



# POMED

PROJECT  
ON MIDDLE EAST  
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## POMED BACKGROUNDER: A TRIP REPORT FROM TUNISIA'S "DARK REGIONS"

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On our November 2015 visit to Sidi Bouzid, Gafsa, and Gabès, three of Tunisia's most impoverished regions, we encountered deep frustration over unmet economic, social, and political demands, five years after a revolution that was supposed to bring justice and economic opportunity to all Tunisians. As a despondent young civil society activist told us, "The past five years were useless. Nothing has changed."

An eruption of accumulated grievances over joblessness, underdevelopment, and social exclusion in Tunisia's marginalized regions sparked the 2011 revolution. Since then, each successive government—including the current one—has promised to address these inequities, but little has happened. Now, the worry is that many young people, hit hard by dashed revolutionary hopes, social malaise, and economic hardship, are more and more alienated from the national-level political transition.

Sidi Bouzid, in the central interior, Gafsa, in the southwest, and Gabès, on the southern Mediterranean coast, are all isolated, economically depressed cities of about 100,000 residents, and each is the center of a marginalized governorate of the same name. The activists we met in each place were focused entirely on local problems. They had no interest whatsoever in national high politics, such as the split then unfolding within Nidaa Tounes or a rumored cabinet reshuffle.

We saw up-close how some young Tunisians are using their newfound political freedom to launch impressive civil society initiatives to address community problems. But we also heard from many others who are cynical after years of unfulfilled promises of development from Tunis and international donors alike. Many of our interlocutors worried about young people in these places, feeling excluded and invisible, being drawn to "the wrong path": terrorism. At least two of the perpetrators of the 2015 terrorist attacks in Bardo and Sousse came from deprived interior towns, and during our trip a large counterterrorism operation unfolded just outside of Sidi Bouzid after militants beheaded a 16-year-old shepherd.

### ABOUT THIS REPORT

*In November 2015, POMED Executive Director Stephen McInerney, Deputy Director for Research Amy Hawthorne, and Program Associate for Civil Society Partnerships Raouia Briki traveled to the south and interior regions of Tunisia. Over the course of five days, they visited Sidi Bouzid, Gafsa, and Gabès and spoke with a variety of activists, NGO leaders, researchers, and other members of civil society.*

## A HISTORY OF EXCLUSION

Tunisia's regional inequities date to at least the French protectorate period. After independence, successive Tunisian leaders continued to marginalize the interior and south. Former president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (1987-2011) called these largely poor, less populated parts of Tunisia the "dark regions," in contrast with the wealthier, industrialized, and more densely populated areas of the capital, Tunis, its northern suburbs, and the Sahel, the affluent central Mediterranean coast region from where both Ben Ali and Tunisia's legendary first president, Habib Bourguiba, hailed. Tunisia has long been run through a highly centralized system, and Tunis and the Sahel produce most of the country's elite. The coastal cities of Tunis, Sousse, and Sfax account for 85 percent of Tunisia's GDP<sup>1</sup> and attract 95 percent of its foreign direct investment.<sup>2</sup> The poverty rate in the deprived regions is three times higher than that of the country's wealthier areas, and the per capita income is half.<sup>3</sup>

Ben Ali, a Tunisian analyst explained, made sure to keep the poverty of the interior and the south far from public view. This changed in mid-December 2010 when, as is well known, a popular uprising over over police abuse, economic injustice, and social and political exclusion ignited in Sidi Bouzid and spread quickly to Gafsa, a phosphate mining town that has long been a hotbed of unrest, and on to other interior towns, reaching Tunis and the Sahel a few weeks later. The initial interior uprising fused with a coastal uprising driven more by a push for freedom of expression and association and other democratic demands to force the ouster of Ben Ali on January 14, 2011. It took the combined power of both movements to topple the dictatorship so quickly. But while the transition so far has brought some visible gains for the democracy revolution, it has mostly sidelined the other demands for which hundreds of Tunisians in the marginalized regions gave their lives.



## DILAPIDATED CITIES, ISOLATED REGIONS

The three governorates are connected by narrow, often poorly maintained roads, along which both pastoral rural scenery and run-down buildings and trash are visible from the car window. Inside the cities, the effects of the unbalanced regional development policies of the last six decades, compounded by the economic crisis of the past five years, are evident in dilapidated buildings, half-finished construction sites, and poorly paved streets. During the 1990s, the state began to dedicate more funds to the interior and southern regions, and some modest improvements

1 *The Unfinished Revolution: Bringing Opportunity, Good Jobs and Greater Wealth to All Tunisians*, World Bank Development Policy Review report, May 2014, p. 282.

2 "Promoting Inclusive Growth in Arab Countries: Rural and Regional Development and Inequality in Tunisia," by Mongi Boughzala and Mohamed Tlili Hamdi, Brookings Institution Global Economy and Development Working Paper no. 71, February 2014, p. 6.

3 *Ibid*, p. 1.

resulted.<sup>4</sup> But investments still fell far short of the needs. Furthermore, officials in Tunis made poor decisions about regions they did not understand well, local authorities lacked management capacity, and endemic corruption siphoned off resources. The post-revolution governments effectively have continued the failed approaches of the Ben Ali era.

On our visit, Sidi Bouzid looked especially hard-scrabble and bleak, the resentment of residents apparent on their faces. On the post office in the shabby city center building hangs a large banner of Mohamed Bouazizi, the local fruit vendor whose self-immolation triggered the uprising, labeling him as “the symbol of national unity.” But the main impression is of a place forgotten by the rest of Tunisia. Gafsa and Gabès appeared somewhat more lively, but they were still run down and full of young men idling at cafés.



*A banner displays a photo of Mohamed Bouazizi with the text “The Symbol of National Unity” on the side of Sidi Bouzid’s post office.*

Local services in the three governorates are hard to access and of poor quality. Residents lack adequate health care facilities, especially hospitals equipped to treat the rampant cancer and other illnesses believed to be caused by unchecked pollution from the phosphate and other industries. In some outlying areas, drinking water is not clean. A bitter young civil society activist in Sidi Bouzid complained that, since the revolution, countless international delegations have visited his city to ask questions and formulate assistance plans, but “nothing ever changes. We never see any results.”

## UNEMPLOYMENT AND THE SMUGGLING ECONOMY

Since 2011, as investment has dried up, labor strikes have slowed down productivity, and the national economy has struggled to get out of its ongoing crisis, economic conditions in the three governorates have worsened. According to recent official statistics, Gabès and Gafsa have among the highest unemployment rates in the nation, at 24.4 percent and 27.9 percent, respectively.<sup>5</sup> We were told that youth unemployment in the three governorates may reach 40 percent.

The reasons behind chronic unemployment and underemployment are, like everywhere, complex. Part of the problem is that traditional sources of formal employment—agriculture in Sidi Bouzid, phosphate mining in Gafsa, and fishing and phosphate conversion to fertilizer in Gabès—offer only low wages. Another factor is that few other industries have been created, and most existing businesses are tiny and stuck in the informal sector, where pay is also very low. The educational system is inferior to what exists in the more affluent parts of the country. In addition, as one person explained, many university-educated young men, who have the highest rate of joblessness in Tunisia, do not want to take available jobs in agriculture or construction, instead

<sup>4</sup> “Promoting Inclusive Growth in Arab Countries: Rural and Regional Development and Inequality in Tunisia,” p. 4-12.

<sup>5</sup> “Note on the National Employment Survey, Q2 2015,” National Institute of Statistics. (In Arabic and French) [http://www.ins.nat.tn/communiqués/Note\\_emploi\\_T2\\_2015\\_ar\\_fr.pdf](http://www.ins.nat.tn/communiqués/Note_emploi_T2_2015_ar_fr.pdf)

preferring to spend their days sitting in cafés waiting for a job in the public administration, Tunisia's main employer, with its better pay and job security. One Sidi Bouzid resident told us that some graduates wait ten years to find a job. With so many men unemployed, more women in these regions are supporting their families by working in the fields and on construction sites, where health and safety protections are absent. Young people told us that they have good ideas for small businesses, but banks very rarely lend money to anyone without connections.

One area of economic growth is the smuggling sector, which moves various forms of contraband across Tunisia's relatively porous borders. Smuggling has been part of Tunisia's large informal economy for a long time, but it has thrived since the revolution. The state's ability to maintain authority over borders with Algeria and Libya has eroded. The tight controls imposed by former president Ben Ali and his family, who were reportedly deeply involved in the smuggling sector, disappeared, allowing more Tunisians to compete for a piece of the action. Along rural highways and just outside the cities—in one case just steps away from a National Security building on the Gabès-Sfax road—we saw stand after stand of smuggled Libyan and Algerian oil in plastic jugs for sale. Tables piled with used clothing, apparently smuggled from Algeria, were also visible in some towns.

The smuggling economy moves petrol, food products, electronic items, appliances, cigarettes, and other items from Algeria and Libya, where prices are much lower, across well-established illegal routes into Tunisia, with the acquiescence—and sometimes direct participation—of the police. This trade is lucrative enough to entice many Tunisians into taking risks to work in this sector. For example, a liter of gas costs about the equivalent of 0.2 Tunisian dinar (DT) in Algeria and Libya, and 1.5 DT in Tunisia, and an air conditioning unit costs 400 DT in Libya and 800 DT in Tunisia. The monthly salary at a factory in the south, one person explained, is about 250 DT, while an entry-level job in a smuggling network is 500-600 DT. Thus smuggling is a vital safety net, providing many jobs and helping to maintain social peace, but it deprives the state of much-needed tax revenue. Even more urgent, some experts believe that terrorists are exploiting smuggling networks by moving weapons and extremists along the same well-worn paths used for commodities. One Gabès resident who had recently visited the barrier that the Tunisian government is building along part of the border with Libya described it being built with gaps for contraband to enter. It is urgent for Tunisia to break the smuggling-police corruption-terrorism nexus.<sup>6</sup>



*A jerrycan of smuggled oil from Libya sits outside a vendor's stall on the route between Sidi Bouzid and Gafsa.*

<sup>6</sup> For more on cross-border smuggling and border security in Tunisia, see "Border Security Challenges in the Grand Maghreb," by Querine Hanlon and Matthew M. Herbert, United States Institute of Peace, May 2015.

## YOUTH: SOME ARE DRAWN TO CIVIL SOCIETY, BUT MOST ARE DISENGAGED

In our conversations with dozens of young people, their absence of fear was notable. Our interlocutors spoke freely, discussing sensitive political topics at length with inquisitive visitors. Many remarked upon the freedom of association they now enjoy, although some said space for political expression, especially for protests, had begun to narrow over the past year. The proliferation of youth-led civil society organizations was evident—fueled in part by an influx of foreign funding. Everywhere we went, we heard about money from the U.S. State Department’s Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the European Union, France, and Germany. One young NGO member in Gafsa, complaining about the lack of support from the Tunisian government, described USAID and MEPI as “our Ministry of Youth.”

This spread of civil society organizations can help Tunisia’s transition greatly by inculcating civic values, by offering a training ground for young people in politics and leadership, and by channeling youth energy in constructive ways. In fact, one NGO worker said that civil society is the only part of Tunisia that is thinking, proposing, and doing; the political parties are passive. One especially impressive youth-run group in Gafsa uses art, music, and design to teach new skills to at-risk high school and university students and to provide creative outlets and foster a sense of belonging. “The kind of work we do to change the minds of young people works far better than laws and prisons,” they explained with pride.

But the layer of civically engaged youth in these deprived regions is thin, and some worry that much of the new civil society is “just decor” and will not be sustainable once donor funding shifts elsewhere. Some NGO offices we visited were crackling with energy, but others were nearly empty. Civil society, we were told in each region, is fragmented, and lots of tiny, isolated organizations cannot mobilize citizens to generate real pressure on the authorities. The infusion of donor cash since 2011 has in some cases—as is true in other transition countries—funded superficial initiatives. In one meeting, a young NGO leader rattled off several minutes of donor jargon (“capacity building,” “youth empowerment,” “social entrepreneurship”) while providing little specific detail on what her organization does. Youth engaged in civil society told us that they appreciate the international funding and training for this sector, as well as the jobs it creates. But they see little meaningful international support of other kinds, such as to create broader economic opportunities.

Cynicism about the revolution and a feeling of isolation from a transition that is constantly praised by the international community ran deep among the young people we met. It is clear that democratic changes to the political system have not yet fixed old problems of alienation. Our interlocutors spoke disdainfully of political parties, complaining that the members of parliament elected last fall were now nowhere to be seen in their home districts. Numerous reports note that youth turnout in last year’s elections was low across Tunisia, and anecdotally it appears to have been especially weak in these deprived regions. Civil society activists said that they feel far removed from national politics and that they cannot influence debates in the capital as the prominent NGOs in Tunis can. People mentioned repeatedly the absence of “political will” on the part of Tunisia’s leaders to improve conditions in the interior and south. And some complained that since the 2014 elections, many of the “same people” who were running the country under Ben Ali are back in power. One person blamed disengaged citizens: if they desire more change, they will push for it. A civil society activist in Sidi Bouzid captured the disillusionment of many

when he noted, “The only thing that has changed since 2011 is that we can now speak out freely. Before, if we expressed our opinions, we were beaten up or thrown in jail. Now they let us say whatever we want, but they ignore us.”

Unchecked corruption and the associated injustice is a major grievance. “Corruption has been part of our system for fifty years. The corrupt employee is valued more. He will always advance ahead of the honest one, every time,” an activist in Gafsa said bitterly. A group of youth in Gafsa complained of a corrupt local businessman who has been receiving government contracts for the past 20 years to build roads in the governorate, and everyone knew he was not building the roads but instead pocketing the funds. Although this was exactly the kind of corruption that sparked the revolution, this man was nonetheless elected in 2014 to represent Gafsa in the Assembly.

Civil society leaders also bemoaned the lack of cultural and social activities for young people. In Gafsa, there is one cinema and no swimming pool, and the state-run youth center has been closed for two years. Sidi Bouzid, a city of approximately 125,000, has one poorly equipped youth center and no cinema. We heard that the high school drop-out rate is rising in each of the three governorates. Many young people spend their days sitting in cafés. “Radicalization can take place in the cafés as much as through deviant imams,” a young person in Gafsa worried. In Gabès, we were told, more and more desperate young people are migrating illegally to Europe by sea each year, becoming radicalized there, and transmitting extremist ideas back to Tunisia.

### IS DECENTRALIZATION THE SOLUTION?

“Decentralization is our last hope,” proclaimed an activist in Gafsa. In Tunisia’s notoriously centralized governance system, the Ministry of Interior (MOI) controls local government, and the municipal authorities—all appointed—have no independent power or resource base, including the ability to tax. Decisions are made by MOI-chosen governors, and officials in Tunis allocate funds for each governorate in ways that activists argue are unfair to the deprived regions. A group of NGO leaders in Gafsa, for example, complained that, although a large share of Tunisia’s budget historically has come from profits from the phosphates mined in the governorate, their region sees very little of this wealth. In fact, the regions with the greatest natural resources—such as phosphates and agriculture—are among the poorest in the country. Many donors and Tunisian officials, tired of disruptive protests and strikes, and wanting tamer forms of activism, are encouraging NGOs to conduct advocacy campaigns to press local government officials for more resources and attention to community priorities. The effectiveness of this approach is not clear, however. We heard repeatedly that most local government functionaries, many of whom are holdovers from the old regime, often have little authority or incentive to respond to advocacy efforts.

Hopes are high that the decentralization promised in the new constitution and local elections proposed for fall 2016 (the country’s first such vote since 2005) could be the steps to finally begin delivering improvements for the deprived regions. In recent weeks, local and national NGOs have organized consultations and training sessions on local government across the interior and south.

But the government’s commitment to genuine local empowerment, and how it will implement the somewhat vague language in the constitution, remains uncertain. The draft law released in November by the MOI is convoluted and reserves crucial powers for that ministry. We encountered much confusion about how the gradual process envisioned for devolving powers to the local level will work, along with an acknowledgment that to make decentralization

function, major shifts within Tunisia's top-down political culture will be required. Many activists are concerned that without meaningful authority and sufficient revenues, freely elected local councils won't be able to make much difference. "How will we convince people to pay local taxes to fund municipal councils before they have confidence that local services will improve?" an NGO leader in Gafsa asked. Others fear that the dominant national parties—Nidaa Tounes and Ennahdha—will control the process, divvying up regions and cutting off chances for new, bottom-up political forces to emerge.

### URGENCY MUST REPLACE COMPLACENCY

Marginalized citizens of the interior and south—especially young people—have raised their expectations high, only to be successively let down over the past five years. Now, many worry that the promised transition has more or less been completed without changing much on the ground, while others cling to the upcoming local elections as a "last hope." The decentralization process required by Tunisia's constitution could open up a new pathway—or it could instead reinforce the existing Ben Ali-era system, expand corruption, and breed even greater popular disaffection.

Many Tunisian officials and donors may want to believe that another interior uprising like that of 2010 is very unlikely to recur because of the democratic gains that Tunisia has made and how much has changed in the country. But those democratic gains, important as they are, are not felt by the residents of the interior and the south of the country. And social and economic inequalities and hopelessness are contributing to ripe conditions for recruiting youth to extremism.

There are no easy fixes for the deep-seated problems of Tunisia's deprived regions. Change is disruptive, and many will fight hard to retain privileges they have enjoyed for decades. Even with the best of intentions and political will, creating more and better jobs in marginalized areas, improving social conditions, and deepening feelings of national belonging will require leadership and the right mix of bold new government policies, private investment, donor support, and civil society contributions over many years. But citizens of these regions fear that the needed political will and intentions are entirely absent and that the changes they seek will not come. As one Tunisian activist told us, "We can be patient for the results, if we see steps are being taken now that will bring results in the future. But we don't see anything."

It would be a mistake to underestimate the dangers of continued disillusionment in the interior and the south should citizens continue to feel so excluded from the politics underway in the capital. In some respects, this dynamic is eerily reminiscent of what we saw in Yemen in 2012 and 2013, where political elites and the international community were too consumed with the formal political processes underway in the capital to appreciate fully unresolved grievances and discontent in other parts of the country, which ultimately would undo all of the painstaking progress made in the capital. Our recent trip in Tunisia underscored the risks of a similar phenomenon unfolding there, in the absence of immediate and sustained efforts by the country's political leaders in Tunis and by the international community alike. Perhaps most important, the citizens of Tunisia's dark regions must themselves be included at the center of shaping and driving the needed changes. As one person told us sadly, "We are Tunisians, too."