

## TUNISIA'S BORDER REGIONS: BETWEEN SECURITY AND SOCIAL UNREST

By Hamza Meddeb

Increased security measures along Tunisia's border with Libya have adversely affected local communities, particularly herders, who no longer have free access to pastures and water sources for their livestock. Indeed, the desire for enhanced security has come with a heavy price tag. Communities in marginalized border regions have long relied on pastoralism and cross-border interaction for their livelihoods. Today, such activities are threatened, and the Tunisian state may soon face new rounds of social discontent amongst the inhabitants of its border areas.

In southern Tunisia, livestock breeding has mainly involved goats and camels. While they are not nomads, herders require mobility to find pastures and water for their animals. In the past they relied on customary and tribal arrangements to allow transhumance routes on both sides of the border. This system survived into Tunisia's independence with the consent of authorities on both sides of the border, although modernization and changes in lifestyle have eroded pastoral ways of life. Local populations have supplemented livestock activities with farming or cross-border trade or smuggling.

A series of [terrorist attacks in Tunisia in late 2015](#) led the government to [strengthen security measures](#) by establishing a physical barrier along half of the country's 500-kilometer border with Libya, with the support of international partners. Under a [grant awarded in 2016](#), the U.S. government's Defense Threat Reduction Agency helped install an electronic security surveillance system. Germany [contributed](#) mobile observation and surveillance equipment. The border barrier is composed of a network of sand berms, water-filled trenches, and fences, along with motion detectors, cameras, ground surveillance radars, and infrared sensors.

Along the more densely populated northern half of this border, a [10 to 20-kilometer-deep buffer zone](#) makes up the first line of defense. Much of the land in this buffer zone had been allocated to herders, but is now under the control of the Tunisian Army, which patrols the area and coordinates the activities of customs authorities and the National Guard. The southern half of the border—from the border post of Dhehiba to Burj al-Khadra—is a military exclusion zone to which only the Defense Ministry can authorize access.

The state's focus on security has left no room to consider the region's deep-rooted socioeconomic realities, where pastoralism and agriculture are a way of life and important sources of revenue, particularly so following 2015 government restrictions on cross-border trade and smuggling activities as well as a slowdown in the border economy resulting from Libya's financial crisis, a consequence of the conflict there. Many cross-border traders turned to livestock and farming activities to make up for their losses. With access to grazing areas and water sources reduced by government decree, local populations are seeing further restrictions on local livelihood opportunities.

The Tunisian state's border policies have not only harmed the border economy, provoking a socioeconomic crisis, but have also led to a livelihoods crisis amongst pastoral communities. The Tataouine region remains severely underdeveloped, with above-average unemployment rates – almost [twice the national average](#) in 2019 – failing public infrastructure, and a stunted private sector. Remada and Dhehiba also have among the country's [highest percentages](#) of unemployment, [estimated at 38 percent and 42 percent, respectively](#). The dire economic situation has provoked anger in these border communities, with incidents leading to strikes and an [increase in tension](#) between authorities and locals.

The economic crisis in Tataouine Governorate has aggravated the condition of herders, but other factors have further exacerbated their situation. The first is the tribal land tenure system, under which [thirty percent of land](#) is subject to collective tenure and is managed by tribal councils, with each tribe in Tataouine having such a council. The system has created tensions over land ownership among tribes, causing communal disputes over boundaries and the use of these areas, which have disrupted transhumance routes. A second factor is the drastic reduction in the land available for pastoral activities. This is primarily due to desertification and climate change, but also the privatization of communal lands and their purchase by large farms. In 2010, private land ownership in Tataouine Governorate was estimated at [65,710 hectares \(around 82 percent\)](#). The remaining land that is owned communally



Tunisia's border with Libya  
Source: Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center

KEY	
Buffer zone	Border fence
Military zone	Secondary road
Town, village	Main road
District capital	International boundary
National capital	Port
Border post	

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PERIPHERAL VISION IS PUBLISHED TWICE A YEAR AS A TIMELY UPDATE OF DYNAMICS ON THE GROUND WHILE ALSO HIGHLIGHTING THE LATEST NEWS FROM THE X-BORDER LOCAL RESEARCH NETWORK'S ACTIVITIES.

is a source of conflict between small farmers and herders. [Small farmers are tempted to expand farming lands](#), which encroaches upon grazing areas and transhumance routes.

The militarization of the southern border regions, the growing role of the military in the region, and the army's frequent dealings with border communities in a context of rising tensions and scarce resources have also raised concerns over relations between the military and the local population. The Tunisian Army lacks expertise in civil affairs, hampering public acceptance of its border security measures. Calming tensions and building trust among the local population, especially herders and farmers, requires transparency around the military's role in maintaining security. It also necessitates communicating on the size and limits of restricted border zones and eventually loosening the conditions of access to them. Providing services that could compensate the population for any loss of revenue, such as providing health services, youth vocational training, boosting regional development and increasing the region's attractiveness to investors and employers, may also contribute to improved relations.

The crisis in these marginalized border areas is likely to perpetuate social instability. During the past five years, particularly in 2020, the government [faced months of protests in Tataouine](#), which hindered oil production and forced Tunis to offer significant concessions to the local population. To avoid a return to that situation, authorities must approach border security with more flexibility, and take into consideration the socioeconomic vulnerabilities of a region that, both literally and figuratively, is living on the edge.

“ *The state's focus on security has left no room to consider the region's deep-rooted socioeconomic realities, where pastoralism and agriculture are a way of life* ”

## LESS VIOLENCE, MORE TENSIONS: TRENDS OF IDENTITY-BASED CONFLICT IN SUBNATIONAL AND BORDER AREAS ACROSS ASIA

Even before the global pandemic, the world had experienced a tumultuous period of rising tension, polarization, and conflict. Across Asia, high-profile events have created the impression of a new era of instability and violence.

In 2017, extremists took over the city of Marawi in the southern Philippines, leading to five months of aerial bombardment and a bloody urban siege. That same year, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya fled Myanmar across the border to Bangladesh following a series of brutal attacks. In February 2021, the Myanmar military took over government and arrested elected leaders, leading to protracted protests and violent repression. Several months later, the Taliban reasserted control over Afghanistan amid scenes of fear and chaos.

In spite of these harrowing events, overall levels of violence across most of Asia have trended downward in the past decade. In [The State of Conflict and Violence in Asia 2021](#) report, The Asia Foundation highlights country-level analysis and regional trends to build a comprehensive assessment of how conflicts in Asia conform and contest global patterns. Afghanistan remained rife with conflict up to 2021, but elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia there have generally been declines in the scale and intensity of violence, causing fewer than 2,000 recorded fatalities in 2020, a huge drop from almost 10,000 in 2010.

The overall decline in fatalities (outside of Afghanistan) can be explained. The deadliest conflicts in Asia are typically subnational rather than international—they occur within rather than between countries and are usually confined to limited conflict zones. These zones are often found in peripheral regions, located adjacent or close to borders where [state control is contested](#). Common trends are identifiable across the region, as subnational conflict tensions persist but violence has typically become less intense.

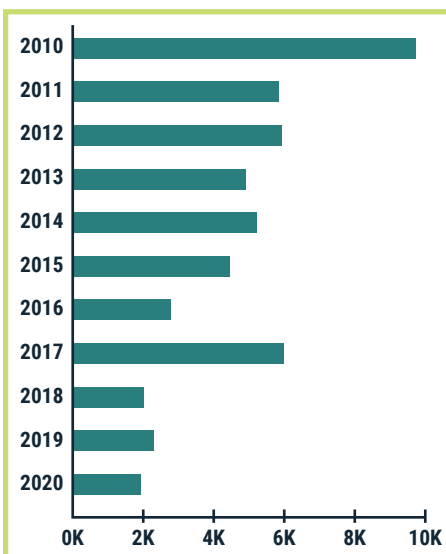
In Pakistan, the Zarb-E-Azb government offensive in North Waziristan district from 2014-2016 played a significant role in extending control of the state and minimizing militarism in the area. In Southeast Asia, too, governments have been able to contain violent conflicts in restive regions even if they have been unable to decisively end them. Prior to the military takeover in Myanmar, the government had been able to manage violence in the country's east through a series of formal and informal ceasefires, even as conflict in the western border area of Rakhine State increased in 2019 and 2020.

Governments have gradually expanded their reach over a period of continued economic growth across most of the continent. New roads, improved services, and more functional bureaucracies have brought new tools and strategies for pacifying resistance. Military expenditures have increased over the last ten years, by around 41 percent in South Asia and 34 percent in Southeast Asia in real terms.

At the same time, adversaries occasionally agree to negotiate peace settlements, and some national leaders have carried out political reforms to tackle the root causes of violence. Most prominently the Philippines has made steady progress on its 2014 'Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro', with the plebiscite and passage of the enabling laws in 2019 and the creation of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao the same year. Peace agreements in Nepal and Indonesia also continue to hold even if developmental and conflict challenges remain.



Destroyed buildings in Marawi, Philippines.  
Photo credit: The Asia Foundation



Fatalities in Asia since 2010, excluding Afghanistan.  
Source: UCDP data, 2010–2019 estimates based on UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset 20.1. 2020. From The Asia Foundation, 2021, *The State of Conflict and Violence in Asia*.

Despite the overall reduction in violence, contemporary trends including growing social or political divides, identity tensions, and the emergence of authoritarian and populist leaders, are very much in evidence. Identity-based politics have become more common and more confrontational in Asia, and waves of violence targeting Muslim minority communities, often tacitly or even overtly encouraged by political leaders, have occurred in Myanmar and several South Asian countries. In these ethnically and religiously diverse nations, customs and institutions that maintain a balance between groups have been undermined by populist assertions of ethnic and religious primacy, and by authoritarian leadership willing to court supporters by appealing to their baser instincts. Where governments have not offered support, the impact of extreme identity-based movements has been limited, but when backed by governments or influential political parties, they have been particularly violent.

Simultaneously, the Asia region has experienced a broad decline in support for liberal activism and interventionism, while China, increasingly affluent and outward-looking, offers for many a more pragmatic model and a ready source of funds. Reports have clearly identified [an Asian trend away from democratic norms](#), emphasizing the authoritarian pivot and restricting civil society space. China has also played an increasingly assertive role in its borderlands, seeking to ensure that subnational conflicts and other tensions do not threaten the stability needed for advancing its political, economic, and strategic interests.

The Asia Foundation's report also explores how social media has polarized societies. Extremists spreading hate speech and opportunists purveying misinformation are enabled by algorithms that push users towards "echo chambers" and by tools or methods that can be used to game the system. These are major concerns around the world, but the problems are graver still in many Asian countries where regulation and oversight are weak or captured by powerful interests and political leadership. Templates for sophisticated social control now allow for constant digital campaigns that run alongside tools of censorship to consolidate authority.

For Asia's contested border regions, these emerging trends add further strains and potential for instability. The risk is particularly acute where longstanding conflict drivers remain unaddressed, and where fault lines between heterogeneous ethnic and religious groups might drive new waves of communal violence. The [October 2021 violence targeting Hindus in Southern Bangladesh](#), which was spurred by the widespread circulation of footage alleging the desecration of the Quran, shows that agitation on social media can quickly lead to bloodshed. Ten people were killed and over 100 temples and makeshift shrines were vandalized in the violence, despite a rapid response by Bangladesh authorities.

Tensions along lines of identity—typically ethnicity or religion, sometimes between indigenous groups and settlers—are core aspects of many such conflicts. In subnational areas where significant progress has been made towards reforms and reduced violence, populist political pressure could undermine hard-fought peace dividends, underscoring the importance of adopting broad perspectives around what continues to drive conflict and instability. Where governments have shown a commitment to pluralist, inclusive political systems, there may be greater resilience to weather both identity-based tensions and subnational conflict. Civil society, too, can play a particularly important role in working across ethnic and religious divides, especially in peripheral regions where the state's authority is divisive and contested. The continued pursuit of these top-down and bottom-up efforts can help ensure that reduction of armed violence across the region is sustained.

An adaptation of this piece first appeared in The Asia Foundation's [InAsia blog](#) on 27 October 2021.

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## TRADE, TAXES AND TENSIONS IN THE SOMALI BORDERLANDS

Borders are central to cooperation and conflict between communities and states in the Somali-speaking regions of the Horn of Africa (Somalia, Somaliland and the Somali-speaking regions of Ethiopia and Kenya). Often overlooked because of their peripheral location, borders in the Somali territories are crucial sites of revenue generation and state-building.

Rift Valley Institute's work under the Somali Borders and Conflict Economies research project uses three case-studies from Somaliland and Puntland—two sub-national entities derived from Somalia itself—to examine the crucial significance of borders in this region. These case-studies focus on previously under-researched 'trading borders' that are crucial for the circulation of commodities across main Somali trade and transport corridors.

First, [the contested city of Lasanod](#), which is located on the border between Somaliland and Puntland and is on an important trade and transport corridor that links supply chains from the Somali coastal ports of Berbera and Bosaso with the Somaliland interior. To profit in this complicated business environment, traders must negotiate multiple tax regimes in the borderlands between Somaliland and Puntland.



Lasanod checkpoint on the road to Berbera. Photo credit: Ahmed M. Musa, 2021

Second, the **Gaashamo trade corridor**—a collection of small 'bush' trade routes connecting Ethiopia's Somali Region with Somaliland. A system of cross-border trading and taxation has developed around these routes, which is locally developed and maintained, and has very little to do with federal and regional policies or laws.

Third, **Galkayo**—a strategic trade hub divided by competing clan lineages and administrations straddling the border between Puntland and Galmudug states. Despite the political divisions and local insecurity, traders continue to prosper in the city through a complex system of cross-border relations with different local authorities.

Each of these examples demonstrates the importance of cross-border trade to the development of Somalia's states and semi-autonomous state-like entities. A combination of more than two decades of civil war, and Somalia's internationalized, outward facing economy, means that most food and consumer goods found in the country are imported, either from neighbouring states or via maritime routes from further afield. Cross-border commodity trading is consequently a vital, and (for some) highly profitable component of local livelihoods.

The taxation of imported goods is also the main source of income for various Somali states, or state-like entities—whether national or sub-national—including Somaliland and Puntland. The regulation and control of trade via borders is therefore extremely important—economically and, as a consequence, politically too. The ability of state authorities, or those aspiring to be a state authority, to govern and tax a steady flow of commodities across their borders is a key requirement to be able to strengthen or simply maintain this status.

Studying how Somali trading borders work provides important insights into the relations between trade, taxation and state-building. Not only are territorial states and aspiring administrations most evident at the border, but as the Somali cases show, they are also largely financed by economic transactions across the border. Also, because trading borders are often strongly contested, studying the governance of these internal and international trading borders helps build an understanding of significant drivers of conflicts in the region.

Several key political dynamics and trends are at play in Somalia's contested trading borders. Growing competition over trade revenues between Somali state entities and Federal Member States manifest in the development of rival trade corridors. This competition has produced a fragmented trading landscape as well as shifting trade volumes and corridors as Somali traders move their goods across multiple administrative and social boundaries marked by different types of regulations. Because the taxation of goods is a main source of revenue, border points and trading hubs have repeatedly been sites of conflict as various interest groups seek to benefit.

A broad range of legal, illegal, formal and informal taxes and fees are levied by state and non-state actors involved in regulating cross-border commodity trading in the Somali territories. The Islamist group Al-Shabaab is a part of this informal taxation system—a tactic that has been extremely influential in its ability to survive within Somalia's fractured national political landscape for over a decade.

States and aid organizations typically seek to formalize cross-border trading through customs and other administrative reforms in an attempt to make them more state-like. It is vitally important to recognize the plurality of regulations and practices—both formal and informal—that exists at Somali trading borders.

In the Somali territories, borders—which have seen an increase in the number and also the strength of local administration—are sites where state-building can be supported and conflicts, in particular over revenues and trade corridors, can be defused. Building economic cooperation is key to a sustainable political settlement both in Somalia and Somaliland. Therefore, trading borders are sites that warrant increased attention, particularly from those wishing to assist with the development of the economy, security and administration in the Somali-speaking regions.



**Border regions of Somaliland, Puntland and Ethiopia's Somali Region.**  
Source: Rift Valley Institute.  
Base map data source: OpenStreetMap. © MAPgrafx 2021.

KEY	
	Capital
	Regional capital
	Major port
	Other town
	Primary road
	International boundary
	State boundary
	National capital
	Study site

“ It is vitally important to recognize the plurality of regulations and practices—both formal and informal—that exists at Somali trading borders. ”

As part of the **Cross-Border Conflict: Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) program**, the X-Border Local Research Network is a partnership between The Asia Foundation, the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center and the Rift Valley Institute. With support from UK aid from the UK government, the three organizations work with local research partners to improve our understanding of political, economic and social dynamics in conflict-affected borderlands, and the flows of people, goods and ideas that connect them. The project supports more effective policymaking and development programming, leveraging research to advocate for peaceful change. The views in *Peripheral Vision* do not necessarily represent those of the partner organizations or the UK government.

