northern Mali and the Sahel are not exactly circumstances conducive to the effective handling of internal political change. Moreover, the worrisome situation in Libya has warranted Algeria's military surveillance of its border with Libya since 2011, stretching dangerously thin the armed forces that are spread out along the borders with Mali, Morocco and Tunisia.

groups, as well as their relative growing independence vis-à-vis regional sponsors and potential international supporters, as demonstrated by the refusal of General Haftar to meet Fayez al-Sarraj, prime minister of the GNA, in Cairo in February 2017, and the earlier offensive launched by the Benghazi Defence Brigade to take control of the oil crescent.

The risks of increased polarization and military confrontation between opposing Libyan forces still linger over the region, thus posing challenges for Tunisia. These challenges include, on the one hand, the risk of a large new wave of displaced people coming to Tunisia (and the impossibility of managing it) if the infighting were to intensify in Tripoli and western Libya, and, on the other hand, the security threat associated with the high risk of jihadist infiltration. In this light, the success of the Tunisian–Algerian initiative hangs in the balance, dependent on the Libyans agreeing on an inclusive power-sharing process. The consolidation of Tunisia’s active role in this initiative will depend also on the neutralization of conflicts between Tunisian political forces. The Tunisian opposition has denounced the mediation role that Ennahda’s leader, Rached Ghannouchi, is playing with Islamist movements in Libya, in close coordination with Algiers. In response to Ghannouchi’s growing role in the Tunisian–Algerian initiative, Mohsen Marzouk, one of the Tunisian opposition leaders and a founder of the newly created anti-Islamist Salvation and Progress Front, met General Haftar in Libya in February 2017 accompanied by a delegation of his party and without any previous coordination with the Tunisian Ministry of Foreign Affairs or Tunisian President Beji Caid Essebsi. This visit exacerbated the cacophony around the role of politicians in Tunisian diplomacy and echoed the growing polarization within the political sphere. This polarization will likely increase as the 2019 elections draw closer. During a meeting with Emirati diplomats, one of the founders of the Salvation and Progress Front requested financial support from the UAE to help challenge Ennahda. Thus, the Libyan predicament is aggravating divisions within Tunisia, weakening the fragile political compromise and threatening to considerably limit Tunisia’s efforts to find a diplomatic solution.

## **BORDER POLITICS AND CROSS-BORDER ECONOMY**

The fragmentation of Libyan society and the dominant role played by militias and other non-state actors within it, especially along the border, pose a significant challenge to the Tunisian state. Indeed, the border economy exerts a magnetic pull on militias attracted by the prospect of controlling and benefiting from illicit trade. Historically, cities in the west of Libya have always played a major “city-entrepôt” role with regard to the border economy, connecting southern cities in Tunisia to the global market and ensuring the continued illicit supply of goods and fuel to the Tunisian market. According to the Tunisian security services, around fifteen Libyan non-state armed groups are today positioned along the border with Tunisia, complicating Tunisian authorities’ efforts to coordinate border security arrangements with their Libyan counterparts. The proliferation of these armed groups weakens ongoing attempts to work out a diplomatic and security agreement between the two countries, limiting their efficiency in the regulation and control of the border. Dealing with these non-state actors, many of which have competing political and economic agendas, is a crucial challenge for the Tunisian state. Since the fall of Qaddafi, the new authorities in Tripoli have had little influence over the armed groups. Their failure to establish control over the borders and to regulate competition over access to border resources has helped fuel the conflicts between armed groups and made frequent armed clashes inevitable.

Controlled by the Amazigh city of Zuwara (around 60 kilometres from the Tunisian border and 100 kilometres west of Tripoli) since the fall of Qaddafi, the border crossing of Ras Jedir lies at the heart of rivalries between the armed militias of Zuwara and the Brigade Tarek El Ghayeb from Zawiya. The city of Zuwara is aiming at consolidating its military and economic influence by investing in the construction of an airport and port facilities. These efforts are based on a number of rationales: following an economic rationale, local businessmen have promoted the city as an import–export hub able to compete with the chaos-ridden capital Tripoli; a military rationale relies on the consolidation of the cross-border economy to provide important goods to the militias; and finally, a political rationale argues that the city should become more prominent and promote the Amazigh identity. Its rivalry with Zawiya, a large city in the western part of Libya, intensified when Zuwara decided to extend its administrative district to include the Ras Jedir border crossing with Tunisia. The Brigade Tarek al Ghayeb, affiliated with the city of Zawiya, has tried multiple times, but to no avail, to gain control over that very crossing. In the end, they established a roadblock a few kilometres beyond the crossing. In the eyes of the Tunisian authorities, this brigade, which belongs to the Madkhaly movement, a strain of Salafism, represents a real threat to the security of the country, especially if it succeeds in taking control of the Ras Jedir crossing. This strain of Salafism, which follows a Saudi doctrine, is a serious rival to the Muslim Brotherhood movement and other jihadist groups. Tunisian authorities are particularly worried about Salafi forces relocating to the south of the country and the power they would have to attract Tunisian youth in the historically marginalized south. Indeed, the economic situation has deteriorated since 2011 in the two governorates bordering Libya, Medenine and Tataouine, which increases the sense of marginalization among the local population and occasionally feeds social protest demanding employment and development.

The example set by Ras Jedir has been replicated further south at the Dhehiba–Wazen border crossing. Before 2011, the Border Guards were in charge of the Libyan–Tunisian border. Qaddafi mostly used men from the Si’an and Nwa’il communities along the border. After the revolution, control over the Dhehiba–Wazen border crossing passed into the hands of the Nalut military council. In an attempt to counter the domination of the Amazigh over all the border crossings between Tunisia and Libya, the Zintan militia tried to obtain the opening of a new border crossing, Mashhad Salah. They also attempted to use Si’an people – who own the lands located along the border across the Hamada Desert – in a way very similar to what Qaddafi had done previously. Convinced that initiating an open conflict with the Nalut was not in their interest, the Zintan militia avoided becoming directly involved in tensions or clashes with Nalut groups and preferred to support the Si’an. These struggles demonstrate that the order emerging in the border regions is the result of fierce competition and persistent attempts by non-state actors to strengthen their positions on the ground and to gain access to border resources. Many militias, fearing that their control over trans-border traffic might be jeopardized, have done everything possible to prevent this from happening. As political and military conflicts have intensified since the fall of Qaddafi, the objective for all the communities in the region is to ensure they have access to at least one channel to the outside world.

The conflict economy in western Libya has generated fresh uncertainty in Tunisia’s border regions and increased competition between Tunisian smuggling networks seeking protection in Libya. The

control of the border crossing has become increasingly crucial, as the economic situation has worsened in Libya. Border crossings are the main access points for travellers and traders operating between the two countries. The economic hardships in Libya and the collapse of the Libyan dinar have boosted the demand for dollars from the marketplace of Ben Guerdane, turning the control of the cross-border road into a lucrative business for militias interested in hard currencies and in participating in the black market.

## ECONOMIC BURDEN AND SECURITY CONCERNS

Apart from the dynamics related to the smuggling economy proliferating across the border, with the chaos engulfing Libya Tunisia has lost its fourth most important economic partner at the very time it needs it the most. Revenues from trade with Libya could have played a vital role in re-establishing the country's economy and ensuring the stability necessary for its successful democratic transition. Since 2011, the importance of the informal economy has increased in proportion to the reduction of economic opportunities within Tunisia and the cessation of economic migration to Libya. For more than four decades, Libya had been a major destination for Tunisian seasonal workers, mostly from the border regions, who helped meet the demand for labour in their oil-producing neighbour. However, since the fall of Gaddafi and the deterioration of the security situation in Libya, some 40,000 Tunisian workers have fled the country. The loss of these incomes has increased poverty and dissatisfaction among large swathes of the Tunisian population. Since 2011, between 10,000 and 15,000 families have stopped receiving income because of the crisis in Libya.

Driven by internal security threats and regional instability, Tunisia spent 20 percent of its 2016 national budget on internal security and defence alone, adding a further burden to the country's economic woes and budgetary restrictions. Since reducing the porosity of its borders is Tunisia's most pressing concern, the country has dug a trench along its frontier with Libya and restricted the influence within Tunisia of the military groups fighting for control of the flow of goods between the two countries. Since August 2013, a military-enforced buffer zone has also been in place along the Tunisian border.

The securitization of borders, and particularly the closure of the crossings, has resulted in the frequent suspension of cross-border trade, which in turn has negatively impacted the social and economic conditions of the populations living in the surrounding area. Indeed, informal trade represents an important part of Tunisia's bilateral trade with Libya, accounting for more than half of the overall official trade. Within the border regions specifically, informal trade is one of the most important activities. For example, a large part of the fuel consumed in Tunisia is imported from Libya informally. Within the governorate of Medenine in the south-east, 20 percent of the working-age population is said to operate within the informal sector, of whom approximately 83 percent are thought to be from the border town of Ben Guerdane.

The tightening of controls at the Libyan border has also resulted in the exclusion of many operators from the border economy and the consequent slowdown of economic activity within this marginalized region. In addition, the absence of concrete measures to address the economic and regulatory differences in terms of tariffs, tax levels and subsidies on the two sides of the border, together with intensified security measures, have gradually increased corruption among

state agents and, ultimately, undermined the effectiveness of government controls on smuggling activities.

The overall situation has been complicated still further by Islamic State-affiliated jihadist groups seeking to exploit existing rivalries between tribes and smuggling networks experiencing economic hardship in order to establish a base along the border. A review of the 26 assailants from the Ben Guerdane insurgency who tried to capture this border town on 7 March 2016 reveals an over-representation of youth originating from the R'baya' tribe, historically dominated by the powerful Twazine tribe, which controls the cross-border trade around the town. The marginalization of the R'baya' was exacerbated by a long-lasting and unresolved conflict over land ownership in the area. R'baya' smugglers, traffickers and individuals, ousted from the border economy as a result of heavy-handed security measures, found in jihad a narrative that allowed them to resist the state and to pursue these old tribal rivalries. Security in the peripheries is therefore directly threatened by the deepening of pre-existing divisions that feed on the dynamics of the jihadization of local conflicts in the context of the erosion of the state, economic hardship and the emergence of a conflict economy.

The security-centred approach is threatening to cause the central state to lose, rather than gain, the legitimacy for which it strives. While providing a semblance of stability, this approach actually perpetuates the sense of disenfranchisement among those it hopes to police. As local populations depend on the border economy out of necessity in the absence of alternatives, restrictions on cross-border trade have resulted in periodic conflicts with both the security services and the military. Indeed, the long legacy of the alienation of Tunisia's south and the failure of post-2011 governments to promote development have left young people with very restricted options: emigration, contraband or protest. The increased illegal emigration of young people from border regions with Libya, namely Medenine and Tataouine, has resulted in fatal boat capsizings, for example the deaths off the Libyan coast of twelve young people from Ben Guerdane and fourteen from Tataouine respectively in July 2016 and March 2017. These tragic episodes have provoked angry outbursts in these regions, where citizens experience the very absence of the state and unequal access to economic opportunities and social services.

Since 2011, frequent social protests have shaken southern Tunisia. The pressing issues of unemployment, corruption and underdevelopment are becoming more contentious every day. Since March 2017, strikes and protests in Tataouine have completely blocked all economic activity in the region. The protesters have proclaimed their right to employment and the development of their marginalized region, where many oil companies operate without accepting any social or environmental responsibility for the development of the area. They are also asking for concrete measures to promote economic development and to incentivize participation in the legal economy, such as the creation of a free trade zone with neighbouring Libya.

This social instability in southern Tunisia is not only evidence of the post-2011 government's inability to contain the protests; it also attests to the inability of the political system to include all societal forces and its limited capacity to channel and mediate the social claims of the disenfranchised populations, who feel excluded from political representation and from enjoying the benefits of the revolution. It points also to the limits of consensus between Islamists and secularists that frame

formal politics. For large swathes of the population, this consensus has turned into a power-sharing pact that has marginalized long-standing and deeply rooted structural socio-economic grievances and, in the absence of a strong and representative political opposition, has opened the door to informal political contention. The worsening of the situation in Libya and the failure of the Tunisian political elites to kick-start development in the peripheries will only further foster the conditions in which radical groups thrive, given their proficiency in harnessing the type of social anger threatening to transform Tunisia's south into a hotbed of radicalism.

In addressing the impact of border insecurity, Tunis continues to wrestle with what it sees as the contradictory demands of security and the economic development of the region. Given the security emergency, the priority given to it is understandable. However, separating security concerns from the development of the border regions is likely to fuel the causes of the insecurity the state seeks to address.

The choice between security and development is likely to remain an unresolved dilemma as Tunisian jihadists return from Libya and Syria, sparking bitter controversy in the society and the Tunisian media. The government's lack of a clear plan to resolve the issue only increases the unease. By refusing to negotiate with jihadists, the government is ruling out the possibility of reproducing the Algerian experiment that allowed for the reintegration of jihadists in order to defuse the terrorist threat. When the prime minister announced in February 2017 that returning jihadists from Syria and Libya belonged in prison, he clearly shot down any possibility to differentiate among jihadists on the basis of the danger they actually represent and their potential to be reintegrated into civilian life, even when many of them are in close proximity to the Libyan-Tunisian border. Handling returning jihadists well could go a long way toward ensuring national security in Tunisia.

## CONCLUSIONS

Six years after the Arab uprisings, Libya's stabilization is of urgent concern for Tunisia if it is to both thwart the deterioration of internal fault lines, which could lead to an outbreak of violence, and alleviate the negative effects of the serious economic crisis in which the country is ensnared. Strengthening the resilience of the Tunisian state and society implies paying closer attention to the economic, political and social dynamics at play in the ongoing security and social tensions that are tearing southern Tunisia apart. Tunisia needs to put in place a development programme to tackle the specific challenges facing the border regions, including preventing the spread of instability from neighbouring countries to Tunisia and improving the living conditions of local populations. This requires the building of access roads to open up the regions to the private sector and to create local jobs, and more generally the setting up of a positive discrimination system that could alleviate regional disparities and reinforce national cohesion. The Tunisian army should also reconsider the terms of its presence in the south. It should combine its primary mission of defending the territory with its role as a social actor through programmes of vocational training for young people that promote employability and prevent radicalization in the peripheries. It should also encourage the construction of military hospitals that provide care to local populations.

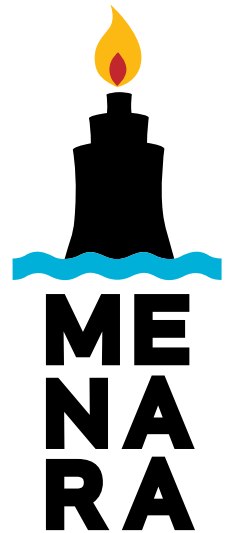
The Tunisian-Algerian initiative is an attempt to pull Libya out of the military conflict that erupted in 2014. Reaching a political settlement is all the more important because none of the Libyan



players are or ever will be capable of winning the war. Indeed, even with the backing of Egypt, the UAE and Russia, General Haftar has been unable to fend off the relentless attacks of his opponents. Moreover, the acts of violence perpetrated by his troops in March 2017 in Benghazi could indicate a renewed determination to further escalate the current hostilities, thereby exacerbating existing divisions between tribal groups. Given the good relations that Algeria maintains with Russia, and that Algiers and Tunis have kept with the different Libyan parties, the Tunisian–Algerian initiative could contribute towards bringing the different Libyan belligerents to the negotiation table. However, if it is to succeed, the initiative must be detailed and supported explicitly by major international partners and most importantly by Egypt who, for historical, political and military reasons, has a significant amount of influence in Libya. There is indeed a high degree of risk that an antagonistic axis could emerge that would oppose the existing axis formed by Egypt and the UAE which already dominates the eastern part of Libya, thereby worsening the country’s existing polarization.

The support of European countries for this initiative is crucial for its success. However, given the different strategies of European countries and even divisions among each country’s elites concerning how to proceed toward any possible settlement in Libya, this support is far from guaranteed. The main concerns for European countries remain the closure of the central Mediterranean migration route to Europe and the war on terrorism, as attested by the European Union (EU) summit held in Malta in February 2017. Whereas Italy has close relations with Misrata, the election agendas in France, Germany and even the UK are preventing any long-term reflection and coordination on a concerted political strategy on Libya, thus reducing the European official position to supporting the internationally recognized government.

The EU and its member states can play a major role in strengthening the resilience of the Tunisian state and society via the coordination and partnership mechanism G7+, which includes the G7 countries together with EU and international financial institutions (IFI). Launched in June 2016 to coordinate economic assistance to Tunisia, this mechanism focuses on economic and governance reform. It could play a central role in enhancing territorial integration and social cohesion and in overcoming the security–development dilemma in southern Tunisia.



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