

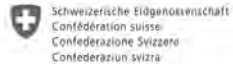
## On the Edge? Trafficking and Insecurity at the Tunisian–Libyan Border

*By Moncef Kartas*



Security Assessment  
in North Africa

A Working Paper of the Small Arms Survey/Security Assessment in North Africa project, with support from the US State Department, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.



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## About the Small Arms Survey

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# About the Security Assessment in North Africa

The Security Assessment in North Africa is a multi-year project of the Small Arms Survey that supports actors engaged in building a more secure environment in North Africa and the Sahel–Sahara region. It produces timely, evidence-based research and analysis on the availability and circulation of small arms, the dynamics of emerging armed groups, and related insecurity. The project places special emphasis on the local and transnational effects of the region’s recent uprisings and armed conflicts on community safety.

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## List of abbreviations

<b>AQIM</b>	Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
<b>LCPR</b>	Local Committees for the Protection of the Revolution
<b>NTC</b>	National Transitional Council
<b>RPG</b>	Rocket-propelled grenade (launcher)
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

## About the author

**Moncef Kartas** is a researcher at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva and the project coordinator of the Small Arms Survey's Security Assessment in North Africa project.

He holds a PhD in international relations from the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva and a Master's degree in political science, philosophy, and international law from the University of Munich.



## Acknowledgements

Conducting field research in Tunisia and Libya on security issues is a very challenging and at times frustrating task. Decades of authoritarian rule, built on a collective illusion of all-encompassing and powerful security and intelligence services, have instilled suspicions among people and institutions towards anyone who asks questions. Moreover, in the border region between Tunisia and Libya, the tribal networks that control informal trade and contraband attribute their thriving business to a deep-rooted 'code of silence', which is itself reinforced through abundant rumours and disinformation. At the same time, the people of this region stand out for their hospitality and friendliness.

The author would like to thank all the people who have helped him in the course of his travels through the border region between Tunisia and Libya, all of whom shall remain anonymous. They include members of civil society organizations, local development associations, local labour unions, mayors and other local officials, political activists, journalists, ordinary people who were engaged in providing assistance to refugees from the Libyan armed conflict, and a few shopkeepers and traders involved in informal trade and perhaps even contraband. He also extends thanks to officers from the security forces and customs, who agreed to meet on the condition of anonymity. He particularly appreciates the fact that many deemed this study a worthwhile piece of research.

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# Introduction

Tunisia, Libya, and much of the Arab world are in the midst of political and social upheaval widely known as the ‘Arab Spring’. Thus far, the tidal wave of change that began in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid on 17 December 2010 has led to the end of former president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali’s 23-year dictatorship and to the fall of fellow dictator Muammar Qaddafi in Libya, while also setting off government transformations and conflict across the region. The revolutions in Tunisia and Libya have not only changed the political landscapes in both countries, but also affected the informal networks and ties that have long characterized the shared border region of the two nations: the Jefara. Indeed, the revolution in each country has profoundly affected the other and will probably continue to do so.

With this understanding, this report investigates how the Libyan armed conflict and its aftermath have affected the security situation in Tunisia, particularly in light of the circulation of firearms and infiltrations by armed groups. As the circulation of Libyan small arms and light weapons in Tunisia cannot be adequately understood without a closer look at the tribal structures behind informal trade and trafficking networks in the border region, this report examines how the Libyan revolution affected such structures in the Jefara.

This Working Paper presents several key findings:

- Despite the weakening of the Tunisian security apparatus and the ongoing effects of the armed conflict in Libya, the use of firearms connected to crime and political violence has remained relatively low in Tunisia. Even in light of recent assassinations of two prominent leftist politicians and regular armed clashes between violent extremists, the military, and security forces on the Algerian–Tunisian border, the use of firearms remains the exception rather than the rule.
- In Tunisia, firearms trafficking currently exists in the form of small-scale smuggling. However, larger smuggling operations have been discovered and tied

to Algeria-based violent extremist networks—such as al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb—which have infiltrated the country.

- Since the 1980s, tribal cartels have been in control of informal trade and trafficking in the Jefara. Their continued control rests on the cartels' strategic stance, informal agreements with the government, and their ability to withstand new, Libya-based competitors (both tribal and militia-based).

### Box 1 A note on methodology

This paper is based on a combination of desk and field research. The desk research involved a review of available information on the informal trade and contraband in the Jefara, including media reports of events that took place after the onset of the political upheaval in Libya. The field research focused on the main cities and strategic locations of the Tunisian–Libyan border region, notably the Jefara, with a special focus on the two official border crossings at Ras Jdir in the north and Dhiba southwards in the Nafusa Mountains. Three lengthy field trips to southern Tunisia were undertaken in 2012—in late May, mid-June, and mid-July—with a focus on the cities of Ben Guerdane, Medenine, and Tataouine. Shorter visits were also conducted to the border cities of Dhiba, Ras Jdir, and Remada. The research was complemented with a series of interviews in Tripoli, Libya, in February, May, and June 2013.

A variety of approaches were applied during the field research:

- In southern Tunisia, the author conducted 35 confidential interviews and narrative conversations with members of civil society, Local Committees for the Protection of the Revolution (LCPRs), local officials, and people engaged in informal trade (either as resellers or as traffickers).
- Another 12 confidential and informal discussions were conducted with customs officials, border guards, and security officers.
- On-site verification of rumours and news reports about criminality and insecurity were carried out in the region of Sousse, Sfax, and southern Tunisia, in order to assess to what extent firearms were used and whether people witnessed their use.<sup>1</sup>
- In Tunis and Sousse, the author conducted 32 confidential interviews with scholars, experts, journalists, and civil society activists, as well as with representatives of the two main unions of the security forces. Seven of the interviewees, all of whom were from the security forces, agreed to engage in regular follow-up conversations.
- Attempts were made to secure relevant data from the Tunisian Ministry of the Interior, such as the number, type, and quality of arms seized since the Libyan armed conflict, stockpile management techniques to safeguard the seized arms, and the official border management policy of the Tunisian government. Although the Ministry of Interior did not formally reject such requests, the data was not provided.

- Clashes in the Jefara over trafficking routes and the reconfiguration of Tunisian–Libyan tribal alliances play key roles in either propelling or curbing cross-border trafficking in small arms and light weapons.
- The presence of significant numbers of Libyan refugees in Tunisia—including many former Qaddafi loyalists—puts Tunisia at risk of being drawn into the continuing tribal conflicts in Libya.

It is beyond the scope of this report to offer a quantitative assessment of the number of small arms and light weapons in circulation and their availability. Rather, this Working Paper provides a qualitative assessment of the transformations of trafficking dynamics in the Jefara from the onset of the Libyan armed conflict. It also offers an analytical reading of trafficking patterns based on publicly available data (see Box 1). Special attention is directed at the implications of refugee flows, in terms of both Tunisia’s security situation and its strategic role in the Libyan armed conflict. To evaluate the geostrategic importance of the Jefara both during and in the aftermath of the armed conflict, this report also explores the links between the support for Libyan refugees in Tunisia and tribal militias in the Nafusa Mountains (see Map 1).

This report is divided into three main sections. The first section provides a brief geostrategic and historical background on the Jefara and the evolution of the informal trade and trafficking in that region. The second section discusses the impact of the Libyan armed conflict on informal trade and trafficking in the Jefara. The final section describes the dynamics of arms circulation in Tunisia in the aftermath of the Libyan armed conflict and analyses which groups have an interest in small arms and light weapons. ■

# I. The evolution of the Tunisian–Libyan border region

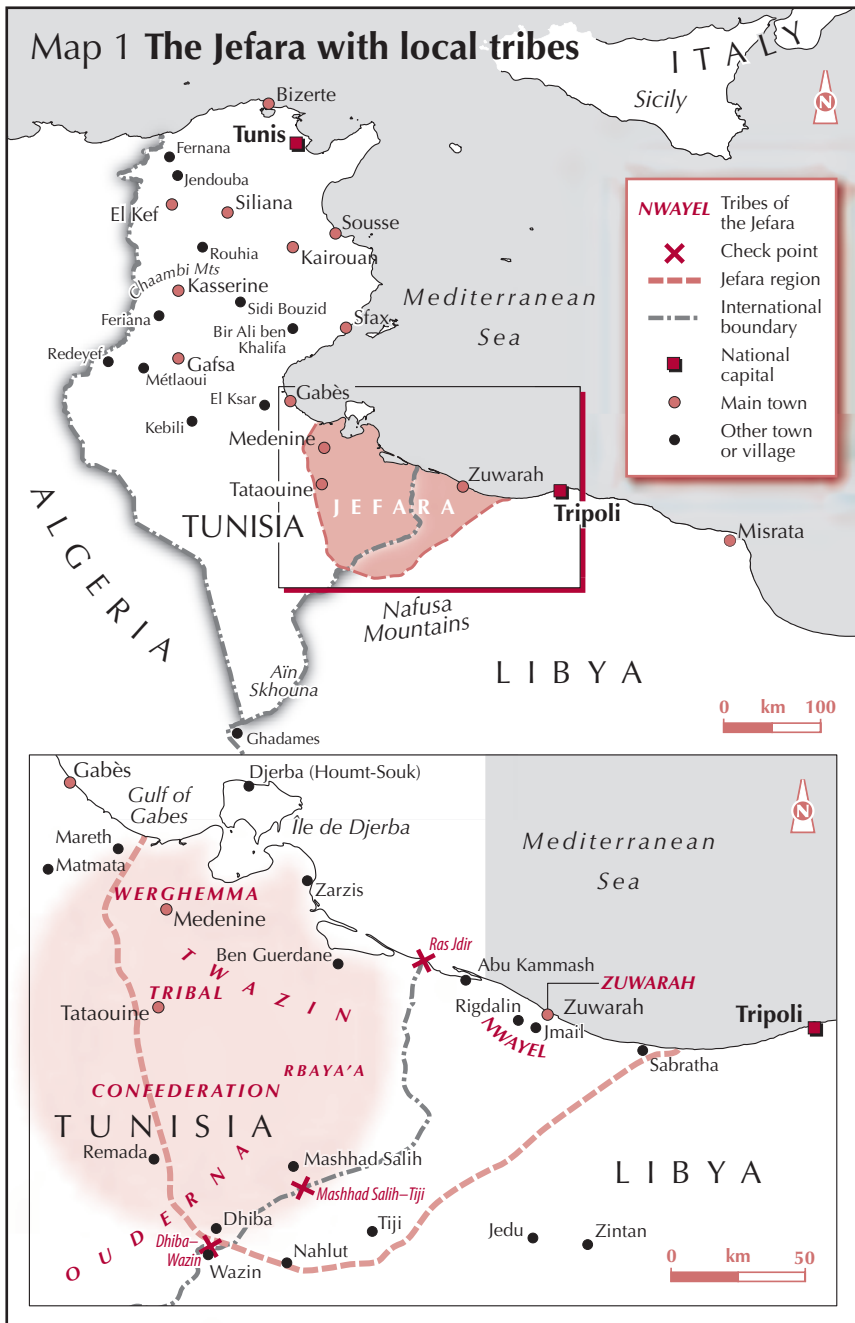
The Jefara forms a triangular area that stretches out from Mareth (in the north-west) to Somrane (in the north-east), and from the Libyan Gulf coast to Nahlut, in the southern Nafusa Mountains (also known as the 'Jbel Nafusa'). It covers a territory of more than 15,000 km<sup>2</sup> that consists mainly of plains, though on its south-eastern flank a mountainous landscape attains more than 750 m in elevation.

## History and economy of the Jefara

The Jefara was an undefined region, controlled by various rulers until the 11<sup>th</sup> century, when large tribes invaded the area and began to lend it both territorial and socio-cultural definition (Martel, 1965a). For centuries thereafter, the region enjoyed a stable and calm indigenous order. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Werghemma (west) and Nwayel (east) tribal confederations came to dominate the Jefara (Martel, 1965a; 1965b). Yet that stability was shattered with the arrival of French colonizers at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and Tunisia's subsequent emergence as a modern nation-state dominated by coastal elites.<sup>2</sup> The arbitrary division of the Jefara between the French and Italian colonies further disrupted the complex systems that nomadic tribes had developed in relative isolation from the Ottoman rulers, to ensure their survival and the region's stability (Tabib, 2011, pp. 27–28).<sup>3</sup>

Along with stability, the Jefara had long enjoyed a solid, if unspectacular, economy. Yet the political division of the region also contributed to its economic decline, which was exacerbated by external events, including World War II and cross-border tensions between Libya and Tunisia (Abdelkebir, 2003). In the 1960s, the development of the Libyan oil industry began to change the Jefara's economic outlook. Remittances from economic migrants increased and informal, cross-border trade began to increase (Chandoul and Boubakri,

Map 1 The Jefara with local tribes



1991). When political tensions between Tripoli and Tunis occasioned a tightening of border controls (see Box 2), the Twazin tribe of Ben Guerdane in Tunisia responded by developing a range of black market, cross-border services (Boubakri, 2001, pp. 7–8; Chandoul and Boubakri, 1991, pp. 160–62). Working with their Libyan allies of the Nwayel tribes, the Twazin traffickers developed

## **Box 2 A history of Tunisian–Libyan relations and the Jefara: key events<sup>4</sup>**

### **1881**

France imposes the Treaty of Bardo on the Tunisian Bey, establishing the French protectorate.

### **1910**

A treaty between the French government and the Ottoman ruler in Tripolitania delineates the border between the two territories that make up the Jefara. The Werghemma confederation allies with the Nwayel to fight the establishment of the border.

### **1951**

Libyan independence.

### **1956**

Tunisian independence. After four years of armed rebellion and unrest, especially in the Jefara, the Tunisian armed and security forces seal the border to Libya.

### **1974**

President Habib Bourguiba and Col. Muammar Qaddafi sign the treaty of Djerba, which is intended to lead to a gradual political and economic union between Tunisia and Libya. Bourguiba changes his mind and the union fails.

### **1976**

Qaddafi sponsors an attempt to kidnap Prime Minister Hedi Nouira of Tunisia. After the plan's failure, the Libyan government expels more than 18,000 Tunisian migrant workers.

### **1978, 1980**

Qaddafi sponsors two unsuccessful coups against Bourguiba.

### **1987**

On 7 November, Tunisian Prime Minister Zine El Abidine Ben Ali stages a 'medical coup' against Bourguiba; as the new president, he ends the feud with Qaddafi.

### **1989**

Signing of a treaty establishing the Arab Maghreb Union; the borders between Tunisia and Libya are opened again.

### **1992–2004**

UN embargo against Libya.

### **2011**

Uprisings in Tunisia begin the 'Arab Spring', causing the downfall of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Qaddafi in Libya.

money-changing businesses, informal remittance systems, and people smuggling networks, bringing Tunisian workers to the more lucrative Libyan labour markets. As some Twazin traffickers became prominent informal money changers, best described as ‘cambists’, they took on the roles of financiers, providing capital resources that allowed other tribes in the Jefara to develop their own trafficking businesses (Boubakri, 2001, p. 17; Boubakri and Mbarek, 2009, pp. 4–6; Tabib, 2011).

With the advent of the treaty establishing the Arab Maghreb Union (Union du Maghreb Arabe) in 1989, the border between Tunisia and Libya was opened. Three years later, the United Nations imposed an embargo on Libya, inadvertently causing trafficking to become one of the main economic activities in the Tunisian Jefara (Boubakri, 2001). In 2010, an estimated 10,000 Libyans and Tunisians crossed the Ras Jdir border every day. Indeed, an estimated 1 million Tunisians have benefited directly or indirectly from informal trade with Libya, and the annual trade value reportedly surpassed USD 1 billion in 2010 (H.M., 2011). In this context, networks of informal trade and trafficking—based on tribal alliances between the Werghemma (including the Twazin) and the Nwayel—rapidly expanded (Boubakri, 2001; Boubakri and Mbarak, 2009; Tabib, 2011).

As the trafficking networks took shape, so did their structure. The *duleb*, a modern reinterpretation of a tribal business association, is at the heart of the trafficking cartels headed by the Twazin cambists; it constitutes the financial backbone of most trafficking operations.<sup>5</sup> Within a *duleb*, *tayouts* are individuals who play critical roles in illegal trafficking; originating principally from the Ouderna tribe, they are independent drivers who own one or two Toyota pickups.<sup>6</sup> The dominance of the Twazin cambists from Ben Guerdane rests primarily on their financial resources, on which the traffickers from the Ouderna and other tribes depend. Moreover, big families headed by the cambists control the networks of informants, bribed security forces, bent bankers, and others—key elements of a successful trafficking businesses at scale. Although *tayouts* are free to do business on their own outside the *duleb*, the risk of getting caught increases considerably in the absence of the network’s support. Indeed, such is the power of the trafficking networks of the Jefara that one could describe them as evolving into ‘cartels’ with common interests, controlling prices and keeping competitors out.



## The economic and political rise of trafficking groups

As trafficking expanded following the imposition of the UN embargo against Libya, the cambists clearly reaped the greatest benefits. Beyond supporting and financing the trafficking cartels, the cambists also offered global financial services for Libyan elites. Indeed, they were informally recognized by the Qaddafi regime for their role as the main gateway for ruling party and military elites to change money, open foreign bank accounts, and acquire assets and real estate abroad (Tabib, 2011). On the Tunisian side, the Ben Ali regime accepted, and even encouraged, the emergence of the trafficking cartel of the Twazin cambists as a driver of economic growth in southern Tunisia. Since the early 1990s, the huge amount of remittances and investment in the local economy from informal trade and illicit trafficking has represented a considerable share of the annual regional economic growth (Boubakri and Mbarek, 2009, p. 17).

Yet the Tunisian government's tolerance of trafficking did not translate into a blank cheque. In fact, although the regime's agreement with the tribes involved in trafficking and financial services was informal, clear rules did apply: the government forbade arms and drug trafficking and simultaneously required assistance in the fight against external arms and drug traffickers.

Moreover, as part of the government's border management policy, customs checks and border patrols functioned as a 'filter and valve'; specifically, informal trade and trafficking by non-Jefarans was filtered out and the amount and types of goods that were smuggled in and out were regulated.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, smugglers continue to select the most appropriate trails and vehicles for the transfer of different types of goods.<sup>8</sup>

In mid-2010, members of the Trabelsi family (President Ben Ali's in-laws) sought to revoke the tacit agreement between the presidency and the Twazin cambists.<sup>9</sup> Before the nationwide uprising that marked the beginning of the Arab Spring in December 2010 had gathered strength in the Tunisian interior, the town of Ben Guerdane had already been the scene of week-long riots during the Ramadan period (Chourabi, 2010). The deal between the Ben Ali administration and the tribal leaders of Ben Guerdane included a provision preventing the Trabelsis from interfering in the cambists' business and their 'exclusive' zone around Ben Guerdane. The Trabelsis pushed for the introduction of an

entry tax for Tunisians crossing the Ras Jdir border.<sup>10</sup> Despite the presence of thousands of security and armed forces in the region, the August 2010 riots failed to diminish until the president personally ordered the cancellation of this 'entry tax'.<sup>11</sup> These events, which in some sense anticipated the revolution in Tunisia, highlighted the vulnerabilities of the Jefaran trafficking business to its participants. The prominent Ben Guerdane trafficking families thus observed the Tunisian revolution with anxiety. 🇹🇳

## II. Tunisia's security predicaments and the Libyan armed conflict

### The Tunisian government's position on the Libyan revolution

With hindsight, it becomes clear that the Tunisian and Libyan revolutions were inextricably intertwined. Prior to being deposed, President Ben Ali had maintained close ties with Qaddafi's Libya.<sup>12</sup> Yet after his fall, the most significant 'counter-revolutionary' threat to Tunisia's revolution actually came from the Qaddafi regime, which may have been tempted to disrupt it (Slate, 2011a). Revolutionary movements continued to perceive that threat in the early months of the provisional Tunisian government; however, only a week after the beginning of the armed conflict in Libya, a renewed set of protests led to the demise of the transitional government of Mohamed Ghannouchi, which was still tightly linked to the *Rassemblement démocratique constitutionnel*, the party of the former regime.

In contrast, the creation of a new transitional government, led by Béji Caïd Essebsi, underlined that political change in Tunisia was for real. Qaddafi—known for his political impulsiveness—was a major source of concern for the new Tunisian leadership, which feared destabilization attempts from his increasingly embattled regime (Jeune Afrique, 2011b). If the government chose to support the Libyan rebels, it would risk being drawn into its neighbour's conflict; if it supported the incumbent Libyan regime, it would risk international opprobrium and domestic unrest. Thus, in the end, the transitional government opted for neutrality, at least officially.

Remaining passive was a fraught exercise, as the government strove to protect its borders from infiltrations by both parties and aimed to ignore provocations by Qaddafi's forces (Jeune Afrique, 2011b).<sup>13</sup> The Tunisian stance had the practical effect of making the border region a sanctuary for both sides of the Libyan conflict, though more so for the revolutionaries.<sup>14</sup> For example, the government did not interfere when the border crossing of Dhiba–Wazin fell into the hands of Libyan revolutionaries from the western front. As described below,

Tunisian armed forces also stopped Qaddafi loyalist units from pursuing revolutionaries in Tunisian territory, which thus became a crucial sanctuary for the revolutionaries.

Despite Tunisia's stated neutrality and the activities it undertook to control its border, the Qaddafi regime continued to view its neighbour as an avenue of exit (Slate Afrique, 2011b). This was particularly true for the area around Ben Guerdane, where the Twazin cambists remained loyal to their Libyan allies, the Nwayel, who were staunch Qaddafi loyalists. Indeed, for as long as Qaddafi's troops controlled the border at Ras Jdir, they received supplies from Ben Guerdane.<sup>15</sup>

## The immediate effects of the revolutions on trafficking

In the immediate aftermath of Ben Ali's departure, Ben Guerdane faced the sudden collapse of its informal economy (H.M., 2011; Hali, 2011). The borders at Ras Jdir and Dhiba were completely closed by the new government, which feared 'counter-revolutionary' infiltrations in support of Qaddafi's declared allegiance to the deposed Ben Ali.<sup>16</sup> The traffickers of Ben Guerdane soon experienced how vulnerable their livelihoods were to sudden political change. The fall of the Ben Ali regime threatened to compromise the long-standing agreement over the 'exclusive zone' of activity. On the Libyan side, the long-established flows of people into Libya and goods out of Libya were abruptly reversed.

The Libyan armed conflict not only reversed the flow of trade—including with a new demand for petrol exported to Libya—but it also created new areas of demand for staples such as food and medical supplies. Stockists in Ben Guerdane took advantage of their new position as suppliers and exporters by increasing prices. Such speculation resulted in a widely reported milk shortage in mid-2011, as milk was exported to Libya, where it fetched 5–7 times more than its price in Tunisia.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the war offered immense business opportunities, which many sought to exploit. During the Libyan conflict, the trafficking cartels of Ben Guerdane dealt primarily with Libyan wholesalers based in Tripoli, though they also had dealings with some in the coastal cities.

Not only did the cartels make substantial profits exporting goods into Libya, but the influx of refugees from the country also brought new opportunities.

Many refugees arriving in Tunisia were in dire need of cash, as they could not access their bank accounts in Libya prior to their flight. As a result, these refugees often sold whatever they could not carry with them and brought the proceeds with them to exchange or, in the case of gold or other valuables, sell for the best price they could find, usually far below the actual value. Among the valuables brought by some Libyan refugees were firearms, mostly AK-47-type rifles and handguns.<sup>18</sup>

While the Libyan refugees were nearly all in need of cash, their economic status varied, largely reflecting regional differences. Whereas urban and coastal refugees brought gold and other valuables, the majority of refugees entering through the Dhiba–Wazin checkpoint (and coming from the Nafusa Mountains) were not wealthy. Instead of gold, they brought herds of goats and sheep and, unable to maintain them, sold them to the Werghemma tribes for a pittance. Some Tunisians may have profited from deals made with Libyan refugees during the conflict, but the majority of the population did not.

## **Libyan refugees in Tunisia and the supply chain of the western front**

By early 2011, the Tunisian government was struggling to cope with both the logistics and the politics of accepting significant numbers of refugees from its embattled neighbour. Fearing the possibility of unfettered refugee flows, local civil society groups—particularly the Local Committees for the Protection of the Revolution—stepped into the breach.<sup>19</sup> As the refugee numbers increased, a series of civil society initiatives began to supplement the early role of the LCPRs. Tunisian youth groups, activists, and academics involved in the Tunisian revolution organized solidarity groups in support of the Libyan revolutionaries. These groups arranged for the transport of goods for refugees into the Jefara.

Although these groups and the LCPRs worked together in many endeavours, tensions simmered among them as well as between the groups and the local population. These tensions are perhaps best illustrated by the case involving a group of 24–25 self-proclaimed ‘salafists’ who sought to provide aid and shelter at Ras Jdir at the end of February 2011.<sup>20</sup> Salafist networks had collected ‘solidarity’ funds at mosques all over Tunisia; their arrival at the border led to

conflict with more secular youth volunteers from Tunis, who demanded their removal on the grounds that they were only helping a small sub-set of the refugees.<sup>21</sup> The LCPR sided with the salafists and began to work with them to house the more conservative Libyan refugees with Tunisian host families identified by the salafists. Though the salafists left Ras Jdir only a few weeks after they had arrived, they were able to build lasting ties with the Libyan refugees.

The political dimension of refugee aid became obvious very early in Tunisia's south. Ben Guerdane, known for its close ties with the Qaddafi regime, developed a different dynamic with refugees than did Tataouine, farther in the interior. Refugees close to the Qaddafi regime only crossed the border in the Ben Guerdane region.<sup>22</sup> A minority remained there, though most continued towards the coastal cities from Gabès, over Sfax and Sousse, to Tunis. A considerable number of these 'loyalist' refugees still reside in Tunisia; although only 90,000 Libyan refugees are registered with the government, estimates suggest that more than 450,000 now permanently reside in Tunisia.<sup>23</sup> Those estimates imply that a large number of refugees remain sympathetic to the former Libyan regime.

In contrast to Ben Guerdane, the crossing point of choice for Qaddafi loyalists, the governorate of Tataouine by the Dhiba–Wazin border attracted refugees who were more likely to be sympathetic to the revolutionaries. People crossing in this region were primarily from the Nafusa Mountains, from either Berber or Arabic-speaking tribes (Ahsan, 2011; Magharebia, 2011a). About 500,000 refugees fled from Libya into the Tataouine governorate, and more than 200,000 stayed with host families there during the war.<sup>24</sup> The refugees who were sympathetic to or involved in the Libyan revolution and had found their way to the governorate of Medenine tended to avoid Ben Guerdane altogether. It should also be noted that the distribution of refugees in the south broadly followed patterns of tribal allegiance. Overall, Qaddafi loyalists were able to draw on Ben Guerdane for support, while the revolutionaries of the western front used Dhiba, Medenine, Remada, and Tataouine for refuge and as supply bases.<sup>25</sup>

## **Insecurity, infiltration, and the circulation of firearms**

Early in the Libyan conflict, Qaddafi loyalists recognized the strategic importance of the Dhiba–Wazin border region. During April and May 2011, a number

of pitched battles were fought at the Wazin border crossing, as the Qaddafi forces sought to cut off this important link in the rebels' supply chain.<sup>26</sup> During some of these clashes shots and shells hit the town of Dhiba and Tunisian authorities were forced to close the border gates (Barrouhi, 2011a).

A turning point in the conflict was reached in June 2011, when Libyan rebels captured the Nafusa Mountains and the border town of Wazin. For the first time in the conflict, rebels were able to maintain a continuous supply line at the western front, particularly for deliveries of armaments. Indeed, it is through the Dhiba–Wazin border crossing that many of the arms supplied by the Qatari government were funnelled to the western Libyan rebels.<sup>27</sup> Further, though the government in Tunis had declared its neutrality, the Tunisian military actually oversaw the delivery of Qatari arms to the border.<sup>28</sup>

Despite their efforts, government and civil society actors who were engaged in registering and aiding refugees could not prevent them from bringing small arms and light weapons across the border and into Tunisia.<sup>29</sup> Every day, border guards found several cars with handguns or assault rifles of the AK-47 type. Given the volume of refugees crossing the border in this region—an average of 2,000, yet up to 4,000, persons per day—and the informal nature of the checks carried out at the border, the likelihood that significant numbers of firearms were entering Tunisia during this time frame is high.<sup>30</sup> It is equally likely, however, that many of the weapons were subsequently returned to Libya with their owners. As a general rule, Libyans tended to travel armed and it is reasonable to assume that both the original importation and the re-export were a function of this proclivity rather than an overt attempt at smuggling.

That said, arms smuggling did and does exist, although the exact magnitude of the problem is difficult to assess. In Tunisia, guns are subject to taboo and are thus not traded in the markets. This taboo is partly responsible for the relative paucity of incidents of armed violence in the country. Apart from the smugglers and cartels noted above, few non-state entities are armed in Tunisia. In the Jefara, trafficking and trade in firearms occurs only in closed circles, out of the public eye. Moreover, tribal cohesion in the Jefara is strong and serves to limit the ability of the government to penetrate the trafficking networks. It is also worth noting that, given the size of the duleb networks and the fact that only a few senior members have a firm grasp of the breadth of duleb activities,

most of the received wisdom on trafficking is based on rumours, supported by other rumours.

In terms of smuggling, Qaddafi loyalist troops who left Libya in search of safety for their families represent one of the main sources of arms that found their way to Tunisia during the Libyan armed conflict. This group had both the access to weapons and the need for cash, be it to support their families in Tunisia or to buy passage to third countries. It was an open secret in the Jefara that the trafficking networks, especially in Ben Guerdane, availed themselves of this supply, and built up considerable stockpiles.<sup>31</sup> It is common knowledge in Ben Guerdane that these stockpiles exist; while the police are eager to downplay their size and potential uses, they claim to know their locations. In confidential interviews, police officers said they intended to seize the stockpiles in the course of broader seizures of contraband goods, rather than in targeted raids.<sup>32</sup>

Firearms entered Tunisia through other means as well. Tunisian 'religious' fighters, who supported certain revolutionary militias in Libya, represented a secondary source of small arms. As war is a business for these men, their weapons were more likely to be used 'professionally' than to enter the informal or underground markets.<sup>33</sup> Military operations in Libya also spilled over the border on a few occasions. As noted above, shells fell on the city of Dhiba during the conflict. In addition, Qaddafi loyalist militias chased revolutionary militias over the border on several occasions (Ghaith, 2011); one incursion—whose purpose remains unknown—penetrated more than 200 km into Tunisia (Chivers and Sayare, 2011). In response to most of these incursions, the Tunisian military intervened and disarmed both groups; the weapons were returned to the Libyan authorities at Ras Jdir, albeit without their ammunition.<sup>34</sup>

In the wake of the Libyan revolution, Tunisians' sense of insecurity has been heightened largely due to the emergence of small, religiously inspired terrorist groups. Several incidents have solidified this fear. In May 2011, two Libyans with alleged ties to al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) were arrested in Tataouine, in the Jefara. The two young men had carried improvised explosives with them (AFP, 2011a). Three days later, the Garde Nationale arrested another two-man AQIM 'commando' hiding in the Nekrif Mountains (Barrouhi, 2011b). Local herdsmen had informed the security forces about the presence of these men. Probably as a result of the interrogations of those two men, security



forces conducted searches farther north in Rouhia and turned up another AQIM cell, again with the help of the local population (Barrouhi, 2011b; Dahmani, 2011). The armed group resisted arrest and opened fire with assault rifles, killing two officers of the armed forces (Gulf News, 2012). The security forces later found a number of AK-47s with ammunition and several hand grenades (Dahmani, 2011).

Even in the face of the ongoing political turmoil in Tunisia since the uprisings in 2010–11, the infiltration of terrorist groups has been much more limited than in other countries in the trans-Saharan region, where AQIM and other terrorist groups have been able to seek refuge and build up camps throughout the past decade. Nevertheless, as these incidents show, the threat is real and it is present in the minds of many Tunisians. 🇹🇳

### **III. Tunisia's security prospects following the Libyan armed conflict**

The fall of Qaddafi not only removed an entrenched dictatorship and ushered in an era of instability and opportunity in one of the region's wealthiest countries, but it also had and continues to have reverberations among its poorer neighbours. Notable among those was the invasion of northern Mali by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azwad and the Islamist group Ansar Dine, undertaken using weapons from Qaddafi's former arsenal (Nossiter, 2012; Conflict Armament Research and Small Arms Survey, 2013).

Though Qaddafi's fall had less dramatic immediate consequences for Tunisia, the continuing political instability and the struggle to rebuild government institutions after decades of dictatorship has left Tunisia exposed and vulnerable to further shocks emanating from Libya. The immense quantity of small arms and light weapons and heavy artillery in Libya, the relative weakness of Libya's central government (especially in the face of the still-prevalent brigades and militias), the resurgence of long-suppressed tribal conflicts, and the tense economic situation are all potential factors that could affect Tunisia's security, economy, and political stability.

The following sections analyse the current effects of the collapse of the Qaddafi regime and its administration on Tunisia while focusing on small arms, trafficking, and infiltrations by armed extremist groups. The first section maps out the evolution of armed incidents in Tunisia and along the border. The following section offers reflections on the discrepancy between perceived and tangible insecurity in Tunisia in the context of the current political struggles in the country. The third section highlights the role of violent extremists in trafficking and the use of firearms. Against this backdrop, the fourth section reflects on the demand for small arms and light weapons in Tunisia. Finally, the last section draws a sketch of the arms trafficking patterns on the Tunisian–Libyan border.

## Major armed incidents and the Tunisian–Libyan border

Since it proclaimed independence in 1956, Tunisia had been a country largely free of gun violence. In the aftermath of the Libyan revolution, however, incidents of armed violence and arms smuggling have increasingly been in the news, particularly in the latter part of 2011 (see Table 1). Particularly troubling was the rapid deterioration of the security situation at Ras Jdir. As soon as the armed conflict ceased, tensions at this important border crossing escalated. A Libyan militia controlling the customs seized the car of some young, Ben Guerdane-based smugglers. In retaliation, their clans blocked the road to Ras Jdir by staging protests. To open the road, the Libyan militia broke through the border in several trucks, threatening Tunisian customs officials with firearms (Ghanmi, 2011).

Zuwarah-based militias allegedly participated in the attack at Ras Jdir. These Zuwari militias were also believed to be responsible for a series of incursions onto Tunisian territory, resulting in several border closings by Tunisian authorities (Ghanmi, 2011; Radio Jawhara FM Tunisie, 2011). Similar problems occurred at the Dhiba border crossing, where Berber militias allied with the Zuwari militias forced their way through the border with a series of vehicles (Magharebia, 2011c). Shortly thereafter, an armed Libyan group kidnapped four border guards, who were soon released (Tunisia Live, 2011; *L'Economiste Maghrébin*, 2012). These incidents, combined with clashes between rival traffickers from Dhiba and Remada, led to conflict between affiliated tribes. Since January 2012, the unstable security situation has led to frequent border closings, lasting from hours to several days (News24, 2011a–c). Incidents involving Libyan traffickers and militias have become a daily norm along the border in the Jefara.<sup>35</sup>

The clashes in Dhiba also revealed the extent of firepower available to the trafficking networks based in Tunisia. This augmented availability has coincided with their increased use to settle disputes between rivals. For example, in April 2012, armed clashes between the Twazin tribe and its Rbaya'a rivals erupted, ostensibly after the controversial nomination of a radical imam at an important mosque in Ben Guerdane.<sup>36</sup> After the government refused to intervene, the dispute was settled through the offices of tribal elders. Though these clashes are illustrative of the increasing use of firearms by the trafficking cartels, they can also be seen as highlighting emerging reconfigurations within the Werghemma tribes—and the trafficking networks in general, as discussed below.

**Table 1 Arms from Libya seized by Tunisian security forces and main incidents involving firearms\***

Date/period	Location	Context	Source
11 May 2011	A hotel in Tataouine, close to the border with Libya	Two Libyan members of an Algerian terrorist cell (allegedly AQIM) are arrested. <b>Arms seized:</b> Explosives.	Barrouhi (2011a; 2011b)
14–15 May 2011	Mountains of Nekrif, near Remada, 46 km from the Dhiba–Wazin border, in the Tataouine governorate	One Algerian and one Libyan of the terrorist cell discovered in Tataouine (see 11 May) are arrested. <b>Arms seized:</b> 3 AK-47s, ammunition, 1 clip, 1 hand grenade, and TNT.	AFP (2011a); Barrouhi (2011b); Kapitalis (2011b); Magharebia (2011b)
18 May 2011	Rouhia, in the centre of Tunisia, in the governorate of Siliiana (about 150 km from Tunis and 390 km from Ras Jdir)	Nine individuals (Tunisian, Algerian, and Libyan) representing the core group of the terrorist cell discovered in Tataouine (see 11 May) clash with security and armed forces at a checkpoint near Rouhia. Two officers and two terrorists are killed in the gun battle. Among them are two known AQIM members, Walid Sa'adaoui and Nabil Sa'adaoui, arrested in 2006 as the leaders of a terrorist group discovered that year in Soliman. <b>Arms seized:</b> More than 10 modified AK-47s, ammunition, hand grenades, clips, and TNT.	Bahri (2011); Dahmani (2011); author interview with a member of a Tunisian anti-terrorist unit, location withheld, June 2012
June 2011	Métlaoui, in the Gafsa mine region (about 360 km south-west of Tunis)	Tribal violence breaks out and persists for a week. At least 12 people are killed and 150 are wounded. Several die from bullet wounds, allegedly fired from hunting rifles, though the use of handguns seems more credible.	Babnet Tunisia (2011); Jebnoun (2011); Le Corbusier (2011); MosaïqueFM (2011)

Date/period	Location	Context	Source
18–20 August 2011	In the region of Douz	Libyan militias stage an incursion in at least 5 4x4 pick-ups, loaded with guns.	<i>Le Point</i> (2011)
22 September 2011	La Marsa and Tunis	Men in a Volkswagen Passat are seen offering assault rifles and handguns for sale. They manage to flee before the police arrive.	Mzioudet (2011); Rouissi (2011)
4 October 2011	1) Ben Guerdane 2) Belkhir, near the Algerian border in the Gafsa governorate	1) One Tunisian and one Libyan who have firearms in the trunk of their car are arrested; 2) Seven Libyans are arrested in a cab from Medenine, with AK-47s.	1) Kapitalis (2011a); Mzioudet (2011); 2) Nidhal (2011)
Since December 2011	Ras Jdir	After several incursions by Libyan militias, Col. Mohamed Jarafa, a Libyan border official, reveals an agreement with the Zuwarah militias to retreat a few kilometres behind the border. Tensions ensue between rival traffickers on the Tunisian and Libyan sides.	AlertNet (2011); Dermeh (2012); Deshmukh (2011); Ghanmi (2011); Magharebia (2011c); Mohamed and Ghanmi (2011); Radio Jawhara FM Tunisie (2011); TAP (2012c); Wafa (2012b); Youssef (2012a–c); Zargoun (2011)
13 December 2011	Dhiba and Remada	Armed clashes erupt between clans over trafficking trails.	Ghribi (2011); Tuniscope (2011)
1 February 2012	Bir Ali ben Khelifa, city in central Tunisia in the governorate of Sfax	A group of Tunisian jihadists smuggling weapons into Tunisia are discovered and engage security forces in a firefight, resulting in several deaths on both sides.  <b>Arms seized:</b> More than 32 AK-47s and 2,500 rounds of ammunition; fewer than 10 handguns.	Shirayanagi (2012); TAP (2012a); author interview with security officers, Tunis, May 2012

Date/period	Location	Context	Source
February 2012	Tunisia	In a press conference, a presidential spokesman confirms that Tunisian security forces have discovered and confiscated many arms caches since the outbreak of the Libyan conflict; few details are provided.  <b>Arms seized by border guards:</b> 156 assault rifles, 59 handguns, more than 500 rounds of ammunition.	A.D. (2012); Shems News (2012a); Zribi (2012)
24 February 2012	Mountains between Matmata and Mareth (about 420 km south of Tunis), in the governorate of Gabès	The security forces stop three Tunisian nationals who are smuggling firearms from Libya using mules for transport, after being informed by a herdsman.  <b>Arms seized:</b> Fewer than 10 AK-47s and ammunition.	Hafez (2012); Radio Jawhara FM Tunisie (2012)
29 April 2012	Ben Guerdane	Violent clashes between two tribes of Ben Guerdane—the Twazin and Rbaya'a; one child is wounded by a shot from a handgun.	Algérie1 (2012); Babnet Tunisia (2012); Maatoug (2012); <i>Tunis Tribune</i> (2012); author interviews with residents of Ben Guerdane, May 2012
20 June 2012	Aïn Skhouna, a desert well close to the Libyan border, mid-way between Remada and Ghadames	The Tunisian Air Force destroys three Toyota Land Cruiser pick-ups in the <i>oueds</i> (dried-up riverbeds) that wind through the eastern Tunisian Sahara.  <b>Arms seized:</b> 3 pick-ups loaded with assault rifles and ammunition, including: 2 machine guns, 2 rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs); missiles; GPS and radio equipment.	BBC (2012); Chennoufi (2013); Euronews (2012); Magid (2012); Reuters (2012b)

Date/period	Location	Context	Source
8 December 2012	Fernana, in the governorate of El Kef (about 180 km west of Tunis)	A pick-up transports some firearms and explosives.	L.M. (2012a)
17 January 2013	Medenine	Security forces arrest a man suspected of belonging to a criminal network; as a result of their interrogation, security forces discover an arms cache.  <b>Arms seized:</b> Anti-tank mines, hand grenades, hand grenade fuses, TNT, detonators, explosive fuses, RPGs (including launchers, projectiles, and expelling charges), AK-type magazines, goggles, and ammunition (more than 1,000 9 mm rounds; more than 1,000 7.62 × 54 rounds).	Babnet Tunisia (2013); B.L. (2013); Chennoufi (2013); Ghanmi (2013a); <i>La Presse de Tunisie</i> (2013)
20 February 2013	Mnihla, in the governorate of Ariana (a suburb of Greater Tunis)	After a member of an armed cell steals a Tunisian electric company car that is equipped with a GPS tracking system, security officers track the vehicle and uncover an arms cache, arresting several suspects.  <b>Arms seized:</b> See Box 3.	Mag14 (2013)
4 August 2013	20 km from Ben Guerdane, governorate of Medenine	The Garde Nationale stops a pick-up truck after receiving information from local residents.  <b>Arms seized:</b> 10 AK-47 type assault rifles; 20 hand grenades; 5 RPG rockets; 2 PSK-type machine guns; more than 1,000 tasers, ammunition, night vision binoculars.	MosaïqueFM (2013); Weslaty (2013)

**Notes:** \* This table does not include hunting rifles or shotguns. Events were recorded until 5 August 2013. If no details are provided on seized arms, information was not available.

## Insecurity and political struggles

Insecurity along the Tunisian–Libyan border stems from the weakness of governments in Tunis and Tripoli, not from conflict between them. The National Transitional Council (NTC) in Libya and the Tunisian government regularly exchange information and have discussed a range of measures to strengthen security along their shared border.

In Libya, the NTC has little to no control over the militias of Jedu, Zintan, or Zuwarah, and even less control over Qaddafi loyalist militias of the Nwayel. Further, during the immediate aftermath of the revolution, the NTC used Berber tribal militias from the Nafusa Mountains and Zuwarah to patrol the border region.<sup>37</sup> The NTC's attempts to reassert authority have been resisted by the incumbent tribal militias. The dominance of these Berber tribes, in turn, has upset the Nwayel on the plains, east of the border, as they fear that their traditional trafficking trails to Tunisia may be denied them. Qaddafi had served as the arbiter of tribal disputes; his absence thus further compounds these conflicts.

On the Tunisian side of the border, the fall of the Ben Ali dictatorship and its party-state exposed the fragility of government structures, particularly in the security services and in the country's inner region and the south, where tribal structures prevail (ICG, 2012). The vaunted security structures of the former regime appear to have been built on appearance, rumour, and fear; their true strength was perhaps one-third of previous estimates—a strength of 47,000 rather than 150,000—and their competences were wildly overestimated (ICG, 2012, p. 9). For their part, members of the security services said that they were being used as scapegoats for all manner of ills associated with the former regime.<sup>38</sup>

Notably, unions representing the security forces claim that because the new government has neither replaced nor confirmed the validity of law number 4 of 1969—which regulates the use of coercive measures and firearms by security personnel—any action undertaken during their missions lack a clear legal foundation. Indeed, some 30 police officers have been indicted for what the union claims were routine applications of the law.<sup>39</sup> This limbo is but one aspect of the tension between members of the Ennahdha Party-dominated government (many of whom were once targets of the security services) and members



of the security services, who fear that their former role may prevent them from having a place in the new social and political order.

Given these tensions, the security forces have been reluctant to intervene forcefully against road blockades, illegal gatherings, and violent protests, as well as against petty criminals. There is a broad perception that crime has increased significantly. In fact, crime has been steadily increasing for a decade, starting prior to the fall of Ben Ali—although reliable statistics do not exist.<sup>40</sup> The regime's censorship machine kept the population in the dark about these trends, as reporting on daily crimes was forbidden. In stark contrast, the newly liberated press has filled newspapers and websites with all manner of crime reports, many of which are poorly researched and based on little more than rumour. As a result, the average Tunisian's perceived sense of security does not necessarily reflect the objective level of security in the country.

In the absence of accurate crime data, it is impossible to ascertain whether there was a spike after Ben Ali's fall. What is known is that in the immediate aftermath, security forces retreated. Furthermore, in January 2012, President Moncef Marzouki issued a decree reducing custodial sentences meted out under the former regime, thereby releasing some 9,000 prisoners onto the streets (Hassassi, 2013; Espace Manager, 2012a). The combination of these two events most probably did increase crime; fewer than four months after the inmates had been released, the security services had arrested about 6,000 of them for new crimes.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, the political opposition, the media, professional associations (especially security service unions), and liberal civil society activists have inflated the problem of insecurity in Tunisia.

In order to assess the security situation in Tunisia, the author of this report visited a series of villages in the Sfax governorate, where people had complained of high levels of crime. During interviews, villagers identified problems that actually pre-date the revolution as *current* security concerns. Further, most of the incidents cited to demonstrate insecurity in the area were based on unconfirmed rumours. Additional visits for the same purpose took place in the governorates of Medenine, Tataouine, and Sousse, with similar results. While the findings of these inquiries cannot be considered definitive, it is apparent that the sense of increased insecurity springs from three sources. First, in small towns and villages in the south of the country, the authorities have failed to reopen police

stations that were attacked and burned during the uprisings. Second, with the newly gained freedom of the press, Tunisians are now exposed to a constant stream of news about roadblocks, violent protests, and crime, even outside Tunis. Third, under the previous regime police forces were perceived as omnipresent and were feared. In the aftermath of the revolution, the security forces have not only disappeared, but their aura of power has been dispelled. Even where security forces are 'back on the beat', their presence does not appear to evoke a sense of safety, but rather of mistrust.

Evidence shows that crimes involving small arms and light weapons tend to occur in the underprivileged neighbourhoods of Tunis or other urban centres. A few banks have also been the targets of armed robberies.<sup>42</sup> When violence does erupt, people usually take hold of clubs, iron bars, or perhaps hunting rifles rather than assault weapons or handguns.<sup>43</sup> While crime involving firearms was long restricted to isolated incidents and the circulation of firearms in Tunisia remains relatively limited, armed violence has been on the rise since the assassination of Mohamed Brahmi in July 2013, notably in connection with violent extremists. Prior to that shooting, the most prominent incident involving a handgun had been the assassination of Chokri Belaïd—a popular leftist politician in the opposition, much like Brahmi—on 6 February 2013.

## **Violent extremists and insecurity**

In the immediate aftermath of Tunisia's revolution and at the beginning of the Libyan conflict, clashes between extremists and the Tunisian government were largely firearm-free (see Table 1). In clashes between radical Islamists and security forces at Jendouba,<sup>44</sup> Sidi Bouzid, and Siliana,<sup>45</sup> people were injured and Molotov cocktails were used to torch police stations, bars, and hotels, but there were no reports of civilians using or carrying firearms. Nor were firearms involved when an angry Islamist-inspired mob attacked the US embassy in September 2012. Yet this trend changed in Sidi Bouzid on 21 February 2013, when an exchange of fire occurred between security forces and a group of violent extremists who had barricaded themselves in a mosque (Middle East Online, 2013).

Early in 2012, armed radical groups made incursions into Tunisian territory. In response, security forces—including the military—conducted a sweep of the Algerian–Tunisian border area, where the incursions had been detected. The number of small incidents increased throughout 2012, and armed clashes began late in the year. By the end of 2012, Tunisian authorities appear to have gained an intelligence edge, as they tracked down a series of terrorist cells and arms caches (Mag14, 2013). These successes, however, did not eliminate the threat, and armed clashes became a regular occurrence. In the governorates of Kasserine and El Kef these clashes were particularly costly for the security services, as operations to dismantle terrorist camps in the mountains of Chaambi (on the Algerian border next to Kasserine) led to significant casualties (Khilfi, 2013).

The apex of armed violence was reached on 29 July 2013, when eight soldiers were brutally killed in the mountains of Chaambi (Khilfi, 2013). Tensions had risen significantly when the leftist politician Mohammed Brahmi was assassinated on 25 July, in a manner similar to Chokri Belaïd in February (*Tunisia Times*, 2013). This was followed by a series of arrests of terrorist cells based on information gained through interrogations after the arrest of a suspect (Weslaty, 2013; MosaiqueFM, 2013). The opposition expressed doubt about these investigations and speculated that the sudden series of arrests reflected an attempt to calm the population and underscore the capacity of the security services.

Unsurprisingly, most major terrorist activities in Tunisia have been linked to Algerian-based extremist groups, particularly AQIM.<sup>46</sup> The reason appears to be twofold. First, Algerian groups have the experience, skills, and resources to acquire weapons, transport them, and stage operations. Second, the Tunisian population is generally less sympathetic to and tolerant of these extremist groups' aims and methods. Though there were Algerian-linked groups operating (or attempting to do so) within Tunisia prior to the revolution, the country was not fertile ground for anything other than recruitment.<sup>47</sup> Thus, though there are Tunisians in the ranks of extremist groups such as AQIM, the organizations are primarily Algerian or trans-Saharan in focus and support, with some bases in eastern and southern Libya. The lack of a Tunisian 'base' is also important in understanding trafficking patterns.

## Demand for small arms and light weapons in Tunisia

Terrorists and self-proclaimed ‘jihadi salafists’ are the groups most likely to seek firearms in Tunisia. Though these groups have evinced little apparent interest in staging attacks within the country thus far, their presence is highly visible in the underprivileged neighbourhoods of the main urban centres on the coast, in the inner country, and in the south. Post-revolutionary Tunisia has become, according to many experts on Islamic movements, a kind of safe public space for Islamist organizations and radical Islamist preachers.

**Violent extremists and self-proclaimed salafists.** The organization of ‘salafists’ into armed militias and terrorist groups is a matter of much public speculation. For example, an article by the well-known French journalist Nicolas Beau claims that 10,000–12,000 men affiliated with the ruling Ennahdha Party trained in camps in Khledia, Medenine, and Tataouine, although the argument is based on nothing more than rumour (Beau, 2012). Both the media and the public have failed to differentiate between the ‘camp of a terrorist cell’ and a ‘training camp’, using the terms interchangeably even though none of the discovered camps had been intended for the training of new recruits.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, all of the discovered camps were close to borders or settlements, areas where training in firearms or the use of explosives would surely have attracted attention.

To develop a more fine-grained analysis of potential threats, it is useful to differentiate between groups that are lumped together under the banner of ‘salafism’. In general, they can be divided into two strands: ‘quietist’ and ‘jihadist’ (ICG, 2013). The majority of the salafists in Tunisia are of the ‘quietist’ strand and have their roots in non-violent salafism. These salafists use preaching and social action to encourage the population to become ‘good Muslims’.

The jihadists are less concerned with the individual and more focused on the transformation of the state into a religiously dominated political organization, such as a caliphate. Although they ideologically endorse armed combat (*qital*),<sup>49</sup> they consider Tunisia an *arth el da’wa* (land of preaching). This may be the reason that global jihadi movements have thus far displayed little interest in staging terror attacks or armed insurgencies in Tunisia. Rather, Tunisia can be understood to be a new public space from which a range of preachers, thinkers, and teachers of Islamic doctrine disseminate their messages throughout the Maghreb and Sahel. In this way, the leaders of the jihadists occupy a

social space that is not filled by the state or its organs (ICG, 2013). The heterogeneity of the jihadi salafists may contribute to the confusion between quietist salafists, jihadists who prioritize *da'wa*, and jihadists engaged in armed combat.

Under Ben Ali, Tunisian security forces held more than 2,000 known jihadi salafists in custody. Of this number, an estimated 350 were active in terrorist organizations and had military training, whether from camps in Afghanistan, Algeria, or other places.<sup>50</sup> After the fall of the old regime, many of these men were released from custody and numerous others returned from exile. As of August 2012, Tunisian security forces estimated that perhaps 500 jihadists with military training or experience were located in Tunisia. In contrast to the other salafists, these combat-trained jihadists are violent extremists linked to groups such as AQIM in Algeria and Libya, rather than 'native' Tunisian groups. That said, they are much more clearly linked with arms trafficking activities that touch Tunisian territory. The terrorist cells discovered in Bir Ali ben Khalifa, the Chaambi Mountains, and Rouhia are undoubtedly tied to this violent strain of salafism, and can be said to represent a clear threat to the Tunisian government (see Table 1).<sup>51</sup>

The government seems surprisingly confident regarding the presence, activities, and apparent threat posed by these groups within Tunisia; every security officer interviewed in the course of this research insisted that all such groups were closely observed, that the security forces were in control of the situation, and that they could arrest all members of jihadi salafist groups should the government so order. Some senior officers even intimated that the current situation was an opportunity to gain insight into the terrorist cells and networks, as many felt quite free to move and operate in Tunisia.

Apart from the jihadi salafists with military training, most adherents of this strain of salafism are youths who have rallied around older, charismatic salafist leaders and preachers, many of whom have gained experience outside of Tunisia. These youths hail largely from underprivileged neighbourhoods surrounding major cities or from smaller urban centres. The organization of these types of jihadi salafist groups appears to be relatively flat or based on networked relationships, as opposed to vertical hierarchies. Moreover, a significant portion of these jihadi salafist groups are organized by former or current criminals, many of whom have adopted the religious raiment of salafism to cloak their criminal undertakings, although some do distance themselves from their past activities.

These jihadi salafists have gained public attention as a result of a series of violent protests that were prominently covered by the media, such as riots in Jendouba, Sidi Bouzid, and Tunis. Tunisians perceive these hybrid groups of criminals and young firebrands as part of Ansar al Sharia (supporters of the sharia) in Tunisia, a jihadi salafist movement headed by sheikh Abou Iyadh, a former jihadi salafist militant with links to al Qaeda (Kapitalis, 2012c).<sup>52</sup> Estimates put these non-militant jihadi salafists at 8,000–14,000, depending on sources and methods of categorization.<sup>53</sup>

It is important to understand that salafist and jihadi groups barely correspond to the institutional view of organizations with regulated hierarchies and clear memberships. Rather, groups such as Ansar al Sharia should be understood as networks woven and converging around key figures and cells. Thus, multiple allegiances are the rule rather than the exception.<sup>54</sup> A supporter of a quietist salafist movement can be active in a jihadi group engaged in preaching and, simultaneously, collaborate with a cell of violent extremists. In Tunisia, despite their fluid identity, most jihadists adhere to a non-violent path to political Islam.

In contrast to violent extremists, supporters of jihadi salafists have not used firearms in their clashes with the security services. Despite their participation in some high-profile actions—notably the protest at and attack on the US embassy—only one instance of the use of firearms can be attributed to these groups, namely in Sidi Bouzid (see Table 1). In lieu of firearms, these groups utilize knives, clubs, swords, air rifles, and improvised incendiary weapons (Molotov cocktails) during their violent actions. Although they are not known to have used firearms, some of these groups are allegedly building up significant small arms and light weapons caches, particularly in the underprivileged neighbourhoods of Tunis.<sup>55</sup> These groups have also been associated with trafficking contraband to both Libya and Algeria, including scrap metal, drugs, and alcohol, which would make them quite likely to possess small arms and light weapons.

If the allegations that these groups have arms caches are accurate, then the fact that they have never been observed in public with firearms indicates that they are highly disciplined and able to control levels of violence and escalation.

Most security experts consulted during the research for this paper take the view that these groups are managing to keep their firearms out of sight until the ‘appropriate’ moment comes for their use—either to defend themselves in case of a crackdown by the security forces or to stage attacks against public and tourist facilities once their numbers have grown sufficiently. The same experts express serious concerns about the return of Tunisian combatants from Syria.<sup>56</sup> The Syrian conflict has offered an opportunity for preachers to recruit young Tunisians, radicalize them, and send them to Syria through organized networks.<sup>57</sup> Upon their return to Tunisia, these jihadists would be not only trained but also battle-proven, in contrast to other salafists. What is more, they would have links to arms traffickers in North Africa and the Middle East.

On 27 August, the Tunisian government officially pronounced Ansar al Sharia a terrorist organization because of proven links to the assassinations of Chokri Belaïd and Mohammed Brahmi, as well as its links to the terrorists operating in the Chaambi Mountains. This designation will certainly test the predictions of the aforementioned experts.

**Tribes and clans in dispute.** The demand for firearms among tribal clans in the Jefara, as well as in the inner country and the mine region around the city of Gafsa, appears less pronounced than among violent extremists and self-proclaimed salafists. Tribal clashes in 2011 and 2012 featured the use of firearms by the warring clans and resulted in several deaths and scores of wounded.<sup>58</sup>

**Civilians arming for self-protection.** Some observers have speculated that the piecemeal nature of much of the arms trafficking currently happening in Tunisia is partially driven by a demand for weapons among civilians who wish to arm themselves in response to the widespread perception of insecurity. Anecdotal evidence suggests, for example, that farmers and others living in remote areas with limited police presence are buying assault rifles to replace their hunting rifles.<sup>59</sup> Given the increase in arms possessed by criminals and tribe-based groups, the potential for greater actual insecurity in Tunisia is high. As one confidential source in the security forces noted:

*Firearms were a social taboo in Tunisia. Tunisians are not used to [living] with firearms. [Things] could, therefore, escalate very easily.*<sup>60</sup>

## Arms trafficking patterns and the Tunisian–Libyan border

In the current regional geostrategic landscape, Tunisia is a peripheral market for small arms and light weapons. Nearby conflicts, both in sub-Saharan Africa and across the Middle East, have boosted demand in the affected countries, whereas Tunisia has remained relatively peaceful and stable. While the arms market in Tunisia is most probably small, however, firearms trafficking may nevertheless jeopardize the country’s security. The events at Soliman in 2006 and the clashes between extremist groups and security forces on Tunisian soil since the beginning of the revolution in Libya demonstrate that even a small number of weapons can have a destabilizing effect.<sup>61</sup>

The end of the Libyan armed conflict had a dramatic impact on informal trade and trafficking in the Jefara. Demand increased on both sides of the border, especially for basic foodstuffs, as traders sought to maximize profit

**Table 2 Trafficking patterns**

Border area	Pattern of trafficking
<b>Ben Guerdane</b> from Ras Jdir to the feet of the Nafusa Mountains on the Tunisian–Libyan border	Under the Ben Guerdane cambists, who dominate the informal trade. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• During armed conflict: as a wave of armed loyalists enter, traffickers buy their weapons.</li> <li>• Post-conflict: single, small-scale smuggling operations.</li> <li>• Ant trade.</li> </ul>
<b>Dhiba–Wazin</b> in the Nafusa Mountains on the Tunisian–Libyan border	Remada and Dhiba traffickers in cooperation with traffickers of the Nafusa Mountains (mainly from Nahlut). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Post-conflict: a wave of deliveries from Nahlut.</li> <li>• Small-scale smuggling (maximum of one 4×4 pick-up load).</li> <li>• Ant trade.</li> </ul>
<b>South of the Nafusa Mountains</b> from the southern foot of the Nafusa Mountains to Ghadames on the Tunisian–Libyan–Algerian border	Single smuggling operations by violent groups, such as AQIM and al Mua’qi’oon Biddam (Those Who Sign in Blood).
<b>Ghadames–Ghat</b> on the Libyan–Algerian border	Single smuggling operations by violent groups (such as al Mua’qi’oon Biddam) in collaboration with Tuareg tribes. <sup>64</sup> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trafficking in diverse scales and quantities.</li> <li>• Ant trade (barter trafficking by Tuaregs).</li> </ul>



# Map 2 Arms trafficking routes



(Business News, 2012b; I.B., 2012b). The instability of the governments on both sides of the border strengthened the hand of the larger trafficking cartels, who stepped into the breach created by the removal of the security services and used that newly acquired power to protect their own operations from smaller competitors.<sup>62</sup> All the while, lucrative new markets continue to emerge in Libya, including alcohol, drugs, and prostitution.<sup>63</sup>

As shown in Table 2 and Map 2, different patterns of arms trafficking may be identified along four border areas. The rest of this section discusses each of these patterns in greater detail.

### *The Ben Guerdane border region*

The Ben Guerdane cartels face troubling uncertainties. The demise of the Qaddafi regime has isolated the Nwayel, the Werghemma's main ally in Libya (Tabib, 2011; Boubakri, 2001). In Tunisia, a struggle to establish supremacy among the trafficking networks and exercise some of the control formerly in the hands of the security services has led to clashes between rival groups, such as at Ras Jdir and Dhiba (Tabib, 2012; North Africa United, 2012; Reuters, 2012a). At the same time, in Libya, the Berber and Arab-speaking tribes of the Nafusa Mountains are no longer content with their previous roles as intermediaries and are building their own networks with their tribal allies in the Jefara (Tabib, 2012).<sup>65</sup>

On the Libyan side, different groups control various sectors that connect Ben Guerdane to Tripoli, although it seems that the Zintan brigades are the dominating force in the region. The Ras Jdir border post is controlled by a 'security committee' of about 500 men stemming mainly from the Zintan brigades under the 'control' of the Ministry of the Interior. The Zuwarah brigades have managed to impose themselves as the main guardians of the Mlita oil facility and the surrounding sector from Abu Kammash to the west of Sabratha. Notwithstanding the dominance of the Zintan and Zuwarah brigades in the region, militias from Rigdalin and Jmail regularly attempt to establish temporary roadblocks, fuelling armed violence along the border. This volatility makes the border particularly difficult to secure, frustrating Tunisian–Libyan efforts to control the border. Indeed, the border region has become increasingly unpredictable, even for traffickers. Smuggling larger quantities of small arms and

light weapons requires negotiations and payments at several points for passage, which increases the risk of detection.<sup>66</sup>

In the face of these uncertainties, the heads of the Werghemma cartels met in mid-2012 to recommit themselves to their old pledge to refrain from dealing in drugs and weapons in exchange for government assurances on border regulation and investment.<sup>67</sup> Yet, according to informal sources, no agreement was reached between the cartels and the government.<sup>68</sup> Nonetheless, from the perspective of the Werghemma, increased arms circulation would lead to more problems than benefits. If the region's tribes and traffickers were to respond to current insecurity by increasing their own purchases of firearms, the Werghemma cartels would risk losing control of their historical position. In addition, insecurity may depress the local economy and, with it, informal trade. Generally, the fact that the Tunisian authorities engage in negotiations with the tribes illustrates that traffickers from the Jefara dispose of a reliable surveillance system. The Werghemma's dense network of informants along the border makes it difficult to cross into the neighbouring country without their knowledge.<sup>69</sup> Hence, any policy aimed at reducing arms trafficking in the region will need to build on the cooperation of the Ben Guerdane cartels.

In contrast to commonly held beliefs in Tunis—notably by opposition parties and media outlets—it is thus fair to say that the Ben Guerdane border region is not a lawless frontier through which firearms are flooding into Tunisia. Rather, firearms can be purchased on demand through appropriate contacts. This finding is corroborated by investigative reporting on the 'Dammak Affair' and arms purchasing (Nawaat.org, 2013; Ayadi, 2013). As a recent report of the UN Panel of Experts on Libya suggests, firearms circulation in the Ben Guerdane region may be characterized as an 'ant trade' (UNSC, 2013); traffickers conceal single pieces in their common goods but do not venture to smuggle larger quantities.

While arms trafficking in the Jefara typically takes place at a small scale, there have been exceptions. The discovery of an arms cache in Medenine, for instance, highlighted the attempts of a few violent groups and jihadists to smuggle firearms and explosives in modest quantities (about one pick-up load) over the Ben Guerdane border region (see Box 3).

Another potential path for arms trafficking is via the Mediterranean. During the Libyan armed conflict, the coastal city of Zuwarah, about 50 km from Ras Jdir, was cut off and could only be supplied by boat from the Tunisian port towns of Zarzis and Djerba (Mandraud, 2011).

### *Dhiba–Wazin*

Since the end of the armed conflict in Libya, smugglers from Remada and Dhiba have forged ties with smugglers and militias in the Nafusa Mountains, notably the people from Nahlut, in Libya. These traders and smugglers have recognized the new ties as an opportunity to increase their autonomy vis-à-vis the Ben Guerdane cartels and erode the cambists' control of the border. In Nahlut, the economic situation after the armed conflict was difficult, heightening the financial incentive to sell and smuggle assault weapons—which were in abundant supply. Brigades and militias in Nahlut were known to have significant stockpiles of firearms.<sup>70</sup> An article in the *El Maghreb* newspaper identifies a threefold form of 'self-regulation' among the arms merchants of Dhiba: 1) sales are to be limited to civilians who wish to use the weapons for personal protection; 2) weapons are to be sold individually, either without ammunition or only with the ammunition in the weapon's clip; and 3) ammunition is not to be sold alone (Ayadi, 2013).

The recent decision by the Libyan government to open a third official crossing point at Mashhad Salih–Tiji, half-way between Ras Jdir and Dhiba–Wazin, may increase the trafficking incentives for militias and smugglers around Nahlut.<sup>71</sup> Allegedly as part of a deal with the Zintan brigades to return the Tripoli airport security to the government, the new border crossing will connect the Tunisian city of Tataouine directly with the highway to Tripoli and thus circumvent not only militia checkpoints, but also the region around Wazin and Nahlut.<sup>72</sup> It will further decrease the traction of Dhiba–Wazin for formal and informal traders and encourage illegal activities by the local militias.

As noted above, the status of trafficking in the Jefara is in flux. The expansion of trafficking activities in Remada and Dhiba, combined with uncertainties regarding in the role of the Ben Guerdane cambists, has created a volatile situation. It is further complicated by the presence of heavily armed Libyan tribal militias at Ras Jdir and the Nafusa Mountains—fighters who do not shy

away from using armed force in their competition with the cartels from Ben Guerdane. If the Ben Guerdane cartels were to retaliate or even increase their own arms smuggling, the stability of the Jefara, and perhaps even of Tunisia as a whole, would be put at great risk.

### *South of the Nafusa Mountains*

At present, there is only one main route for smuggling small arms and light weapons into Tunisia without the complicity of the Tunisian traffickers, namely through the *oueds* (dry river beds) that wind through the eastern Tunisian Sahara. It was in these *oueds* that the Tunisian Air Force destroyed three Toyota Land Cruiser pick-ups in June 2012, after receiving a tip from a herdsman (Reuters, 2012b). In general, the region is sparsely populated and the river beds provide terrain negotiable by vehicles, as well as a multitude of crevices and caverns that can be used by smugglers. The *oueds* also offer a route into the centre of the country that is free of the checkpoints which dot the main roads into Tunis. The routes are challenging and long, requiring sophisticated operations replete with scouts and backups.<sup>73</sup> Perhaps because of the challenges, the routes have no established 'contraband structures'; consequently, only well-trained groups with sufficient capital resources—such as *katibas* (battalions) linked to AQIM or other violent organizations—are able to navigate them.

### *Ghadames–Ghat*

At the end of October 2013, Algerian security forces discovered a large arms cache in the region of Illizi in southern Algeria, close to the Libyan border. The cache contained hundreds of guided anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles as well as rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) (MediaTerranee, 2013). It is the pinnacle of a series of weapons caches discovered in the border region between Algeria and Libya since the end of the Libyan armed conflict (Fethi, 2011).

In a previous discovery, the Algerian Armed Forces had found boxes containing 15 man-portable air defence systems, or MANPADS, notably SAM-7-type guided anti-aircraft missiles (*El Watan*, 2012). The boxes had been buried in the desert sand in the region of In Amenas, about 43 km from the Libyan border. It is the same border area where the spectacular attack on the gas field of Tiguentourine was staged by the group al Mua'qi'oon Biddam—a splinter

### Box 3 The Medenine and Mnihla caches

On 17 January 2013, security forces arrested a suspect who, during interrogation, disclosed the location of two warehouses north of Medenine (Haféz, 2012). One of the warehouses contained a considerable amount of explosives, anti-tank mines, and rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) launchers (with their projectiles), as well as all sorts of fuses and miscellaneous equipment (Mandraud, 2013). The discovery of the Medenine arms cache and arrest of four suspects with links to the jihadi movement was the key event in revealing the connecting thread between previous arms seizures in Mnihla and Fernana.

After the arrest on 17 January, investigations revealed links between the Medenine cache and an armed group on the Tunisian–Algerian border; that group had previously clashed with Tunisian security forces and was probably connected to a pick-up loaded with explosives and RPGs that was seized in the Tunisian town of Fernana (L.M., 2012a; 2012b). Interrogations of the four suspects revealed that the caches in Medenine were a major stocking and collection point used to facilitate the onward transit of the arms.

The cache that had previously been discovered at Mnihla, by chance rather than through these investigations, was initially stocked in the Medenine warehouses (Espace Manager, 2013; see Table 3). Thus far, the materiel recovered from these caches comprises mostly explosives and RPGs rather than handguns, assault rifles, or associated ammunition. According to confidential sources, all suspects are linked with terrorist cells with roots in Algeria’s infamous Armed Islamic Group and the Salafist Group for Call and Combat.<sup>74</sup>

**Source:** Analysis of photos and videos on the Tunisian Ministry of the Interior’s website, as provided to the author by Nic Jenzen-Jones and James Bevan



Weapons seized in the neighbourhood of Mnihla, 2013. © Ministry of the Interior, Tunisia



Ammunition seized in the neighbourhood of Mnihla, 2013. © Ministry of the Interior, Tunisia

**Table 3 Arms recovered from the Mnihla cache**

Type	Number	Item	Origin
Anti-tank rockets	27?	PG-7P expelling charges for PG-7	n/a
	>15	PG-7 projectiles	Made by Vazovski Mashinostroitelni Zavodi (VMZ Co.), Sopot, Bulgaria
	1	RPG-7V-type launcher	n/a
Rifles	5	AKM-type rifles	n/a
	3	PKM-type general-purpose machine guns	n/a
	1	FAL-type rifle	n/a
	1	PM Md. 65	Romania
	1	PSL (aka FPK) rifle	Romania
	1	Type 56 (early model) rifle (modified stock to fold sideways)	People's Republic of China
Ammunition	10	AK-type magazines in stamped sheet metal, AG4 (glass-reinforced plastic), and black polymer	n/a
	8	HG 85-type grenades	n/a
	5	F1-type hand grenades with additional UZRGM-type fuses	n/a
	3	E105 fragmentation grenades with silver packaging cylinders behind them	Grenades made by Haley & Weller, UK
	3	Rolls of detonating cord	n/a
	2 (visible in photos)	440 cartridge tins of 7.62 × 54R LPS (light ball)	Arsenal, Bulgaria, 1987
	1 (visible in photos)	440 cartridge tin of 7.62 × 54R T-45 (tracer)	Novosibirsk Low Voltage Equipment Plant, 1970
	1	Open cartridge tin (which may not be the original container) with a mix of (three or more) separately produced 7.62 × 39 cartridges	n/a (headstamps not quite visible)
	?	Electrical detonators	n/a

group of AQIM led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar (Djaad, 2013). Before the commando staged the attack, its fighters assembled in Libya in the Awaynat plain in the Wadi ash-Shati valley, not quite 100 km from In Amenas (Laurent, 2013, pp. 353–57; Djaad, 2013).

Since the end of the Libyan armed conflict, Tuareg militias and the Zintan first brigade that patrols the border region have been fighting for control of the border south of Ghadames (Jeune Afrique, 2012; *Le Figaro*, 2012). Yet despite some skirmishes, the Tuaregs and the Zintan brigade have struck a deal, resulting in decreased tensions and flourishing trafficking activities.<sup>75</sup> Taking all threats into account—including the fact that violent extremists operating on the Algerian–Tunisian border cross the boundary with relative ease—it seems far more likely that weapons are transported from Libya directly to Algeria, where they eventually find their way into Tunisia over the smuggling paths in the mountains. 📌



## **Conclusion: Tunisia's prospects in light of the social divide and insecurity**

Compared to the violent and bloody political clashes in Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, the Tunisian revolution took a more peaceful path. Despite the proximity of Libya, terrorist camps in Algeria, and large concentrations of terrorists in safe havens across the Sahara—especially in northern Mali—Tunisia has managed to prevent a collapse of the social order and security. The situation remains fluid, however, and polarization among the different political factions in Tunis could well undermine the current—relative—stability.

Unfortunately, the divisions in Tunis run deep. Under the previous two regimes, the capacity of the government rested on tight links between the party in power and the administration exercising that power. These links were forged through a mix of ideology (under Bourguiba) and the distribution of spoils (under Ben Ali). The current Ennahdha-dominated government has thus, from its first days, faced entrenched opposition within the ranks of its civil and military services. To overcome administrative hurdles, the government nominated its own cadres in the ministries instead of increasing participation and transparency. This approach has failed to promote reconciliation between tribes and clans as well as between coastal elites and disenfranchised youths from the inner regions and underprivileged neighbourhoods of urban centres. These deepening divisions have resulted in regular outbursts of violent protest. Thus, the imminent threat for Tunisia is that the frustration and social divides underpinning these protests will persist. Should that occur, it would be only a matter of time before tribes, clans, and protest groups break the long-standing social taboo and begin to arm themselves in earnest.

At present, the overlapping and occasionally coordinated efforts of the security and armed forces and the trafficking interests of the Jefaran cartels tend to contain the circulation of arms within Tunisia. The borders, however, remain porous. Should the demand for small arms and light weapons increase, there is a very real possibility that the current methods of containment will fall short.

Despite their confidence in their own abilities, Tunisian security and armed forces actually lack proper equipment to effectively patrol the country's land and sea borders. The revolution laid bare the myth of the security forces' effectiveness and ubiquity. It is instructive to note that hitherto the government has relied mostly on information from local residents in its efforts to dismantle terrorist cells and discover arms caches.

The discoveries of the arms caches and hideouts highlight the fact that hundreds of Tunisians have joined Algerian-based extremist groups such as AQIM. The 'saharization' of AQIM over the past decade has transformed Algerian jihadi groups into transnational organizations capable of moving and funneling arms from one country to another. The collective fall of repressive regimes in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia has increased the operational scope of AQIM and other jihadi groups of Algerian origin, providing them with the opportunities and resources to develop and use new networks to further their goals.

All North African countries now face serious challenges to their security and the safety of their populations. To address these challenges, the governments will have to improve border management and intelligence techniques in a way that is effective without hampering the economically crucial mobility of goods and people. There is a pressing need for better cooperation among the countries, increased (and more detailed) public information, improved availability of data (to facilitate academic and other research and analysis), and the development of security institutions that value the participation of local organizations and stakeholders. Setting these processes in motion will require translating political will into clear strategies.

While social divides within Tunisia are the most likely cause of near-term insecurity, the implosion of the Libyan state administration is the main concern for Tunisia's security in the mid-term. Integration of the many armed groups in Libya into the formal security institutions of the state has been slow, and efforts to disband and disarm those militias remain sensitive. At the same time, in the southern reaches of both Tunisia and Libya, many of these militias are combining with criminals and traffickers to form hybrid groups with the intent of competing with established trafficking cartels, especially those of Ben Guerdane. The conflict between established trafficking networks and the upstarts out of Libya is nascent, but the possibility of an escalation in

the volume and violence associated with arms trafficking is real. Given the Tunisian government's reliance on its 'partners' among the trafficking networks of Ben Guerdane (and the rest of the Jefara) for control of the border, any losses that diminish the capacities of the Ben Guerdane cambists will have repercussions for Tunisian border security in general.

Finally, the Tunisian revolution has opened a new space for global salafist movements. The country has become a 'land of preaching' (*arth el da'wa*) for salafists and jihadists, a meeting point for preachers and activists from around the Muslim world. Though intelligence services may welcome the opportunity to observe them in broad daylight, a large number of Tunisians fear that the country's many young, unemployed, and disenchanted men will flock to salafist groups, accelerating the radicalization of the country's youths and ultimately exacerbating the polarization of the population. The problem lies not only in the potential for the radicalization of Tunisian youths, but also in the government's 'laissez-faire' attitude towards vigilantism and the lack of progress on transitional justice to pave the way for the impartial application of the rule of law. The longer ongoing excesses remain unchecked, the greater the risk that neither the security forces nor society as a whole will be able to rein them in. 🇹🇳

## Endnotes

- 1 The author undertook on-site verification by travelling to the aforementioned regions and having conversations with representatives of local associations and government authorities; he also talked to members of the public in local coffee shops, where news and rumours are typically exchanged.
- 2 France justified its colonization of Tunisia in strategic terms, saying that the Bey monarchs of Tunis had failed to secure the border to Algeria. Tunisian tribes, particularly the Khrumir, staged regular attacks on colonial settlers and helped the Algerian liberation fighters with hideouts and logistics (Kassab and Ounaies, 2010, pp. 17–18). The French officers named the Tunisian tribal fighters *fellagha*. On the role of the fellagha in the struggle for independence, see *Time* (1954). On the role of Tunisia as a hub for weapons deliveries coming from Egypt, through Libya, and to the Algerian liberation army, see Tripier (1972).
- 3 For more details on trafficking in the Jefara, see Boubakri (2001); Boubakri and Mbarek (2009); Chandoul and Boubakri (1991); and Tabib (2011). This paper draws on these four works as well as discussions with both Hassen Boubakri and Rafaâ Tabib.
- 4 For a good overview of the contemporary history of Tunisia, see Perkins (2004); for a focus on security issues, see Grimaud (1995).
- 5 This simplified explanation is based on the work of and discussions with Rafaâ Tabib. As Tabib (2011) describes, a duleb relies on a complex scheme of shares and pay-offs, but it also takes into consideration issues of tribal order and cohesion. In the duleb network, the cambists play the most powerful role, as they are the main financiers and own large warehouses in Ben Guerdane and hidden in the desert around the city. The *nassaba* are independent traders but have close relationships with the cambists and also with some wholesalers.
- 6 These pick-ups are of the type often transformed into ‘technicals’ in Africa. The name *tayout* comes from the 4x4 Toyota Land Cruiser (HJZ 79) pick-ups favoured by the tayouts.
- 7 This assertion is based on a series of sources. Tabib (2011) reports that government policy deliberately permitted a certain level of informal trade and trafficking in view of its beneficial effect on the economy; he argues that this policy was developed in recognition of the fact that the government itself would lack the will or capacity to invest heavily in this marginalized region. The relaxed attitude of the authorities to Jefaran contraband was also underlined in confidential interviews the author undertook in Ben Guerdane, Medenine, and Tataouine with customs officials, civil servants in the trade ministry, traffickers, and resellers in the souks. As one border guard in Tataouine said during an interview in July 2012: ‘We must let the region breathe!’
- 8 The Jefaran traffickers import informal goods—that is, products that are legal and subject to tariffs—through the border checkpoint of Ras Jdir but avoid paying the taxes with the complicity of the customs officers. In contrast, they use trails to smuggle any goods that are subject to import licences or that are illegal. In this context, *informal goods* are generally

allowed for import; *illicit goods* are subject to licences (while possession of such goods is not illegal); and *illegal goods*, such as narcotics, are generally forbidden.

Clandestine migrants used paths through the marshes that border guards cannot patrol by car. The smugglers cross the 20–30-km trail on foot and, if needed, with pack animals. The petrol bootleggers use sandy but easily accessible trails and face limited tracking by the border patrol. Yet petrol smugglers need the duleb network for the delivery of petrol by their Libyan suppliers, as well as information about the movements of the National Guard. In contrast, the trafficking of illicit goods—such as consumer electronics, machine parts, and gold—attracts the attention of the border patrols.

To avoid scrutiny, the tayouts cross dried-up salt marshes (*sebkhets*). The members of the National Guard are reluctant to follow the tayouts into the sebkhets as, despite the fact that they are ‘dry’, they remain deep, muddy, and likely to cause vehicles to get stuck. Other trails traverse difficult terrain, such as the Nafusa Mountains, and consequently the pursuit of traffickers by authorities can be very dangerous. It is generally accepted that the more ‘dangerous’ the goods to be transported are, the more ‘selective’ the traffickers are about the route to be taken. According to an expert on contraband in Ben Guerdane, this selectivity means that the authorities catch perhaps one in ten trucks, a result the expert ascribed to both the efficiency of the duleb network and the government’s relaxed attitude towards trafficking.

The interference of the Trabelsi family is common knowledge in Ben Guerdane and was confirmed during several author interviews with members of local associations, a reseller, and a local official in June 2012.

Author interview with a local official, Ben Guerdane, June 2012.

- 9 The interference of the Trabelsi family is common knowledge in Ben Guerdane and was confirmed during several author interviews with members of local associations, a reseller, and a local official in June 2012.
- 10 Author interview with a local official, Ben Guerdane, June 2012.
- 11 This point was made with apparent pride by a local ‘chief’ and former member of the LCPR, Medenine, June 2012.
- 12 Media reports allege that officers from the Libyan Army had knowledge of plans prepared at the behest of Qaddafi and Ben Ali’s wife Leïla to destabilize Tunisia. See, for example, Slate Afrique (2011a).
- 13 Although Tunis aimed to remain neutral, it was not impartial. Nonetheless, the government needed to maintain workable relationships with its immediate neighbour and even sought to open communication channels between the warring parties, as evidenced by the informal meetings on the island of Djerba in July and August 2011. See, for example, Le Tallec (2011).
- 14 As described below, Libyan loyalists used Ben Guerdane as a pathway to Tunisia’s coastal cities, while the revolutionaries entered mostly from the Nafusa Mountains.
- 15 This conclusion is supported by the fact that Ben Guerdane did not become a pocket of ‘resistance’ in support of the Libyan revolutionaries. It is reasonable to suppose that the cartels of Ben Guerdane did not wish to break with their historical benefactors and allies, especially given the volume of assets they held on behalf of Qaddafi loyalists.
- 16 Indeed, many Ben Ali and Trabelsi loyalists fled Tunisia for Libya after the collapse of the former regime (Slate, 2011).

- 17 Author interviews with an employee of a development association, Medenine, May 2012. For general information on the shortage of foodstuffs, see Business News (2012b).
- 18 Author interviews with police officers and border guards, Gabès, Medenine, and Tunis, June–July 2012; with volunteers who helped refugees at the Libyan border, Hammamet, Medenine, Sousse, Tataouine, and Tunis, June–July 2012; with residents of Ben Guerdane and Tataouine, May–July 2012; and with leading members in the LCPR, Ben Guerdane, Medenine, and Tataouine, June–July 2012.
- 19 Other important players were the ‘neighbourhood watch’ groups that sprang up early in the Tunisian revolution. These groups were motivated in part by the delicate and uncertain state of security in Tunisia as well as their distrust of the security services, widely believed to be filled with Ben Ali loyalists and thus generally mistrusted.
- In the Ben Guerdane region, the Twazin cartels and their supporters and employees were afraid that uncontrolled borders might lead to damage to their smuggling and other informal business operations. Their concerns were well founded; in an interview conducted for this study in July 2012, one of the leaders of the LCPR of Ben Guerdane said he had no doubt that some small arms had found their way into Tunisia, regardless of policies designed to limit the entry of ‘dangerous’ goods.
- 20 Author interviews with a volunteer from Tunis who worked at the Ras Jdir refugee camp in February 2011, Tunis, May 2012; with a former member of the Ben Guerdane LCPR, Medenine, June 2012; and with a reseller, Ben Guerdane, May 2012.
- 21 The use of the term ‘salafist’ in this report does not entail any endorsement or judgement of the religious purity of these groups; rather, it reflects common usage of the term in Tunisia. It should be noted, however, that this usage is imprecise. Salafist is a generic term—often with a pejorative connotation—applied to people who claim that they themselves adhere to the ‘fundamentals’ of Islam. It is therefore difficult to differentiate among the various types of ‘salafists’, as such distinctions are fluid and often overlap. For example, ‘jihadi’ salafists endorse political Islam but not necessarily the use of violence, while violent extremists or terrorists may refer to themselves—or be referred to—as salafists but see armed combat and political Islam as inextricable. For a precise and detailed introduction of the current salafist challenge in Tunisia, see ICG (2013).
- 22 On this issue, see, for example, Meftah (2012) and Ould Mammar (2011).
- 23 These estimates must be viewed as rough approximations. The number 450,000 was cited during several interviews with security and migration experts in Tunisia, though there are no official totals for refugees beyond the registration numbers. This number seems to have derived from a statement by the Libyan ambassador to Tunisia, who claimed in a June 2012 interview that more than 537,000 Libyans were living in Tunisia, most of them Qaddafi supporters. The ambassador further claimed that Libyan ‘loyalist’ militias were present in Tunisia and were hiding their weapons in the country. See Tunisia Tribune (2012) and Espace Manager (2012b). Such claims are not outside the realm of possibility; according to French journalist Héléne Bravin, more than 1 million Libyans have not returned since the end of the armed conflict, probably because of their links to the former regime (Atlantico, 2012). For details on the 90,000 registered refugees, see UNHCR (2011).
- 24 These estimates are the author’s own based on different numbers provided by LCPRs during interviews in Medenine and Tataouine. The estimates are in line with the partial numbers

provided in UNHCR (2011). To date, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has not published an official total. In May 2011, the media mentioned that a total of 415,000 refugees had crossed the border into Tunisia (AFP, 2011b).

- 25 On the role of the western front, see Stephen, Harding, and Beaumont (2011). As noted above, the initial responders to the refugee influx into Tunisia were Tunisian civilians, who created the basic 'infrastructure' of the response organically, providing shelter in private homes, collecting and distributing supplies, organizing education for the children, and arranging for health care for both civilians and combatants. Unlike the subsequent UNHCR approach, these initial civilian efforts made no distinction between civilians and combatants. As the conflict progressed, volunteers, including Libyans living abroad and other Arabs, added to their number. Gradually, Arab charitable foundations and governments, such as Qatar, financially supported these efforts.

As the conflict in Libya took its course, the infrastructure created to assist the refugees proved to be ideally suited to support the Libyan revolutionaries as well, especially as the basis of the complex supply chain from Tunisia into the Nafusa Mountains (Herman, 2011a; 2011b; Sayare, 2011). By around May 2011, when UNHCR and other international organizations and NGOs arrived to support the refugees, it was too late to introduce clear-cut distinctions between refugee aid and combatant support. Thus, a significant portion of the aid given to refugees in Tunisia ended up supporting the Libyan rebels of the western front, whether directly or as aid for combatants resting or seeking refuge in Tunisia (Herman, 2011a).

- 26 The border crossing lies between the towns of Wazin (Libya) and Dhiba (Tunisia) in the central part of the Jefara, approximately 140 km south of Ben Guerdane. For more information on the infiltrations, see AFP (2011c; 2011e); Fleming (2011); Jeune Afrique (2011a–d); Noueihed and Amara (2011); and Peterson (2011).
- 27 Information about the Qatari involvement in supplying firearms and heavy artillery was leaked to the press. See, for example, Robinson (2011). Confidential sources in Tataouine and among security forces confirmed that Qataris had delivered arms over the port of Zarzis (author interviews conducted in Tataouine, Tunis, and Gabès, June 2012).
- 28 Information from a researcher in Libya suggests that these arms shipments involved only heavy artillery, which could not be delivered directly by plane to the rebels (author interview, Tripoli, April 2013); the same assertion was made by an activist from Jedu (author interview, Tripoli, May 2013). Yet another source claimed that the arms shipments contained both heavy artillery and small arms, and that a small quantity of the firearms was sold to an unknown group (author interview with a member of the security forces and national police union, Tunis, June 2012). Given the involvement of the Tunisian military in the transport, the latter claim is not very plausible.
- 29 Author interviews with security agents from the Garde Nationale, the police, and customs, as well as with local authorities and leading civil society members, Gabès, Medenine, Tataouine, and Tunis, June 2012.
- 30 Author interviews with volunteers from Tunis and Sousse, who provided aid to the refugees and reported about their observations at the border crossing, Tunis and Sousse, June 2012.
- 31 The use of firearms has been witnessed more regularly in the Jefara than along the coastal regions of Tunisia. During all author interviews undertaken in Ben Guerdane, Medenine,

and Tataouine, people confirmed that handguns and rifles were regularly fired during celebrations in Ben Guerdane, notably at weddings. One reseller in Medenine mentioned that some young traffickers fired pump-action rifles during the day in the middle of Ben Guerdane (author interview conducted in June 2012).

32 Author interviews with a security officer from Ben Guerdane, Gabès, June 2012, and with a customs official, Tataouine, June 2012.

33 At this writing, some of the fighters were reportedly in Syria; see Kapitalis (2012b). For insight into the character of these men, see the Facebook page of Essenger el Mednini. The page is dedicated to his experience in Libya fighting with a militia group from Zintan; it contains several videos showing hundreds of weapons cases dropped in the Libyan desert. The author was shown his Facebook page by a journalist in Tunis in May 2012.

34 Author interview with a border guard, Tataouine, June 2012. As noted above, by disarming both the pursuing Libyan forces and the pursued rebels, the Tunisian military effectively made their territory into a safe haven for revolutionaries. For example, in the case of the 200-km penetration, after pursuer and pursued were disarmed, the rebels were able to return to their base in the Nafusa Mountains.

35 I.B. (2012a); I.N. (2012); Reuters (2011); TAP (2012b).

36 The true cause may have been a deeper issue involving shares in the trafficking dulebs or land distribution. The division of shares in the dulebs (9/11 for the Twazin and 2/11 for the other tribes) is illustrative of the Twazin's power among the traffickers (Maatoug, 2012). It is worth noting that Maatoug is the only analyst who mentions the division of tribal land as a reason for the conflict.

37 As reported by the media, the checkpoints were manned by rebels (AFP, 2011e). Author interviews with a revolutionary in Tripoli in May 2013 indicated that the NTC had enlisted militias from Jedu and Zuwarah to control the borders.

38 Author interviews with members of the National Union of Internal Security Forces and the Federation of Unions of the Internal Security Forces, Tunis, May 2012.

39 The numbers were presented to the author by the spokespersons of the National Union of Internal Security Forces and the Federation of Unions of the Internal Security Forces in Tunis in May 2012.

40 Author interviews with an officer of the criminal investigative police, Tunis, June 2012.

41 The author first heard this number from a police officer in May 2012, during an interview in the governorate of Sfax. All of the security officers interviewed in the course of this research confirmed this information.

42 The author worked in these neighbourhoods in 2003. At the time it was common knowledge in the neighbourhoods that some of the criminals owned and used firearms. On bank robberies, see Shems News (2012b).

43 Author interviews with journalists in Tunis and security officers in Gabès, Sfax, Sousse, and Tunis, May–June 2012.

44 For information on clashes in Jendouba on 23 February 2012, see AtlasInfo (2012); on 13 June 2012, see Business News (2012a); and on 8 February 2013, see H.B.N. (2013). Jenoudaba has been the site of regular violent protests.

45 The major and infamous riots in Siliana took place between 27 and 29 November 2012 (France24, 2012). Police fired birdshot, wounding hundreds of people, but none of the protesters used any firearms.



46 Several media reports, including Weslaty (2013), have made this point.  
47 One of the most prominent pre-revolution cases revolved around the group related to the  
Soliman events of 2006–07. Many terrorism experts pointed to the lack of support for Islamist  
groups in evaluating the potential for a return of AQIM fighters from Mali after the French  
intervention in that country. See, for example, Jane’s (2013).  
48 At the time of writing, neither the government nor the media had provided any evidence of  
a training camp.  
49 See ICG (2013).  
50 ICG (2013, pp. 14–15) mentions 1,200 salafists and another 300 with combat experience. In  
author interviews with representatives of the police unions in Tunis in May 2012 as well as  
with a member of the anti-terrorist unit June 2012, the figures were higher, hovering around  
2,000 and 350, respectively.  
51 In fact, the Tunisian prime minister (who is a former minister of the interior) directly tied  
these terrorist cells to an Algerian AQIM branch (L.M., 2012b). For further information, see  
Mandraud (2013).  
52 On 20 May 2012 the movement led by sheikh Abou Iyadh organized a large public demon-  
stration in Kairouan, as a display of force (Janel, 2012). The highlight of the action was the  
demonstration by hooded salafists who practised a Tunisian martial art called zamaqtaI.  
For further information, see Wafa (2012a).  
53 A Washington-based expert argues that the number of salafists has increased to 20,000  
(Amara, 2013).  
54 This point recurs throughout the literature on Islamism and terrorism, and Laurent (2013)  
places emphasis on the fluidity of identity and membership.  
55 Although the author of this report was not able to interview jihadi salafist leaders, three  
independent sources (journalists and researchers) who closely monitor salafist movements  
in Tunisia shared similar stories.  
56 See also Kapitalis (2012b).  
57 For more details see, for example, Auffray (2013). Estimates of the numbers of Tunisian  
combatants who go to fight in Syria vary widely. According to Auffray, government sourc-  
es, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, claim there are fewer than 1,000; the ICG (2013,  
p. 8) quotes sources that account for more than 2,000 such combatants. As the ICG report  
notes, religious networks funnel these fighters through Libya—via Qatar or other coun-  
tries—to Turkey, from where they are sent to a *katiba* (battalion) in Syria. Tunisians who  
are working in Libya have reported that the networks make a significant profit from this  
work. According to (unverifiable) accounts, Libyan networks have even threatened to send  
Tunisians in Libya to Syria against their will (author interviews with a Tunisian activist,  
Tunis, September 2013).  
58 For examples of such clashes and their aftermaths, see AFP (2011d), Le Corbusier (2011), or  
Jebnoun (2011) on Métlaoui (12 dead, more than 100 wounded); see Kapitalis (2012a) on El Ksar  
(2 dead) and Kébilia tribes in the southern city of Kebili. The families of the antagonized  
tribes attacked each other with clubs, knives, and also hunting rifles, leading to the death  
of a 30-year-old man (S.O.B., 2013). On clashes between clans in Feriana that wounded 18  
people, see Ghaith (2012).  
59 At this writing, some rural police stations that had been attacked and burned during the  
Tunisian revolution had not yet been repaired.

- 60 Author interview with a member of an anti-terrorist unit, location withheld, May 2012.
- 61 On Soliman, see Arfaoui (2008); Ghorbal (2008); and Thédrel (2007). On Bir Ali ben Khalifa and Rouhia, see TAP (2012a) and Bahri (2011).
- 62 Author interviews with residents and members of local Medenine development associations, Ben Guerdane and Medenine, May–July 2012.
- 63 This is common knowledge in the Jefara. Notably, local development associations working with resellers and local markets experience the shifts first hand (author interviews in Medenine and Ben Guerdane, May–June 2012). A former Libyan driver on the Tripoli–Tunis axis confirmed this shift to the author during an interview in Tripoli in February 2013; he had quit his job because he no longer felt safe on the Ras Jdir route.
- 64 On the struggle over the border region after the armed conflict, see *Le Figaro* (2012). At this writing, according to informants with knowledge of the region, the Tuaregs and the Zintani brigade that patrols the Algerian–Libyan border had struck a deal, resulting in decreased tensions and flourishing trafficking activities (author interviews with civil society activists from Zintan and Tripoli, Tripoli, June 2013). It should also be noted that a considerable number of terrorists from katibas linked to AQIM—such as al Mua’qi’oon Biddam under Mokhtar Belmokhtar—are said to have found sanctuary in Tuareg territory, notably around Awbari. See Laurent (2013) and Boisbouvier (2013) on the AQIM sanctuary.
- 65 This view is an interpretation of recent events, as described in AP (2012) and Al Arabiya (2012). The interpretation was confirmed during author interviews with a former Libyan revolutionary from Zintan, in Tripoli, April 2013.
- 66 Author phone interviews with confidential sources from Ben Guerdane, October 2013.
- 67 Author interviews with three sources, Ben Guerdane, Medenine, and Tunis, July 2012.
- 68 Author phone interview with a Tunisian trafficking expert, June, September, and October 2013.
- 69 To date, each discovery of terrorist cells or arms caches in Tunisia has been based on information provided by the local population. See AFP (2011a); Bahri (2011; 2012); Barrouhi (2011b); Dahmani (2011); Ghanmi (2012a; 2012b); and Magharebia (2011b). Some informants have claimed that security forces received information on the cell caught in Bir Ali ben Khalifa from the Ben Guerdane traffickers. The cartels were reportedly displeased that weapons were sold to violent extremists without their consent. Author interview with a Tunisian trafficking expert, Tunis, June 2012.
- 70 Confidential author interviews, Libya, April–May 2013. Interviewees did not provide any information about the buyers on the Tunisian side.
- 71 On the opening of the new crossing point, see Ghanmi (2013b).
- 72 Author phone interview with a Tunisian trafficking expert, October 2013.
- 73 Author interview with a security officer, Medenine, June 2012.
- 75 For an introduction to the Algerian jihadi armed groups, see Daly (2005). The main katiba identified on the Algerian–Tunisian border is called Okba Ibn Nafaa. It comprises Algerians, Libyans, and Tunisians; some of the Tunisian members are linked to the Soliman group of 2006, others to the Tunisian Combat Group formed in support of al Qaeda and global jihad in early 2000 by veterans of the conflicts in Afghanistan. The battalion is named after the Arab general of the same name, who conquered North Africa in the 7<sup>th</sup> century; Okba Ibn Nafaa is also the name of the mosque of Kairouan.
- 74 Author interviews with civil society activists from Zintan and Tripoli, Tripoli, June 2013.

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