



Drivers of conflict in Tunisia: An annotated bibliography

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Question

Conduct a rapid evidence mapping to produce a short annotated bibliography to inform a conflict analysis of Tunisia.

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The K4D helpdesk service provides brief summaries of current research, evidence, and lessons learned. Helpdesk reports are not rigorous or systematic reviews; they are intended to provide an introduction to the most important evidence related to a research question. They draw on a rapid desk-based review of published literature and consultation with subject specialists.

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1. Overview

Tunisia has witnessed an increase in conflict activity in recent years, both in the form of violent political protest and acts of violence perpetrated by armed jihadist groups. This report identifies some of the key literature on drivers of conflict in Tunisia, looking at both short-term and structural factors.

The literature included in this report identifies the following drivers of conflict:

- **Socio-economic factors:** The literature identifies a number of socio-economic factors, both structural and short-term, which serve as drivers of conflict in Tunisia. Particular emphasis is placed on the economy. Corruption is widespread, and unemployment levels, particularly among youth and in marginalised areas, are high. This has led to ongoing popular unrest, which shows little sign of abating.
- **Religious extremism:** There has been an increase in jihadist violence in Tunisia since the fall of former President, Ben Ali. In recent years armed jihadist groups have joined forces with criminal elements posing a greater security threat. While jihadist groups are fragmented, the lack of a national strategy to counter violent extremism hinders the government's ability to deal with armed Islamist actors effectively.
- **Political reform, security sector reform, and transitional justice:** A lack of consensus on transitional justice among political actors hinders the government's ability to effectively tackle issues like corruption.
- **Marginalised and insecure border areas:** Insecurity in Tunisia's border areas stems from the ongoing conflict in Libya, and from criminal elements engaged in trafficking and smuggling. Trans-national armed extremist groups also pose a threat to security.

There is a relatively large body of literature on drivers of conflict in Tunisia. This consists largely of reports by international Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and think tanks, but also includes some peer-reviewed academic journal articles. The literature included in this report consists of both English and French language reports. The literature identified during the course of this research is largely gender blind.

2. Drivers of conflict

SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS

Tunisie

Trape, P. (2016). African Economic Outlook. Abidjan: African Development Bank
<http://www.africaneconomicoutlook.org/en/country-notes/tunisia>

This French language report provides a detailed insight into the economic opportunities and challenges facing Tunisia. It finds that economic growth currently stands at 1 per cent, and that the unemployment rate had reached 15.6 per cent in 2016, an increase on the rate of 15.1 per cent in 2015. It notes that in disadvantaged areas in the country's interior regions unemployment exceeds 50 per cent. However, the report finds that economic growth is expected to pick up in 2017/2018 due to investment and the implementation of the country's strategic development plan (*Plan de développement stratégique 2016-2020*).

Great expectations in Tunisia

Yahya, M. (2015). Carnegie Middle East Center.
http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC_60_Yahya_Tunisia_Final.pdf

This article lists a number of socio-economic challenges facing Tunisia, most notably:

- Economic downturn
- Regional disparities
- Widening sense of insecurity
- Growing inflation
- Rise in informal sector activities
- Increasing unemployment levels
- Rising poverty levels, especially among youth
- Sense of disillusionment and alienation among a significant proportion of Tunisian society

The article attributes many of these challenges to the policies of the Ben Ali regime. It notes that post-revolution governments' failure to break with these policies has served to exacerbate these challenges. It goes on to provide a number of policy recommendations for the Tunisian government, focusing on the need for a development strategy for the country's interior regions.

La transition bloquée: Corruption et régionalisme in Tunisia

International Crisis Group. (2017). Tunis/ Brussels: ICG.
<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/177-blocked-transition-corruption-and-regionalism-tunisia>

This French language report focuses on economic rivalries in Tunisia. It discusses the divisions between established business leaders in urban areas and those running the informal economy and especially smuggling operations in under-privileged areas. The latter reportedly support violent protest against the central government in a bid to replace the established economic elites. The report goes on to state that economic and political competition serves to increase corruption and presents an obstacle to reform. This in turn reinforces inequality between regions and discrimination against those living in marginalised areas. The report notes that while the new government, led by Youssef Chaheb, has stated that it seeks to fight corruption and fix the national economy, it finds itself restrained by the power and influence of these economic actors. The report provides a series of policy recommendations for the Tunisian government, emphasising the importance of a national economic dialogue to accompany any government reforms.

Real-time analysis of African political violence, June 2017

Raleigh, C. & Moody, J. (2017). ACLED. pp. 10-11.
http://www.acleddata.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/ACLED_Conflict-Trends-Report_No.59-June-2017_pdf.pdf

Tunisia has experienced increased conflict activity in the first half of 2017. According to ACLED (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project) this takes the form of both popular protests and operations by armed Islamists. This report provides an insight into current conflict trends in Tunisia, emphasising the impact of economic stagnation, corruption, and political marginalisation

as drivers of unrest. It is based on a conflict events dataset recording acts of violence/ conflict activity by location. The report notes that these are the same issues that sparked the 2011 uprisings, but that they have now become more acute. The report predicts continuing popular unrest in the coming months.

RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM

Jihadist violence in Tunisia: The urgent need for a national strategy

International Crisis Group. (2016). Tunis/ Brussels: ICG.

<https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/jihadist-violence-in-tunisia-the-urgent-need-for-a-national-strategy.pdf>

This briefing paper notes that there has been an increase in jihadist violence in Tunisia since the popular uprisings in 2011, which brought about the fall of former President Ben Ali. It argues that the absence of a national strategy to counter violent extremism prevents the government from being able to address the root causes of violence. This paper argues that Tunisia's pressing security challenges have resulted in a repressive state response. It notes that 'coordination between the heads of state and government is poor; numerous administrative obstacles remain between and within ministries; and the multiple ad hoc counter-terrorism commissions often underperform and even fragment policymaking' (pp.1-2). The paper argues that two unpublished strategic government documents on countering violent extremism, prepared in 2014 and 2015, should now serve as a base for the drafting and dissemination of a new document. This should reflect an in-depth understanding of jihadist groups in the country. The paper provides a number of policy recommendations for government actors regarding the design of a national strategy to address jihadist violence.

Market for jihad: Radicalisation in Tunisia

Fahmi, G. & Meddeb, H. (2015). Beirut: Carnegie Middle East Center.

http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC_55_FahmiMeddeb_Tunisia_final_oct.pdf

This article argues that the growth of the Salafi-Jihadist movement in Tunisia can be attributed to the Ben Ali regime (1987-2011), and his monopolisation of the religious sphere and simultaneous neglect of socio-economic issues. It argues that Ben Ali's tight control over religious matters left a vacuum following the 2011 revolution, which created space for radical Islamist discourse. The article also attributes radicalisation to several post-revolution factors, including the disillusionment of Tunisia's youth and the 'mishandling' of the Salafist threat. It provides a number of policy recommendations for the government on countering the jihadist threat.

An Islamist 'renaissance'? Religion and politics in post-revolutionary Tunisia

Wolf, A. (2013). *The Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 18(4). pp. 560-573.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2013.829979>

This peer-reviewed journal article looks at the role of Salafists in Tunisia. It argues that while there has been a lot of focus on Salafism from the international community, Salafists in Tunisia are a heterogeneous movement, which prevents them from unifying against the government (p. 560). It states that, the Salafist movement 'has many competing narratives as to what represents

'the true Islam' and how to implement sharia, the main differences being the Salafists' respective method – violence versus non-violence – their approach – gradual versus immediate – and their outlook – national versus international' (p. 570). However, the article argues that despite this, 'ultra-conservative thought' is now a feature of Tunisian life. The article also highlights the fact that Salafi jihadists have mixed with criminal elements to pose a threat to security and stability (p. 570). It argues that broader regional attitudes towards religious conservatism, as well as harsh socio-economic conditions inside Tunisia suggest that Salafism is likely to increase in the future, with the country being increasingly confronted with religiously motivated unrest, as in neighbouring Algeria and Libya (p. 571).

Salafism, liberalism, and democratic learning in Tunisia

Cavatorta, F. (2015). *The Journal of North African Studies*.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2015.1081464>

This peer-reviewed journal article assesses the rise and fall of Ansar al-Sharia, a Salafi-jihadist movement that emerged in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution. It argues that Ansar-al Sharia's heterogeneity initially worked in its favour, as it enabled the movement to attract Salafis of all persuasions. However, it argues that this also contributed to the movement's downfall because it never committed to a specific strategy to achieve its goals, nor did it take a stand on doctrinal matters. The support for democratic institutions in Tunisia following the revolution, led to Ansar-al Sharia using the new liberal environment to openly proselytise and speak out against democracy and liberalism. The article concludes that this approach was ultimately counter-productive as it served to strengthen the consensus among political actors on the need to build a democratic system. Moreover, it led to the movement being perceived as a threat to stability. It was ultimately banned in 2013, and hundreds of young men suspected of being Salafi-jihadists were imprisoned. The article notes the paradox that in order to 'save' democracy from Ansar al-Sharia, the government began to employ illiberal practices such as indiscriminate arrests and torture. It also highlights the fact that some Salafists attempted to reorganise in order to benefit from Tunisia's new liberal framework, while at the same time opposing it.

POLITICAL REFORM, SECURITY SECTOR REFORM, AND TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

Tunisia: Transitional justice and the fight against corruption

International Crisis Group. (2016). Tunis/ Brussels: ICG.
<https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/168-tunisia-transitional-justice-and-the-fight-against-corruption.pdf>

This report highlights the significance of political tensions between supporters and opponents of Tunisia's transitional justice process. It notes that failure to apply the transitional justice process in the economic sphere serves as a significant obstacle to the implementation of anti-corruption policies and policies to stimulate the economy. The report describes transitional justice in the period after the fall of President Ben Ali in 2011 as 'revolutionary justice', detailing an arbitrary and politicised process, whereby victims of the former regime received 'material and symbolic reparations' and businessmen believed to have been involved in corruption had their assets seized, faced trials or were blackmailed (p. i). It explains that the Truth and Justice Commission (Instance vérité et dignité, IVD), established in 2013, lost official support following political

change in 2014, adding that the discussion about transitional justice in Tunisia became more polarised in 2015. The report provides a number of policy recommendations for the Tunisian government regarding the implementation of the transitional justice process.

A quiet revolution: The Tunisian military after Ben Ali

Grewal, S. (2016). Beirut: Carnegie Middle East Center.

<https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/168-tunisia-transitional-justice-and-the-fight-against-corruption.pdf>

This article finds that while the military has traditionally been underfunded and underequipped, its position has strengthened in the last five years since the 2011 uprising. It describes how the increasing security threat in Tunisia has meant that military officers have been appointed to several civilian and security posts. Moreover, eleven military officers have assumed governorships since the revolution. Some of these have been for multiple terms in different governorates, especially in interior and border regions where security threats are greatest. The article argues that this strengthening of the military could cause concern amongst those interested in democracy, providing several policy recommendations for how the strengthening of the military can be managed democratically. Another key point made in the article is that the Ministry of Interior and powerful police unions appear envious of the military's growth, and that the consequences of this will depend on how the government chooses to handle the relationship between these different security actors.

Political transition in Tunisia

Arieff, A. & Humud, C.E. (2015). Washington D.C.: Congressional Research Service.

<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RS21666.pdf>

This report provides an overview of the key challenges facing Tunisia following the 2014 elections. It outlines socio-economic and political drivers of conflict. Particular emphasis is placed on violent extremism, and the threat posed by groups operating in Tunisia and in the wider North Africa region. The report also looks at transitional justice and Security Sector Reform (SSR) and the challenges posed by tensions between the security forces and civilian leaders.

MARGINALISED AND INSECURE BORDER AREAS

Marginalisation, insecurity and uncertainty on the Tunisian-Libyan border: Ben Guerdane and Dhehiba from the perspective of their inhabitants

Lamloum, O. (2016). London: International Alert.

http://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/TunisiaLibya_MarginalisationInsecurityUncertaintyBorder_EN_2016.pdf

This report, based on over 700 interviews with residents of Ben Guerdane and Dhehiba looks at tensions on the Tunisian-Libyan border. The report finds that these tensions have been on the rise in recent years, but peaked in 2012. Moreover, it finds that In Dhehiba and Ben Guerdane, respectively, 20.5 per cent and 23.5 per cent of respondents reported having participated in a

protest movement in 2015. Protestors' demands generally focus on opening the border and development. The report also assesses the threat posed by armed Islamist groups along the border. It argues that 'the strengthening of the security apparatus, the militarisation of the border, and the active support and cooperation with Western capitals were not enough to protect the country and its border area from IS' (p. 25). However, it notes that the jihadist threat is generally related to Tunisian domestic issues, rather than to foreign influence. It attributes the jihadist threat to the 'crisis of state regulation' and the lack of economic and social rights in disadvantaged border areas (p. 25).

Tunisia's borders (II): Terrorism and regional polarisation (Update briefing)

International Crisis Group. (2014). Tunis/ Brussels: ICG.

<https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/tunisia-s-borders-II-terrorism-and-regional-polarisation.pdf>

This report finds that the relationship between arms and drug traffickers and armed jihadists has strengthened in border areas since 2013. It states that illegal trade networks' activities 'encourage' violence, a phenomenon the media is quick to blame on terrorists. The report goes on to argue that 'these mixed groups are becoming more professional: corrupting members of the security forces; recruiting young men involved in petty crime to settle scores with competitors; attacking army and national guard units that obstruct trafficking; or securing food supplies from marginalised communities in the mountainous areas' (p. 9). Key routes are: Morocco-Algeria-Tunisia-Libya for cannabis resin; Libya-Tunisia-Algeria for military equipment; Algeria-Tunisia for hunting rifles used for personal protection. According to one interviewee the principle aim of some of the security incidents described as terrorist activity, is in fact to secure the transport of these goods (p. 9).

This report also states that there has been an increase in clashes between security forces and jihadist brigades in border areas since the end of 2013. Along the northern part of the Tunisian-Algerian border such clashes regularly result in casualties among army soldiers and the National Guard. According to this report, the fact that the jihadist movement in Tunisia is increasingly weakening and fragmenting, is making it more dangerous in some respects. It argues that 'at a national scale, there exists a genuine risk of isolated elements pursuing a path of individual violence or rallying the pro-IS current as a result of the near- eradication of Ansar al-Sharia' (p. 4). However, the report finds that at the regional or international level, jihadi victories in the region are strengthening the hold of radical Islamism and its 'fascination' for many young Tunisians. There are currently several thousand Tunisians already fighting alongside Islamist militias in Libya and IS in Iraq and Syria. This reportedly makes it very difficult to stop the cycle of repression/radicalisation that Tunisia is currently experiencing. The report provides a number of policy recommendations on how to mitigate the jihadist threat for the Tunisian government.

The geographic trajectory of conflict and militancy in Tunisia

Boukhars, A. (2017). Beirut: Carnegie Middle East Centre.

http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP313_Boukhars_Tunisia_Final.pdf

This article argues that Tunisia's border areas are particularly prone to social discontent, expressed through sometimes violent protests and violent extremism. It argues that the sources of this discontent are:

- Loss of confidence in the country's democratic transition among youth in border areas.
- A desire for a more equitable distribution of state resources and transparent and inclusive processes for managing the country's natural resources.
- The state's failure to reform its system of governance.
- The state's tendency to stigmatise protestors as 'smugglers and terrorists' (p. 1).

The report argues that the state's hard-line security policies often exacerbate social tensions, political violence, and militancy. It presents a number of policy recommendations for the Tunisian Government and the international community, emphasising the need for a new approach to the country's border regions.

On the edge? Trafficking and insecurity at the Tunisian-Libyan border

Kartas, M. (2013). Geneva: Small Arms Survey.

<http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/F-Working-papers/SAS-WP17-Tunisia-On-the-Edge.pdf>

This working paper provides a detailed insight into arms trafficking and extremism in Tunisia, discussing the country's principle security challenges. It argues that there are deep divisions between tribes and clans in Tunisia, as well as between coastal elites and 'disenchanted' youths from the interior and under-privileged urban neighbourhoods. It goes on to argue that these divisions have resulted in violent protests, which could develop into armed conflict if grievances and divisions are not addressed.

This paper also highlights the fact that Tunisia's borders are porous and that the security forces are not sufficiently well-equipped to patrol land and sea borders. It argues that in the medium-term insecurity in Libya and the joining of forces of militias with criminals and traffickers, poses the greatest threat to Tunisia's security. In addition, it highlights the threat posed by transnational extremist groups and the rise of Salafism in Tunisia, emphasising the potential for radicalisation among Tunisian youths.

3. Additional references

Hinds, R. (2014). *Conflict analysis of Tunisia*. GSDRC Helpdesk Report. Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham.

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About this report

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