

Divided they fall

Frontiers, borderlands and stability in North Africa

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Smuggling has historically been a solution for Maghrebi states, ensuring stability in often marginalised areas. This has changed in recent years, with increasingly securitised policies being put in place. These policies have had a significantly negative impact on borderland communities, leading to heightened unemployment, crime and migration.

Key findings

- ▶ Historically, contraband commerce (the smuggling of food, fuel, clothes and people) has been a solution for Maghrebi states, offering a means of enhancing stability in sometimes fractious borderlands.
- ▶ The security strategies of Maghrebi governments tacitly enabled contraband activities, as long as these dealings remained under the observation of and control of the state.
- ▶ In recent years, Maghrebi government approaches have become increasingly zero-sum and securitised, owing to rising transborder violence and European efforts to buttress border security and limit migration.
- ▶ The Maghreb's borderland communities face growing unemployment, crime and migration as a result of these policies.
- ▶ People living in border regions have sought to adapt and respond, although the informal sector in the region's border areas remains in a state of crisis.

Recommendations

Maghreb states and partner countries should:

- ▶ Understand the social and economic drivers of smuggling in the COVID-19 environment.
- ▶ Ensure that institutional reforms are put in place and develop community policing capacity.
- ▶ Combine border security with bolstering civilian institutions to increase participatory local governance and state-sponsored, cross-border, people-to-people diplomacy and dialogue, rather than relying on security institutions as the dominant state representatives in borderlands.
- ▶ Better combine security and development assistance. Economic development strategies for borderlands should be based on substantive input from borderland communities.
- ▶ Evaluate the border development and security strategies applied so far, with the aim of building on successes and adjusting approaches that have proven inappropriate to the specific context.
- ▶ Coordinate better on border security and sustainable development issues.

Donor states should:

- ▶ Engage with borderland communities and other stakeholders in designing and assessing border security and management initiatives.
- ▶ Routinely review and assess the success of border security programmes.
- ▶ Endeavour to better coordinate aid efforts in Maghreb.

Introduction

Times are bleak along the Algeria–Morocco border. The region has long been economically marginalised, with few livelihood options for youth on either side of the frontier. For decades, however, Algerians and Moroccans leveraged the border itself as a resource, earning their livelihoods by smuggling a variety of goods between the two countries.

In 2014 this began to change. The governments in Algiers and Rabat began to tighten border security, erecting walls and deploying surveillance systems, as smuggling came to be construed as a security threat. Since then smuggling has dropped dramatically, putting large numbers of smugglers out of work. '[State officials] talk about security and sovereignty,' lamented one Moroccan youth, 'but here [on the border] we are just under pressure.'¹

The general increase in border security over the last few years has been magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the spring of 2020, the Algerian government reacted to the spread of the virus by further securitising its borders with Morocco, Tunisia and the Sahelian countries to its south.² Border communities and small-scale smugglers again bore the brunt of the impact.

The Maghreb is, famously, one of the least economically integrated regions in the world

Dynamics on the Algeria–Morocco border are not unique. Across the Maghreb (Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria) borders have hardened in recent years, and the informal movement of goods that long characterised these borders has increasingly collapsed.

These new approaches to border management differ substantially from the traditional border control strategies employed by regional states. Maghrebi states largely tolerated certain illicit flows in order to mitigate social frustration, head off unrest, and gather intelligence on more nefarious cross-border actors.

Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia have construed their hardened border security strategies as a success, regularly releasing information on the arrests of

smugglers and migrants. However, there has been far less discussion and analysis on whether the hardening of borders in the region have in fact enhanced the overall security of citizens and stability of states.

This report analyses the complex and evolving issue. It begins by describing the nature of cross-border flows and movement in the region. Next, it details traditional strategies states have used to address border security, and how those strategies are changing. Finally, it examines how changes in border security in the region have impacted economic opportunity, social relations and conflict in the borderlands. It looks at how borderland communities have adjusted to changing situations, how this has impacted stability in those areas, and whether the downsides outweigh the benefits.

This report forms part of an Institute for Security Studies (ISS) special project on migration and border security issues in North Africa. It builds on reports published by the ISS in 2016 and 2020 on cross-border irregular migration and border security sector reform efforts. The report is based on a large number of interviews conducted between 2016 and 2020 in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia with border community members, smugglers, civil society representatives, government officials and international observers.

The field research was complemented with an analysis of existent literature and media reports on the phenomenon.³ Information released by the governments of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia was also analysed.

It is important to note that such information – especially statistical information – is rarely an objective indicator of change. Seizures in particular fluctuate substantially based on changes in smuggling volume and the intensity of law enforcement, or simply increased transparency by regional governments.

Connective borders and integrative flows

The Maghreb is, famously, one of the least economically integrated regions in the world. Official trade from Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia tends to flow north and south, with relatively little movement east or west.⁴

This can be attributed, in part, to the politics of borders, with many of the region's frontiers closed or movement across them subject to significant restrictions. Algeria's

border with Morocco, for example, has been shuttered since the 1990s, while those with Libya and Mali, were closed in the wake of the attack on the Tiguentourine natural gas facility in 2013. While Tunisia's borders with Libya has never been permanently shut, security fears progressively compressed licit trade since 2011.

Yet this image of the region misses the robust, illicit cross-border commerce and contraband that flows lateral across the Maghreb. Fuel from Algeria is sold in small shops in Tunisia; Algerian goods are readily available in north-western Morocco; kitchenware from Morocco is common in the markets of western Algeria.⁵

The situation here is catastrophic, with a lack of development, employment and agricultural investment

Events at one node in the region's contraband networks can generate impacts far afield. When in 2016 Islamic State raided the Tunisian border city of Ben Guerdane – which hosts important black market currency exchanges, smugglers and money changers – those involved in the informal economy in Algiers reported impacts.⁶

While localised disruptions can affect, and in some cases impede, the region's contraband economy for limited amounts of time, they underscore that Maghrebi states are economically knit together, even if it is from below.

This informal connectivity is not a new phenomenon. Smuggling and contraband have been mainstays of the region for centuries, fuelled by a dearth of economic options, significant price differences between goods on either side of a border, and often-limited state control in borderland areas.⁷ As an educator in Algeria's southern city of Tamanrasset noted:

Smuggling is as old as the hills here. It's all about the people on the other side who need these products to survive a good decent life, a nearly civilised life. The people who smuggle do so to support their families and to live a dignified life in their own country, simply because there are no other work alternatives.⁸

Nonetheless, the specific dynamics driving and enabling smuggling are not static and have increased significantly

over the last decade. The uprisings in Tunisia and Libya in 2011, and the conflict in Mali in 2012, have played an important role in shaping the regional smuggling patterns that define the present moment.

Economic drivers of cross-border contraband

At its core, for most of those involved, smuggling in the Maghreb is an issue of livelihood.⁹ There is a wide variety of participants in the contraband trade, from the leaders of large smuggling networks, to low-level drivers shuttling illicit fuel, to young women porting small amounts of contraband by hand through official border crossings. What unites them is their use of the trade for income.

This income stream is particularly central in the borderlands of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, precisely because these areas are often economically underdeveloped and marginalised.¹⁰ This underdevelopment is, in part, a result of long-term national development policies, which have tended to focus on urban and littoral areas.¹¹

In Tunisia, for example, the country's first two presidents, Habib Bourguiba and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, directed most development focus to the country's coast, with only limited assistance for the border areas or interior governorates.¹² 'Going from border to coast, culturally, economically, socially, it's a different world,' explained one citizen in the Tunisian town of Le Kef. 'There are jobs there, there is comfort.'¹³

Historic underdevelopment remains salient today. Notwithstanding official promises to provide jobs and economic development aid to marginalised areas, the economic situation of many borderland citizens in the Maghreb remains precarious. This is despite the adoption of some formal development plans for these regions.¹⁴

One municipal official in the Tunisian border governorate of Jendouba noted, '[T]he situation here is catastrophic, with a lack of development, employment and agricultural investment and the exploitation of the resources of these regions.'

A similar dynamic exists in Algeria, with interviewees in border *wilayas*, including Tebessa in the east and Tamanrasset in the far south, noting the absence of development and a scarcity of job opportunities.¹⁵

In this context of underdevelopment and limited resources, borderland inhabitants have leverage the border as an economic resource and profited from the

differences between countries in the price of goods and their availability.¹⁶ At least 10 000 people in north-eastern Morocco alone were estimated to be involved in the informal sector in the mid-2010s.¹⁷ An apprentice smuggler in Algeria explained, ‘Smuggling is very important in the livelihood of people. When smuggling increases, life prospers, and with its decrease life shrivels.’¹⁸

The profitability of smuggling differs substantially based on the role of an individual and the type of contraband trade in which they are involved. Drivers shuttling a small amount of petrol, for example, typically only make a small profit. One Tunisian smuggler said he earned about 60 dinars (USD\$21.7) per trip, before expenses, leading him to make numerous trips across the border every day.¹⁹

In Morocco, roadside distributors of petrol earn even less, with one noting in 2014 that he recouped around 152 dirhams (USD\$19) on an average day.²⁰ More recently, as the costs of navigating border infrastructure have increased, profit margins have dried up for such small-scale actors.

Traders and businessmen involved in the sale of smuggled goods are some of the biggest beneficiaries

At the same time, large smuggling networks – including those involved in petrol, tobacco and drugs – can recoup significant profits. In some instances, such as with tobacco and drugs, profit margins are larger, while for goods such as petrol, profitability is linked to the volume of goods moved by the smuggling network. ‘[The] money involved in smuggling has made some people very powerful and influential,’ explained one resident on the Algeria–Morocco border.²¹

For mid-level smugglers and those higher up in the chain, the trade can significantly out-earn other jobs in the borderlands, including in the public sector. ‘A smuggler can provide for his family,’ explained one Algerian smuggler in Oued Souf. ‘His income from smuggling is much more than what a government employee earns. Thus, the purchasing power of a smuggler family is better than that of a government employee.’²²

Because of the relative profitability of smuggling and the role of social networks, involvement in the trade can be multi-generational, with parents and children all involved in contraband economies.²³ However, participation in specific types of trade can vary by generation. In southern Algeria, older generations, for example, have tended to avoid drug trafficking, while youth are increasingly involved in the market.²⁴

Smuggling and contraband also have significant secondary economic impacts on borderland economies, with a wide range of sectors profiting in some way off the trade. Some in the borderlands rent their houses to smugglers, for use as storage points, or their vehicles, for use in transporting contraband.²⁵ A mechanic in Tebessa noted, ‘My income comes from fixing smuggling cars: the more smuggling the more income I get, less smuggling means less income.’²⁶

Traders and businessmen involved in the sale of smuggled goods are some of the biggest beneficiaries. Their sales are fuelled by sales to smugglers, and yet they face limited risk of arrest or prosecution because they are not involved, ultimately, in the physical act of smuggling.²⁷

In some cases, however, the line between a legal business and smuggling can become blurred, with formal businessmen also deeply involved in contraband economies. Some copper smelting in the Tunisian governorate of Kasserine, the product of which is bound for both domestic and international markets, is reportedly linked to cross-border smuggling. Owing to price differentials, Algerian copper is smuggled into Tunisia, smelted, and then resold as a Tunisian product, complete with authentication papers.²⁸

Economic underdevelopment is more than simply a driver of smuggling. It also shapes the decisions and approaches of state officials – both politicians and security force officers – on how to address the issue of contraband. The key concern of state officials has historically tended to be keeping the peace in borderlands, not halting contraband (drugs and weapons excepted).

While this began to change in the wake of the 2011 Tunisian and Libyan uprisings, examples of tolerant government approaches can still be found. In Kasserine, which has been menaced for nearly a decade by groups linked to Islamic State and al-Qaeda, one Tunisian security

force official explained that local law enforcement officers were instructed not to arrest smugglers.²⁹

Among low-level security forces, especially, there is even a degree of sympathy with the economic difficulties faced by borderland populations. 'People who live here are smugglers,' explained a Tunisian security commander in the border governorate of El Kef. 'We cannot be very rigid because these people have no other choice because of the situation in this region.'³⁰

Social and local enablers of smuggling

Contraband economies in the Maghreb's borderlands are fundamentally rooted in social connections and histories of mobilities, as well as connections to place. This is the case both within communities on one or another side of a border and between communities on different sides of a border.³¹

The visibility of these social connections varies at different points and along different borders in the Maghreb. In some locations in far-southern Algeria, family and community connections are robust and overt.³² As one interviewee explained in Tamanrasset:

There is a continuation of tribal relations almost everywhere on the borders. This influence is manifested in compassion and material and human support, and sometimes armed support if need be, to the people on the other side, since these tribes do not recognise or admit these borders on their lands.³³

In other places, such as eastern Morocco and western Algeria, social connections are less visible but often no less robust. Inter-marriage across the border in that area is relatively prevalent, despite the long-term closure of the frontier.³⁴ Similar connections exist on the Tunisia–Algeria border, including cross-border family networks and inter-marriage.³⁵ One activist in western Tunisia noted, 'Here, the line between Algerian and Tunisian is thin.'³⁶

Social connectivity can engage with smuggling in a variety of ways. Cross-border connectivity eases the process of sourcing, moving and selling contraband. Many smuggling networks in the Maghreb operate only within a single country, with goods cached or exchanged on or near the border, and separate networks operating on opposing sides of the frontier.

A key challenge for Tunisian fuel smugglers on the Tunisia–Algeria border, for example, is finding an Algerian source from whom the commodity can be sourced.³⁷ While this challenge differs by commodity and the specificities of each border, having relatives or friends on the other side typically enables smuggling networks to more easily source or sell the goods they move.

Social connectivity is also key within smuggling networks. While barriers to entry for some forms of smuggling are relatively and purposefully low, for other types of contraband, involvement in the trade can be tightly controlled.³⁸ As one Tunisian smuggler explained:

You can't become a big smuggler and have your own circuit and merchandise overnight, you have to go through several stages. The domain is controlled by well-known families and people, and to start you have to know one of them or have worked for them before that.³⁹

Often, though not exclusively, control of the localised smuggling of specific goods stays within families, frequently owing to the profitability of the trade and the legal stakes involved. While smuggling – especially of 'innocent' goods, such as food and fuel – is often officially tolerated, it is still illegal, potentially putting participants at risk.

Control over the localised smuggling of specific goods often stays within families

The financial impact of a seizure can be similarly impactful, especially with cargos of tobacco, fuel or drugs. Trust is thus central to group operation, leading to a focus on family networks. 'Many smugglers involve their sons in their activities, often as scouts, because they do not trust others as there is a lot of money at stake,' explained one Tunisian smuggler.⁴⁰ Sometimes non-family members can join these family networks, but doing so typically involves being vouched for by an established smuggler.⁴¹

Finally, smuggling and contraband along the Maghreb's frontiers is enabled by the geographic embeddedness and mobility of local populations. Familiarity with the local

geography allows smugglers to travel via routes that are less likely to attract security forces' attention. An Algerian customs official, when asked to describe a 'typical smuggler', said that:

... the person must be knowledgeable of the desert and rough terrain, and be able to handle security entities with wits. He is often a person with mixed origins and family in neighbouring countries; this facilitates movement.⁴²

Contraband commodities and flows

Contraband and smuggling in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia have historically encompassed a wide variety of different goods, each necessitating different types of smuggling structures. While a definitive account of all forms of smuggling is beyond the ambit of this report, this section details four particularly important forms: licit commodities (including food and fuel), drugs, weapons and people.

Legal commodity smuggling

Licit consumer goods are one of largest categories of contraband smuggled across Maghrebi borders. It is also the most longstanding, with the trade already solidifying in the first years after the independence of Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria.⁴³ It became more essential, however, in the 1980s, as severe economic difficulties across the region drove some to petty smuggling to survive.⁴⁴

Simultaneously, cuts to government subsidy programmes in Morocco and Tunisia led to stark price differences in consumer goods between the two states and Algeria. In the 1990s, this created a market nearly overnight for Algerian commodities such as flour, pasta and milk powder.⁴⁵

The 2011 revolutions in Tunisia and Libya caused traffic in licit consumer goods to surge, especially on the Tunisia–Algeria and Tunisia–Libya border. The types of goods smuggled were diverse, with an Algerian smuggler recounting that before 2011:

... smuggled products were limited to fuel, diesel and livestock, but [by 2016] all products are smuggled, including car parts, vegetables and fruits, cosmetics, household appliances and electronic equipment.⁴⁶

While diverse, one commonality of the smuggled goods is that many are subsidised by the different states, creating price imbalances. With other goods, price or availability differences are engendered by significant tariffs, taxes and non-tariff barriers when imported from abroad. Smuggling avoids these.⁴⁷

Frequently, these goods are not smuggled the entire way, but legally imported into countries in the Maghreb that have lower import costs before being smuggled into territories with higher import costs or barriers.⁴⁸ Explaining the system, a Tunisian National Guard officer noted that in his area, 'clothing sellers and shops buy goods from Turkey, and move them through Libya or Algeria to avoid paying taxes to the Tunisian state'.⁴⁹

The margins on even licit consumer goods can be significant. Estimates place the average Tunisian custom duties for these goods at approximate 33%, whereas the average custom duty in Libya is only 6%.⁵⁰ Similarly, the two Spanish enclaves in northern Morocco, Ceuta and Melilla, were free ports before Spain joined the European Union (EU) and still have a special tax status. This allows the cheap import of products made in the EU and in a range of third countries.

Consequently, the trade depends on changing tax and tariff regulations in the region, and is threatened by new trade agreements, especially between the countries of the Maghreb, Turkey and East Asia.

Massive differences in import costs in the Maghreb have shaped the structure of smuggling

These differences in import costs have shaped the structure of smuggling. Libya and Spain's enclaves function as 'entrepot states', into which these goods are imported legally and then smuggled into Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco.

While estimates on contraband should be treated with caution, some suggest that up to 50% of goods imported into Melilla were subsequently smuggled into Morocco in the mid-2010s.⁵¹ Smuggling across the borders between the Spanish enclaves and Morocco got increasing media attention in those years, as long lines of traders could be

seen carrying heavy bundles through small turnstiles and into Morocco.⁵²

While such highly visible scenes on the borders of Ceuta and Melilla have become less common, licit commodity smuggling in the Maghreb remains largely atomised and fairly easy for individuals to become involved in.⁵³ Goods are frequently transported across borders in small quantities – carried in bundles between Melilla and Morocco, or transported in cars or suitcases between Libya and Tunisia. This general pattern masks the diversity of actors involved in this type of smuggling, ranging from small-scale independent actors to wholesalers who split up their shipments and employ dozens of transporters.

Textile smuggling presents an example of the diversity of smuggling even in a single category of goods. Many textile smugglers have historically been low-level ‘suitcase traders’, moving second-hand or artisanal clothes and other low-value textiles through licit border crossings.⁵⁴ In other locations, however, the trade has been highly structured and lucrative.

A smuggler on the Tunisia–Algeria border explained that ‘with textiles you need to have money in addition to the knowledge and people who will buy these products here in Tunisia. Certain families have a monopoly on these products.’⁵⁵

Payments to textile transporters in the area, and bribes paid to security forces, are significantly higher than for other smuggled commodities such as fuel. Perhaps because of this, and as opposed to other consumer goods that are bartered at the border, payment for textiles smuggled through Tebessa and Kasserine reportedly must be made in euros.⁵⁶

Few of those trading in consumer goods see their activities as particularly deviant; a view often shared by government officials. Rather, the ‘petite commerçants’ typically view their activities as generally licit even if technically illegal.⁵⁷ A young Tunisian smuggler explained his perception of his activities:

What we do is not really illegal trafficking. We enter [Algeria] in regularised ways with our passports and all our papers. And we buy things there that are expensive [in Tunisia], like fuel or food. Some days we make two or three trips.⁵⁸

Few face any significant social taboos as a result of their activities. Borderland communities construe it as simply another form of trade, even if it technically runs foul of some laws.

Within licit commodity smuggling in the Maghreb, the trade in contraband food is a useful focus. The drivers of food and agricultural product smuggling are diverse, and include price differences created by subsidies and taxes, scarcities, and food and agricultural regulations.

This diversity of drivers has also led to a diversity of routes and corridors. There is no borderland within the greater Maghreb where food smuggling is absent. At times, different foodstuffs are smuggled in different directions in the same borderland. On the Tunisia–Libya border, for example, couscous and pasta have frequently been taken from Tunisia into Libya, with cheese or bananas moved from Libya into Tunisia.

The directionality of the flow of foodstuff is often changeable, depending on prices and subsidy regimes. More strikingly, olive oil that is produced in Tunisia is formally exported to Libya, where it is sold at a cheap price, subsidised by the Libyan state, and promptly smuggled back into Tunisia.⁵⁹

Payments to textile smugglers and security force bribes are much higher than for other commodities

Aside from its omnipresence, food smuggling in the region deserves additional attention for a range of reasons. It can provide relief, support livelihoods, and be crucial to the survival of communities. Communities in northern Mali have at times been directly dependent on smuggled foodstuffs from Algeria.⁶⁰ Because of this trade, some food prices in remote parts of northern Mali are lower than in the Malian capital of Bamako.⁶¹

However, the ubiquitous trade in food does present certain risks. Agricultural goods may have health and hygiene issues if livestock is smuggled in a way that subverts health regulations, or if expired foodstuffs are smuggled and re-labelled. The latter has been common on the border between the Spanish enclaves and Morocco.

More problematically, when border communities come to depend on smuggling to get food, they are placed in a vulnerable position if those smuggling routes are interrupted or cut. In such circumstances border communities may find it difficult to buy food, and potentially become food insecure.

Another key type of licit commodity smuggled in the Maghreb is fuel, primarily gasoline and diesel. By a range of metrics it is and has been one of the most important types of goods smuggled through the region in the past four decades. These metrics include its sheer quantity, both in weight and monetary value, and its effect on labour market in borderlands and consumption patterns in the region.

When border communities depend on smuggling to get food, they're placed in a vulnerable position if smuggling routes are interrupted

The trade in contraband fuel emerged more recently than that in consumer goods, with border communities flagging the 1990s and 2000s as the era when it became economically important.⁶² By the early 2000s accounts of the Morocco–Algeria borderland suggested thousands of smugglers and vehicles were moving fuel across the frontier, with trade already well established on the Tunisia–Libya border.⁶³

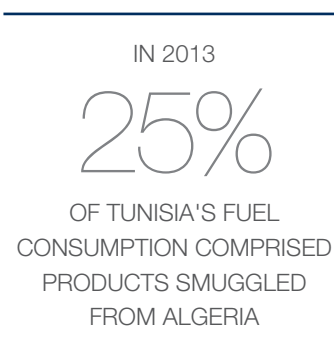
In 2004, however, it expanded significantly on the Tunisia–Algeria frontier, with smugglers reportedly learning of more efficient methods of smuggling in bulk from those who had operated on the Morocco–Algeria border.⁶⁴

A rise in petrol prices in the 2000s and early 2010s increased the size of the contraband fuel market. In 2013, for example, 265 million litres were reportedly smuggled from one Algerian *wilaya* into Morocco.⁶⁵ The same year a study suggested that 25% of Tunisia's domestic fuel consumption was made up of products smuggled from Algeria.⁶⁶

Reflecting the size of the trade, the Algerian minister of interior noted publicly that at least a quarter of Algerian petrol stocks were being smuggled to neighbouring countries.⁶⁷ A similar boom occurred in Libya in the wake of that country's revolution and the collapse of central government control. Some 495 million litres, or another 17% of Tunisia's domestic consumption, was estimated to have been smuggled from Libya in 2015.⁶⁸

As will be discussed in a later section, the sharp rise in fuel smuggling led to a significant crackdown, especially by Algeria, which perceived the trade as siphoning off some €2 billion per year from state coffers.⁶⁹ This crackdown has largely succeeded in halting fuel trafficking along the Algeria–Morocco frontier.⁷⁰

In contrast, fuel smuggling along the Algeria–Tunisia border has continued largely unimpeded. Smuggling of the commodity at Tunisia's border with



Libya has experienced serious crises in recent years but remains significant. Overall, in Tunisia the trade is ubiquitous, with large numbers of young men involved in various stages of the trade, and women and children involved in distribution.⁷¹

‘There’s a small village [here in Jendouba],’ explained a municipal official, ‘where there are Mercedes cars just equipped for the trafficking of fuel, and unemployed young people who work the cars; it’s become their daily life. These young people have no other hope than smuggling and selling gasoline and diesel and giving bribes to customs.’⁷²

The proximate driver of fuel smuggling is price differences across the Maghreb, driven by diverging subsidy policies.⁷³ The primary smuggling corridors lie between the region’s hydrocarbon-rich countries, Algeria and Libya, which significantly subsidise fuel sales, and Tunisia and Morocco, where licit prices are much higher. While fuel costs approximately US\$0.11 per litre in Libya, for example, it is approximately US\$0.72 in neighbouring Tunisia.

Fuel costs approximately US\$0.11 per litre in Libya, compared to about US\$0.72 in Tunisia

The process of fuel smuggling in the Maghreb is diverse, involving both small-scale traders and vendors, and larger networks. Small-scale traders appear to be most common in Tunisia, with fuel being bought at licit stations in Libya or Algeria. It is then smuggled either across formal border crossings in oversized tanks or through the borderlands on 4x4s, motorbikes and donkeys.

Much like smugglers involved in consumer goods, small-scale fuel smugglers say there is a significant difference between their activities and those of larger smuggling networks. The cost of low-level involvement is not particularly significant.⁷⁴ Describing his entry into smuggling, one Tunisian explained:

I started with my brother-in-law, when he came one day and told me he was going to buy a ‘diesel car’. An old Mercedes, for example, with a large trunk and modifications is not too expensive, around

4 000 dinars [US\$1 450]. So even if it is confiscated, the risk is not great.⁷⁵

He drew a sharp distinction between his operations and those of larger, more structured networks. ‘We small [fuel] smugglers enter Algeria in a regular and legal way. As for the big smugglers, they do not pass through customs, they have big DMAX trucks to pass the border via dangerous roads and mountainous areas.’⁷⁶

Larger networks operate in a more industrial manner, with separate networks operating and cooperating on both sides of a given frontier. Such networks often truck fuel to a border region from the interior of either Algeria or Libya. An Algerian mechanic familiar with the process explained, ‘The first phase of smuggling occurs between internal *wilayas* and Tebessa. Fuel then goes to Bir El-Ater, Om Ali, Bekkaria and El-Houijbat. Then it is moved to the border.’⁷⁷

Close to the border the fuel is cached in cisterns before being divided into jerry cans and loaded onto pick-up trucks for the actual smuggling process.⁷⁸ Large smuggling networks, which handle the logistics of transportation, typically sub-contract the fuel’s physical transportation. As one borderland youth in Kasserine explained, ‘The big smugglers handle the whole circuit, it’s not they who carry the goods. Rather, it’s a small smuggler who drives the car and is paid for his services as a carrier.’⁷⁹

The larger smugglers do, however, handle interactions with the authorities in order to reduce risk. When large shipments of fuel are being dispatched across the border, scout cars are often sent to check for security force patrols and to bribe officers at checkpoints to allow the shipment to move unmolested.⁸⁰

Fuel is then typically sold at the informal roadside fuel stations found across the Maghreb’s borderlands. While such distribution is ubiquitous, it rarely leads to a legal response from the authorities. ‘The smuggler sells the goods to these people and these [distributors] only sell it onwards after,’ noted a Tunisian security official. ‘We have guidelines not to arrest the diesel and gasoline dealers.’⁸¹

This diffuse smuggling and distribution structure is one of the main reasons why fuel smuggling in the Maghreb has been highly labour intensive, and has provided income streams to relatively significant numbers of individuals in the borderlands. In Morocco the Association for the

Protection of Oriental Consumers (APCO) estimated that in 2013, 3 000 to 5 000 Moroccan families were involved in the smuggling of Algerian fuel, although it is likely that this has since dropped substantially.⁸² The World Bank estimated that in 2015 the smuggling networks transporting fuel from Libya to Tunisia consisted of 5 600 ‘employees’.⁸³

Narcotics trafficking

The smuggling of consumer goods, food and fuel through the Maghreb falls into a grey zone between technical illegality and practices that are socially, and often officially, accepted.⁸⁴ Not so with the traffic in narcotics, which is both criminalised and treated as a serious offense by authorities.

Despite its illegality, however, trafficking in narcotics has surged over the past decade, with smuggling routes for cannabis resin (kif), diverted pharmaceuticals and harder drugs such as cocaine now snaking across the region. These developments, in turn, have impacted the ability of governments to respond, as well as raising significant concerns around corruption, addiction and empowered criminal groups.

The most common narcotic moved across the Maghreb is cannabis resin, which has deep historic roots in the region.⁸⁵ This growing cannabis trafficking stems from Morocco’s continued importance as a production point, coupled with heightened border security between it and Spain, traffickers’ primary entrance point to Europe.

Morocco is one of the biggest cultivation zones for cannabis globally, with its farmers estimated to produce at least 35 000 metric tonnes annually, which is then processed into 700 or more tonnes of resin.⁸⁶ Between the 1960s and the 2000s, most resin produced in Morocco was smuggled north across the Alboran Sea and Strait of Gibraltar to Spain, before being moved to major consumption markets in northern Europe.⁸⁷

This pattern of smuggling began to change in the 2000s, after Spain implemented a heightened border surveillance system that significantly increased the identification and interception of cannabis shipments. In response, trafficking networks altered their operations to shuttle cannabis resin laterally across the Maghreb, with shipments then moving northward to Europe from littoral areas in Algeria, Tunisia and Libya.⁸⁸

Cannabis trafficking in the Maghreb is organised by a relatively small number of powerful and highly profitable smuggling networks. In practice, these groups subcontract significantly to local smuggling organisations to move the narcotic across borders and through the territories of the different states. Such locally rooted networks are essential, owing to their knowledge of local smuggling routes and relationships with local security force officials (i.e. knowing which officers can be bribed).⁸⁹

Often, such subcontracted trafficking groups develop first in the contraband trade of illicit commodity goods, before becoming involved in drug trafficking. As with other forms of contraband, the groups are often bound by familial or other strong social connections. ‘There is multi-generational involvement in the Algeria–Tunisia drug trade,’ explained a Tunisian government official. ‘It’s popular in part because it is seen as easy money.’⁹⁰

The most common narcotic moved across the Maghreb is cannabis resin, which has deep historic roots here

Diverted pharmaceuticals – including brands such as Rivotril or Tramadol – have risen in prominence over the last decade in the Maghreb, and are now a near-ubiquitous feature of trafficking across the region. Most are destined for growing consumption markets in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. Algeria alone seized 1 970 766 doses in the first 11 months of 2019.⁹¹ Morocco and Tunisia both report significant and routine seizures, though neither country provides regularly updated information.⁹²

In its organisation and operation, pharmaceutical trafficking has significant similarities with the smuggling of consumer goods and fuel. Most of the drugs are legal, though controlled, often requiring a doctor’s prescription. The trafficking cycle thus starts at pharmacies or hospitals, with traffickers sourcing prescriptions – sometimes via bribes to doctors or payments to patients with legitimate prescriptions – or buying the drugs from corrupt employees.⁹³

Because of the relatively limited barriers to entry, the trafficking networks involved are typically small and

ad hoc, with little indication of the highly structured organisation found in the cannabis resin trade. While some diverted pharmaceuticals are sourced and then distributed to consumers in a single country, there is a robust trade across the Maghreb's borders.

On the closed Algeria–Morocco border, Rivotril is covertly moved across the frontier and then down to major urban areas on the Moroccan coast.⁹⁴ On Tunisia's borders with Libya and Algeria, in contrast, most of the trade occurs via formal border crossings, with strips of pills hidden in passenger cars or hand luggage.⁹⁵

Finally, cocaine trafficking has increased significantly in the Maghreb since 2015. Authorities in Morocco and Algeria have made a number of large seizures, including one shipment in Morocco that totalled nearly 2.5 tonnes.⁹⁶ Mostly, such seizures have involved trafficking by sea, with North African states used as staging points by Latin American trafficking organisations supplying cocaine to the European market.

Most weapons trafficked across Maghrebi borders involve shotguns for hunting, not weapons of war

One risk of cocaine trafficking is that it could have a significant impact on governance and corruption in the Maghreb, with some court cases implicating high-level officials or their family members in the trade. However, because the trade is so lucrative, it is also tightly compartmentalised, with little evidence that significant numbers of Maghrebis are involved. This has limited the impact of the trade on the structure of smuggling in the region thus far.

This could be changing, however, as increased cocaine trafficking through the region could create a consumer market for the drug. There is some evidence of small, kilo-sized consignments being moved across the region's borders, though to date such seizures remain relatively modest.

Weapons trafficking

Despite significant concerns among regional governments and the international community about rising weapons trafficking through the Maghreb, the

trade is also fairly modest.⁹⁷ Most weapons and ammunition trafficked across Maghrebi borders involve shotguns used for hunting, rather than weapons of war.

Nonetheless, there has been the occasional seizure of military grade weaponry – either in transit or in caches, especially during the early years of the Libyan conflict. This underscores the reality that, given the fragility of states such as Libya and Mali, the rise of such trade remains a preoccupying possibility.

Most weapons seizures in the region occur along either the Tunisia–Libya or the Tunisia–Algeria frontiers. At both, weapons trafficking takes place in both directions, through formal border crossings and more clandestinely between border crossings. It primarily involves shotguns and shotgun shells, mainly imported from Turkey to Libya and destined for the interior of Tunisia and Algeria.⁹⁸

There is also a small artisanal weapons industry in the border areas of Algeria and Tunisia that feeds into regional trafficking patterns. This also mostly involves shotguns and shotgun shells.⁹⁹

While most traffic in arms is limited and does not pose much of a threat to regional states, more serious weaponry is also trafficked across the region's frontiers. Tunisia's National Guard discovered five weapons caches around Ben Guerdane in 2016. These contained automatic weapons, rocket-propelled grenades and two portable anti-aircraft missiles – the latter a rare and worrying evolution for the area.¹⁰⁰

Algeria too regularly finds weapons caches, mainly in its far-southern regions of Tamarasset and Illizi. Between 2016 and 2019 more than 100 weapons caches were uncovered, including hundreds of firearms, rockets and ammunition.¹⁰¹ It is unclear whether the weapons were intended for further trafficking and use within Algeria, or destined for movement south into Mali.

Human smuggling and trafficking

Human smuggling and trafficking is an important type of smuggling throughout the Maghreb. The most well-known movement of people occurs via Libya, with migrants entering via the country's southern border

before moving north towards embarkation points on the Libyan coast.

Since the mid-2010s a small number of migrants (both Maghrebi and foreigners) have also transited from Tunisia to Libya in an effort to migrate to Europe.¹⁰² The migrants would arrive in Tunis by air before moving down the coast to Ben Guerdane and across into Libya at the Ras Jdir border crossing.¹⁰³

Contraband and smuggling has occurred not despite states but with them

This flow of clandestine migrants from Tunisia to Libya was always comparatively small, and the combination of increased border security and the COVID-19 pandemic largely halted it by the mid-summer of 2020. The most significant flow occurs across Algeria's southern borders. Over the past decade a significant number of sub-Saharan migrants have crossed into the country from Mali or Niger, often, but not exclusively, with the aid of smugglers.¹⁰⁴

'They are brought to the border by African smugglers,' explained one Algerian journalist. 'Another smuggler will be waiting there to move them through Algeria.'¹⁰⁵ The migrants are often transported first to the southern city of Tamanrasset before some move north towards Algeria's large coastal cities.

Prior to the 2010s, a significant number of migrants who arrived in Algeria and planned to move on to Europe would do so rapidly, shuttling across the border into Morocco and then up to embarkation points on the Moroccan coast. The growing securitisation of land borders, and the attendant increase in smuggling costs, in the mid-2010s, however, changed this pattern of mobility, with such migrants remaining longer in Algeria.

As one international official in Morocco explained, 'Some who had in mind to go north to Libya or Tunisia and cross in the north, now define themselves as being in long-term transit in Algeria, where they have installed themselves – working in the black market.'¹⁰⁶

Nonetheless, the ultimate aim of transit migrants in Algeria is to reach Europe, leading most to eventually

attempt to be smuggled across the Algeria–Morocco border. The northern section of the border is a particularly important zone for such crossings, mainly in and around the Algerian town of Maghnia and the Moroccan city of Oujda, and to the south near Figuig.

Most crossings are organised by sub-Saharan networks, with the actual work of smuggling subcontracted to Moroccans and Algerians from the borderlands.¹⁰⁷ Once in Morocco, the migrants transit to points on the Alboran Sea or near Tangier to make the crossing into Spain.

There is also some human smuggling of Maghrebi that occurs latterly across the Maghreb. Mostly, this has entailed Moroccans, Algerians and Tunisians transiting to Libya to either search for work or embark clandestinely for Europe.¹⁰⁸ Many of the crossings between Morocco and Algeria take place close to Oujda-Maghnia, with costs for Moroccan migrants usually ranging from €10–20.¹⁰⁹

Migrants are next moved to Algiers and then south to the city of Debdeb, where they cross into Libya. Some migration also takes place via far-southern Tunisia, with the Tunisian military, which patrols the area, reporting some encounters.

Border regions knit together by contraband

For more than a half century the borderlands of the Maghreb have thus been knit together by a robust and widespread cross-border contraband trade. Rather than being a deviant aspect of the region's political economy, contraband and smuggling have long been part of livelihood strategies in regions that are otherwise economically marginalised and often politically restive.

This has not necessarily made them universally accepted. Many borderland residents draw distinctions between the social permissibility of different types of smuggling based on the goods and profits involved, and the existence of economic alternatives.¹¹⁰

However, focusing only on the economic drivers of smuggling and the social factors enabling it misses the important role that Maghrebi states have played in enabling aspects of the trade. Contraband and smuggling has occurred not despite states but with them, with the governments of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia recouping significant if often-unrecognised security benefits from the activity.

Control and prevent

It is tempting to view the contraband and smuggling along the Maghreb's borders as the result of faulty security infrastructure; an issue to be addressed with greater state capacity or more robust surveillance and technological tools. This, however, misses the role of the region's governments in allowing this state of affairs.

For decades a tolerant official approach to contraband and state involvement in the structuring and regulation of smuggling have ensured stability in border areas. Economically marginalised, often restive borderland communities have been provided with a means of earning a livelihood, which in turn has diverted political frustrations.¹¹¹ Tunisian government officials have stressed that tacit acceptance of contraband was 'the only way to ensure the political control of [border] populations'.¹¹²

Since the revolutions in Tunisia and Libya approaches to border security have begun to change. Cross-border terrorist raids – such as the 2013 attack on the Tiguertourine natural gas facility in Algeria, or the 2016 raid on Ben Guerdane – have led regional governments to re-evaluate their border security approaches.

As a result, fortification and securitisation programmes have significantly stymied informal cross-border mobility. Donors – notably the United States (US), the EU and individual European states – have aided and shaped this process.

The following section details how Maghreb states historically approached the challenge of border security, and how tolerant approaches to border permeability fit within their approaches. It also identifies how these approaches have changed since 2011, and the form of securitisation now increasingly found on the borders of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia.

Border marches and grand bargains

Since independence in the 1950s and 1960s, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia have faced the challenge of how best to control extremely long, often-remote frontiers with limited security forces and equipment. Speaking of the northern Tunisia–Algeria border, which has been comparatively better secured than most others, a Tunisian security force official explained that 'there is a minimum of 7 to 10 km [between border posts], and at each post there are only 15 officers.'¹¹³

In rural and remote areas in Algeria's deep south, or on Tunisia's border with Libya, state presence is often significantly more sparse.¹¹⁴ This geography and the difficult decisions that it has forced in terms of capacity have shaped the strategies developed and employed by the region's states.

Another factor that determined how states approached their borderlands was the function of law enforcement. For much of the period after independence, security agencies in the region focused less on upholding the rule of law than on mitigating threats to those who ruled.

Borderlands were salient to this, as patterns of instability and unrest in the region have generally, though not always, emerged first in rural and remote zones before spreading to the coastal urban centres that were, and are, the bedrock of state power in the Maghreb.¹¹⁵ For state officials, a key part of forces' mission in the borderlands was thus to limit unrest and instability lest it spread.

Terrorist raids have led regional governments to re-evaluate their border security approaches

A final factor shaping approaches to border security in the Maghreb has been the general inviolability of borders. Though Morocco and Algeria contest their shared frontier, fighting a war over duelling territorial claims and engaging in decades of low-level skirmishes and political antagonism, their conflict stands in contrast to the norm. The region has seen relatively little territorial conflict between states, with the border lines existent at independence largely forming the current frontiers.

Cross-border raids or infiltration by terrorist groups have been more common, especially along the Tunisia–Algeria border, with a number of incidents in the 1990s and 2000s.¹¹⁶ Combatting such irregular threats however, necessitated developing robust borderland intelligence networks and winning the trust and support of local people.

As a result of these dynamics, Algeria and Tunisia, and to a lesser degree Morocco, developed and deployed border security systems predicated on a pragmatic

engagement with borderland populations. This engagement was intelligence focused and designed as layers rather than lines in the sand.

In effect, these policies resulted in the region's borderlands becoming 'marches': fracture zones where cross-border intermixing and mobility were common, and where state presence differed in approach and impact from other areas of the country.

Pragmatic bargaining on smuggling

Focused primarily on socio-political stability in the borderlands, the governments of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia came to view smuggling across their frontiers as a solution. By offering livelihoods to the local population, smuggling limited political unrest and tension, turned disaffected youth away from more dangerous and politically volatile pursuits and provided incomes to elite networks.¹¹⁷ Speaking in the present day, a Tunisian security official illustrated the historic approach to the issue, noting:

When I catch a fuel smuggler, I make a report and then I release him. I know he has nothing else to do, and it's better for everyone if he stays in this kind of smuggling and under my supervision, rather than leaning towards terrorism, or gun and drug trafficking.¹¹⁸

When authorities moved against smuggling, they often faced significant pushback and local unrest. An example of the potential explosiveness of counter-smuggling campaigns arose in January 1984 in the northern Moroccan city of Nador. Government efforts to halt smuggling between Nador and Melilla led to widespread rioting, forcing the government to deploy a considerable number of troops and attack helicopters to regain control.¹¹⁹

This accommodative approach did not entail acceptance of all forms of smuggling at all times. Rather, contraband was divided into categories. Otherwise licit commercial goods, food and fuel were typically viewed as non-threatening to state control. Those involved in smuggling them would be buffered from prosecution in return for routine payments to security force officials and the provision of information on terrorists and the traffickers of more dangerous commodities.

Other forms of contraband, including drugs, arms and, to a lesser degree, humans, were construed as more threatening to the state and therefore prohibited. Central to this approach was the surveillance and control by security forces of much of the informal activity occurring along the frontiers. This also enabled officials to shape the smuggling ecosystem in the borderlands and so limit threats.¹²⁰ As one anti-terrorism expert explained in 2016:

The smuggling networks in Algeria are highly surveilled by the security services. If you work with one of the networks, and the security services find out you have helped someone reach DAECH [Islamic State], the entire network is taken down. The managers of Algerian smuggling networks are cautious and work hard to avoid associations with terrorism.¹²¹

The existence of such 'informal authoritarian bargains' between borderland populations and officials did not mean the complete cessation of law enforcement activity.¹²² Officials routinely arrested smugglers and seized their products. However, the aim of these crackdowns was not always to halt smuggling or uphold the rule of law. Rather, they were frequently undertaken to limit the power of smuggling networks in terms of size and geographic scope, lest they begin to pose a political challenge. They were also sometimes aimed at advancing a narrative of official action against the trade propagated at the national and often international level.

By offering livelihoods to the local population, smuggling limited political unrest and tension

In some instances, the bargain between state security forces and smugglers went beyond simple laissez-faire. In Tunisia, for example, during the Ben Ali era, there was close control over who was able to smuggle goods across the Algeria–Tunisia border, with significant profits flowing back to individuals linked to the ruling family.¹²³ For states, in effect, borders and cross-border contraband were opportunities to solidify stability in marginalised, restive areas at little cost. This enabled governments to focus on development and on more politically and economically important areas along the coast.

Intelligence focused

Another commonality of border security strategies across Maghrebi states was a focus on intelligence, with an emphasis on recruiting networks of informants. In part, this reliance on human intelligence was a manifestation of the limited technical intelligence collection and surveillance systems of regional states.¹²⁴ However, it also reflected the nature of the threats, which typically involved irregular actors such as terrorists or insurgents.

As noted earlier, smugglers and their native borderland communities were crucial parts of such informant networks. The cross-border social connectivity of borderland communities allowed for information to be collected on emergent threats and dynamics on the other side of a frontier.

Another commonality of border security strategies was a focus on intelligence and recruiting networks of informants

Security forces could get the cooperation of potential informants not only by making appeals based on national interest but also by offering tangible rewards such as the ability to smuggle without fear of arrest. In addition, smugglers and communities were held responsible if issues emerged in their area that they did not report.¹²⁵ This system worked relatively well for decades, allowing state officials to maintain a robust, if sometimes fallible, system of surveillance across the borderlands.

Fundamentally, security forces could extend their reach into rural and remote areas despite limited capacity at times. They could trust, as one Moroccan official said, that communities would ‘keep a close watch on the contraband that comes across the border’.¹²⁶

The marches: a multi-layered system

While the specifics of border security approaches historically differ between the region’s states, there have been, and continue to be, a number of operational commonalities. Traditionally, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia have all employed multi-layered security approaches on their borders, with different types of security and military forces operating in different areas.

In Morocco the military (Forces Armées Royales) and the paramilitary Auxiliary Forces (Forces Auxiliaires Marocaines) are based on and patrol along the frontier, with Border Police (Police Aux Frontières) posted at border crossings.¹²⁷ Behind these units, the Gendarmerie (Gendarmerie Royale) and Customs units patrol and operate checkpoints in a second band.¹²⁸

Tunisia has a similar system with the country’s National Guard (Garde nationale) – a civilian law enforcement unit, nominally responsible for securing the frontiers, outside of a military exclusion zone in the deep south. Behind this layer is a second, patrolled by the National Guard and Tunisian military.

SINCE

2011

BORDER SECURITY
SHIFTED FROM PATROLS
TO FORTIFICATION
AND MILITARISATION

More military forces are based in a third zone, furthest inland from the border, responsible for intervening in any serious situations in the first two layers.¹²⁹

Describing the importance of the mixed system, a National Guard officer noted that, ‘even with joint patrols in some places, the presence of the National Guard is mandatory, because military forces don’t have the authority to arrest civilians’.¹³⁰

In Algeria, the multi-layered system is also used, though the role of the military has been more opaque. Nominally, the first layer consists of the Gendarmerie Border Guards (Gendarmerie Gardes-Frontières) in the areas between border crossings, and the Frontier and Immigration Police (Direction de la Police des Frontières) at border crossings.¹³¹

An armed Customs force operates in a second layer, which stretches between 30 and 400 km back from the border.¹³² Algeria’s military operates in both layers, although its focus on the borders has nominally been less on lawbreakers and more on national security threats.

Within all of the above systems are a number of different forces belonging to the ministries of defence, interior and finance. Crucially, in nearly all cases the first-order responsibility for border security has rested with civilian security forces, even if, as in Morocco and Algeria, these have been functionally co-deployed with military personnel.

Fears of terrorist infiltration have been a main driver of shifting policy since 2011

Because of the different operational mandates and legal authorities of the forces along the frontier, such as arrest authority, the multi-layered system requires a high degree of coordination between forces to be successful. In practice, such coordination does not always occur, impacting the broader security effort. This multi-layered system essentially has given Maghrebi security and defence forces security in depth. Even if human intelligence networks in the borderlands fail to report threats, the layers of security forces between the

borderlands and key urban areas are typically effective in mitigating risks.

From grand bargains to lines in the sand

While not always foolproof, the system detailed above managed to limiting cross-border threats for a significant period of time, and provided some form of – albeit limited and often inequitable – economic stability in borderlands. However, since 2011 strategic approaches to border security in the Maghreb have begun to change. Rather than border marches, the evolving structures focus on fortification and militarisation.

This reflects a change in how the governments of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia view borders, with cross-border mobility now increasingly framed as a major security threat. As an Algerian non-governmental organisation (NGO) worker explained, ‘Between 2011 and 2015 it was easy, and the security forces handled smuggling with lenience, but as of 2016, things have become harder.’¹³³

There are three main drivers of shifting regional views on borders and border security strategy. The first is the conflict and state fragility in Libya and Mali (and to a lesser degree other Sahelian states) since 2011. Libya, in particular, is perceived by Tunisia and Algeria as lacking functional control over its borders and much of its national territory, increasing the risk that terrorist groups can organise there before targeting other Maghrebi states.

Fears of terrorist infiltration are the second main driver of shifting policy. Violent terrorist raids have been launched from Libyan territory into both Algeria and Tunisia. The former came under attack at the Tiguentourine natural gas facility in 2013 and the latter in 2016, when the Islamic State raided Ben Guerdane.

Both states also have had to deal with protracted terrorist insurgencies, with Tunisia facing a localised conflict with small groups of al-Qaeda and Islamic State fighters along its border with Algeria.¹³⁴ The conflict is seen as both propelled and enabled to a degree by the cross-border movement of militants, and has impacted the Tunisian security forces’ activity in the borderlands and how they police smuggling.

‘We can’t take the risk of patrolling at night,’ explained one officer. ‘Your car might blow up or you might be

killed by terrorists. The smugglers are well aware of this situation and they use it to their advantage.¹³⁵

Morocco has been less affected by challenges resulting from Libyan and Malian state fragility, and the threat posed by cross-border terrorist groups in the Maghreb. Most terrorism incidents are domestic in origin. However, Morocco has also begun to change its border security strategy, seemingly owing both to concerns about how the situation on its borders may evolve in future and to keep up with Algeria's border security build-up.

The third driver is the growing pressure from the EU to tighten border security between Maghrebi states. EU efforts to buttress border security in the region began in the 1990s, with agreements made with Tunisia and Morocco in particular. These aimed to develop a layered border security approach in the Mediterranean basin.¹³⁶

These European efforts have increased substantially since the 2015 surge in migration from Libya. The EU in particular has invested tens of millions of euros in border security strengthening and capacity-building programmes in Morocco and Tunisia.¹³⁷

Driven by these factors, the practice of border security in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia is changing. Three key elements set it apart from that used in previous years:

- Emphasis on fixed border defences
- Militarisation
- Zero-sum approach to cross-border movement

Rising walls and growing surveillance

The most visible manifestation of changing border security approaches in the Maghreb is the construction of border walls by Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. Some border fortifications have existed since the 1970s, notably the 2 500 km berm wall constructed by Morocco to prevent infiltration by the Polisario Front. However, there has generally been a dearth of structures along Maghrebi borders specifically intended to prevent or impede movement.

This began to change in 2013, when Algeria began constructing a ditch and berm system along the Moroccan border close to the town of Maghnia. The ditch and berm system, while basic, is effective in constraining vehicles' mobility. It involves a 6 m-wide

and 6 m-deep ditch, with the excavated materiel piled behind the ditch to form a berm.¹³⁸

Since 2013 Algeria has expanded these fortifications to parts of its borders with Mali, Niger and Libya.¹³⁹ Migrants and smugglers continue to move across these fortifications on foot, but a lot of cross-border vehicle traffic is now being channelled either to extremely remote areas that are not fortified or through formal border crossings.¹⁴⁰ There are also rumours of Algerian construction along the Tunisian border, with little information on the status or impact of that project.

Small-scale smugglers have been most affected by border fortifications across the Maghreb

Algeria has also increased physical surveillance systems along its border, investing heavily in ground radar systems, cameras and motion sensors.¹⁴¹ In addition, it has developed a domestic drone programme, with craft able to both monitor its borders and stage attacks if needed.¹⁴²

Morocco too has begun to erect fortifications. In response to Algerian construction, in 2013 it began to construct a barrier along its northern border. Eventually planned to run for 140 km, encompassing the border areas of Berkane, Jerada and Oujda, the barrier is officially aimed at impeding human smuggling.

In Tunisia the most prominent border infrastructure is a 200 km ditch and berm system, similar to those built by Algeria. Started in the aftermath of the 2015 Sousse terrorist attack, the barrier stretches between two official border crossings, from Ras Jdir to just south of Dehiba, and was largely completed by February 2017. With support from international partners, Tunisia has also installed an electronic surveillance system along the barrier.

Rising border fortifications across the Maghreb have had a noticeable impact on smuggling, shaping who is involved. Small-scale smugglers, often those involved in licit commodity trafficking and fuel smuggling, have seemingly been the most impacted.

More criminalised economies, including traffickers of cannabis resin and cocaine, have seen a far more limited

impact. One informal trader in western Algeria, discussing the effect of the barriers on the border, noted, ‘Smuggling provided for thousands of families, but no longer now. Now, the only thing that remains is trafficking in drugs.’¹⁴³

Rise of ‘military first’ on the border

The emerging border security paradigm in the Maghreb is much more focused on a military response. As noted, military forces in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia have always played a role in border security. However, this role was normally secondary, with civilian security units tasked with taking the lead on most issues along the frontier. However, as cross-border terrorism has come to the fore as a national security concern, Rabat, Algiers and Tunis are increasingly turning to the military to control the region’s frontiers.

In Tunisia, for example, a 3 km-wide military exclusion zone was decreed along the Tunisia–Libya border in 2013.¹⁴⁴ Within this zone, as well as another on the Algerian border and a third in the country’s far south, the Tunisian army now operates as the frontline border security force, with arrest and operational support from the National Guard.¹⁴⁵

Military forces along the frontier have been progressively reinforced and become increasingly active in targeting and attempting to halt smuggling rather than manage it, as was the old strategy. This growing involvement of the military on the border has placed it, for the first time, in a position where it must limit the livelihoods of an important subset of borderland citizens.

This, in turn, has impacted local perceptions of the military, which had been regarded as the most trustworthy security force in Tunisia. In some cases, as in the summer of 2020, frustration with the military on the Tunisia–Libya border has led to multi-day mass protests outside army barracks.¹⁴⁶

Algeria too has turned to its military, deploying tens of thousands of soldiers to its eastern border with Libya and southern borders with Niger and Mali.¹⁴⁷ Significant military infrastructure has been constructed in border areas, including airbases and other surveillance points.

There is seemingly less community backlash in Algeria, although some in the far south have noted concerns about the military’s expanding role. As a community leader in Tamanrasset said, ‘The army has seized the

prerogatives of the customs and border guards, rather than limiting itself to assigned constitutional functions, the protection of national soil and countering terrorism.’¹⁴⁸

Zero-sum approach to border security

The militarisation of border security has changed the risks associated with smuggling, contraband and informal cross-border mobility in the Maghreb. Increasingly, a zero-sum approach has come to the fore, which places a premium on halting rather than managing smuggling, and sanctions the use of violence toward that end.

Violence has, of course, always been a facet of interactions between security force agents and smugglers in the borderlands. However, along most of the region’s borders it was rare and primarily intended to sanction smugglers should they try to avoid or subvert the informal understandings in place. One smuggler on the Tunisia–Algeria border explained violence as arising mainly ‘when [smugglers] don’t pay the [security] patrols their passage fees’.¹⁴⁹

The military is being asked to limit the livelihoods of an important subset of borderland citizens

However, violence is increasingly being used to halt smuggling in full. Tunisian military units are more likely than National Guard officers to shoot at smugglers, often in an attempt to stop convoys. This has led to a number of injuries and several deaths.¹⁵⁰

In one incident the Tunisian military opened fire on a smuggler’s 4x4 north of Borj El-Khadra, wounding 10 Moroccan migrants and their two Algerian smugglers.¹⁵¹ ‘Security forces are aware too much enforcement can spark unrest,’ explained one NGO worker in the area. ‘The military hasn’t followed this approach.’¹⁵² Algeria’s military routinely targets smugglers. In some cases, this has led to violence, such as the killing of three drug traffickers along Algeria’s border with Mauritania by attack helicopter in 2017.¹⁵³

The increasingly zero-sum stakes of border enforcement in the Maghreb have led, in some instances, to smugglers also turning to violence to counter security and defence forces. In a notable incident in July 2020, a Tunisian

soldier was killed by smuggler gunfire. In other instances, corruption has become even more important to smugglers driven by military patrols and rising fortifications to funnel their activities through formal border crossings. This has meant an increasing need to corrupt customs and police officials. 'Using border crossings is now more secure, but in return, bribes must be paid,' explained one Algerian smuggler.¹⁵⁴

Role of foreign partners

While the role of foreign donors in prompting the shift to line-in-the-sand border security strategies should not be overstated, they have played an important enabling role. Foreign donors have provided significant border security funding to Tunisia and Morocco – and to a far lesser degree Algeria – since 2014. At least 93 programmes funded by international donors have mostly focused on training, equipment or aid in building physical infrastructure.¹⁵⁵

The EU in particular has implemented a number of border security strengthening programmes, mostly aimed at either countering terrorism or halting irregular migration from the Maghreb. One project, the Border Management Programme for the Maghreb Region, has been particularly important. Implemented primarily in Morocco and Tunisia, the €55 million project is directly targeted at strengthening border management capacity in the two states via strategic development, equipment acquisition and general capacity building.¹⁵⁶

The US has also been explicit in its focus on border security in the region, making it a key part of its bilateral engagement with the Tunisian military.¹⁵⁷ The US, along with Germany, is a key funder of border surveillance equipment installed on or near Tunisia's border with Libya, with nearly US\$25 million allocated to the project. More broadly, the G7+5 donor group (along with Japan and the United Kingdom) has made strengthening border security one of its key objectives in Tunisia.¹⁵⁸

Donor assistance is often readily accepted by Maghrebi security and defence forces, which do suffer from equipment and capacity deficits. They also have limited absorptive capacity given their historically limited role in this context. Training, provided by foreign militaries or

contractors, also allows Moroccan, Tunisian and Algerian participants to develop or refine skills and become familiar with international best practice.

Most donors take a narrow view of border security in the Maghreb. They tend to perceive it in relatively binary terms, with porous borders 'bad', demonstrating capacity gaps, and hardened frontiers 'good', indicative of heightened state control and capacity.

Such an approach reflects, in many ways, the discourse dominating border security in donor nations' domestic contexts. It generally does not take into account the complex historical functions of porous borders or contraband in the Maghreb and the perspectives, grievances and livelihoods of local communities.

The US has focused on border security, which is a key part of its work with the Tunisian military

Because of this, funding and capacity-building programmes by donor states have fed into and enabled the shift in strategic approaches seen across the Maghreb. They have undermined more meaningful changes in border management by incentivising investments in hard security rather than developing participatory and developmental approaches.¹⁵⁹

From tolerance to targeting

The last decade has seen a shift in approaches to border security in Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria. Longstanding pragmatic approaches, which favoured tolerance of smuggling in order to ensure stability and intelligence collection, have given way to fixed, often zero-sum approaches, predicated upon military force and fixed infrastructure. While smuggling across the borderland continues, it has become more difficult and dangerous. Smugglers face the threat not only of arrest but also of injury or death.

Hardened border security approaches also fuel frustration and tension in border communities. These communities view security initiatives as primarily targeting them and their livelihoods, rather than governments' broader counter-terrorism goals.¹⁶⁰

Adapt, flee or resist

The changes in regional policy to border security discussed above – particularly the creation of barriers, militarisation and the adoption of zero-sum strategies – have had distinct effects on border communities in North Africa.

Even though regional governments have, to a degree, built border security systems capable of confronting and halting smugglers, they generally cannot provide borderland communities with development and alternative job opportunities (key drivers of smuggling). This issue is most acute in remote borderland areas, where local livelihood options are limited and populations vulnerable to interruptions in informal cross-border trade. In turn, sustained interruption of smuggling heightens the risk of discontent and instability.

‘When you close a border, you create misery on both sides, which breeds higher crime, drives radicalisation, and can lead to terrorism,’ noted a retired Algerian official. ‘To stop smuggling by fighting it is not an answer.’¹⁶¹

Yet border communities have adjusted and reacted to the changes in the region’s border politics, particularly the decrease and even collapse of incomes generated via the smuggling economy. Informal and illicit activities dominate adaptation strategies, which include migration, other forms of smuggling, and non-smuggling forms of organised crime.

Adaptation

For many in the borderlands of the Maghreb, adapting to the recent changes to border security policies has meant adapting to lower incomes from the smuggling economy. This has been most extreme in the borderlands between Morocco and Algeria, where smuggling of licit goods has decreased substantially, and the borderlands between Tunisia and Libya, where a similar dynamic has occurred.

In both cases, pressures created by changes to border security strategies have reinforced other pressures on smuggling economies. These include supply shortfalls caused by the conflict in Libya, and increasing competition from formal imports in Morocco resulting from the country’s free trade agreements.

Across the region, adaptation is complicated by the reliance of large segments of the borderlands on

smuggling economies. The labour intensity of many aspects of the smuggling economy and relatively low capital and skill requirements have made smuggling a major job creation mechanism, particularly for younger and less educated sections of the population. Formal alternatives have been rare historically, and have contracted further in the context of economic crisis and high unemployment.

The sustained interruption of smuggling heightens the risk of discontent and instability

In response, there have been four main modes of adaptation: formal economic projects, informal and illicit economic projects (particularly illicit smuggling and criminal activities), organisation and migration. However, as a result of limited formal investment in border regions, adaptation strategies are still highly dependent on informal and criminal networks, and are deepening the economic and social vulnerability of border communities. This dynamic has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Formal economic projects

Many North African smugglers’ participation in the sector is primarily motivated by the difficulty in finding formal employment. This is particularly true for small-scale traders and carriers working in less lucrative positions in the smuggling economies.

Many would in fact prefer formal employment – as over 50% of smugglers in Tunisia surveyed in one study reported. However, inadequate education and insufficient capital weaken their chances in an already small formal labour market in regions characterised by poor infrastructure and an underdeveloped formal sector.¹⁶²

As smuggling economies contract, finding alternatives in the formal sector is further complicated by the number of jobseekers. As a consequence, smugglers and community leaders in the region’s borderlands often take to informal and illegal economic activities.

‘We are forgotten here, marginalised, feeling like second- or third-degree citizens,’ one young man from Oujda

said. 'As we don't have legal opportunities, it's normal to work in trafficking of drugs and humans, smuggling of migrants. We have to live, to realise our dreams.'¹⁶³ In the words of a 23-year-old smuggler from Kasserine, he only works in illegal trade:

because I have no other possibilities – I will tell you one thing, if the state were to give me a job even for 400 dinars I would no longer work in smuggling. Why do I risk my life every day? I drive seven hours every day; even if you escape the patrols there are citizens who hunt you.¹⁶⁴

So far, investment projects financed through both informally and formally generated capital have made relatively limited progress in expanding formal employment opportunities in these areas. Government regulations often pose a significant challenge, with efforts to start licit businesses requiring either significant patience or unofficial government connections.

'If the state were to give me a job even for 400 dinars I would no longer work in smuggling'

While smuggling has led to capital accumulation among some borderland actors, some of which has been invested in formal sector projects, few jobs have been created as a result. This is owing to a range of factors. Many investments by current or former smugglers, particularly money laundering attempts, are in agricultural land and real estate.¹⁶⁵ Not only have these investments done little to generate new employment, they have also driven up real estate prices in the region.

Other popular investments are cafes, tea rooms, restaurants, tourist establishments and wedding venues. While these do generate some employment, they do not typically employ former smugglers, and have had a limited knock-on effect on the wider borderland economy.¹⁶⁶

Most importantly, the effects of these formal investments have been limited because many of them are not located in the borderlands but instead in commercial centres such as Casablanca or Tunis. This is a frequent source of frustration across the region. In the words of a young resident of Feriana in Tunisia's Kasserine region:

We're isolated here, there's no public transport. And Feriana is quite large. Why don't the big smugglers invest in that? All of this is a problem for me as a young person. I'm not against smuggling but they should participate in community life and invest. We don't have a mall, a youth centre or a leisure centre. Why don't smugglers with all the money they earn do something good for the community? But in reality, they don't do anything for our good.¹⁶⁷

With investments by local smugglers providing little formal employment, expectations in the borderlands are frequently directed at state investments. Calls for better infrastructure and economic alternatives are common features of social protests and political activism, particularly in the context of the historical economic neglect of the Maghreb's borderlands.

Recent years have seen successive governments promise large investments in this economic periphery and, in some instances, develop borderland development plans.¹⁶⁸ However, these have been slow to materialise, and marred with implementation problems as diverse as the region's borderland economies. Problems include a failure to adapt to the realities of the local labour market and economic environment, a lack of a broader development strategy for the borderlands, dissonance between centralised and localised decision-making, little investment commitment and a lack of meaningful consultation with local communities.

There is frequent official rhetoric around and occasional attempts to establish free trade zones and special economic zones in borderlands as formal alternatives to smuggling, particularly in Morocco and Tunisia. So far, their development has been slow. Apart from administrative issues, challenges also appear to include overcoming poor infrastructure and attracting formal investment.

More fundamentally, however, it is doubtful whether such special regulatory zones can generate the type of investments – those that are labour intensive and have low barriers to entry – that the region's borderlands need. Until now there has been little cause for optimism.

Morocco's north-eastern borderlands have been particularly hard hit by the collapse of large sections of its smuggling economy following Algeria's border

fortifications. As a result, the Moroccan government has enacted a more comprehensive economic support programme for the area. This includes infrastructure investments in the immediate border area, as well as economic support for agricultural cooperatives in the borderlands. More recently, new development measures have been launched following the increased clampdown on informal trade between Morocco and Ceuta and Melilla.

‘More members of border communities are involved in organised criminal groups because they don’t have choices’

While the framing of these programmes shows growing awareness of the economic context of such activities, it is too early to evaluate their effects. Here too administrative challenges, limited funds, a lack of coordination between agencies, hesitancy about agriculture among former smugglers, and a lack of trust and reliable intersections between borderland populations and state structures have been problematic.¹⁶⁹

‘The border community has to be patient and optimistic over the future,’ a local state official argued.¹⁷⁰ Yet in the borderlands, especially in the face of the new militarised approach, there is a dominant perception of a disconnect between the state and people. ‘They [state officials] are just implementing security policies,’ one resident of a Moroccan border community said. ‘There is still a crisis, and it is becoming worse.’¹⁷¹

Informal and illicit economic projects

With formal income-generating opportunities still falling short of borderlands’ needs, economic adaptation frequently relies on informal and criminal economic activities, most notably the smuggling of illicit goods and non-smuggling organised criminal activities.

As mentioned above, changes to border politics in the region have had varying effects on different smuggling networks. Survivalist and small-scale networks trading in licit goods frequently find the additional costs of overcoming the new fortifications to be prohibitive. Yet there are fewer indications that this has had a similar impact on more highly capitalised smuggling networks trading in illicit goods such as cannabis resin, diverted pharmaceuticals or cocaine.

This suggests that one adaptation strategy for former smugglers of licit goods may have been to transition into illicit goods, or working in human trafficking and migrant smuggling. While data is limited, sources from northern Morocco and Algeria have pointed to this dynamic. ‘Because of their long experience in cross-border smuggling,’ an official in Oujda said, ‘many resort to drug trafficking as well as migrant smuggling due to the strategic location of both sides for such trafficking.’¹⁷²



IN BORDERLANDS THERE IS A PERCEIVED DISCONNECT BETWEEN THE STATE AND PEOPLE

‘Human trafficking and migrant smuggling are easy for borderland populations,’ a community leader in a border town in northern Morocco added. ‘Others choose to work in drug trafficking.’¹⁷³

Another community leader, a little bit further south, highlighted the relationship between the absence of formal alternatives and recruitment into illicit activities. ‘The former smugglers and youths are working in migrant smuggling and drug trafficking. They don’t have any opportunities to reintegrate into society, and so most of them are working in illegal activities.’¹⁷⁴

There are indications that, in those borderlands most affected by changing border politics, this form of adaptation includes not only human trafficking and smuggling of illicit goods but also non-smuggling criminal activity.

Without reintegration opportunities, former smugglers get involved in people and drug trafficking

Particularly in Morocco’s borderlands, local residents, community leaders, public officials and police statistics all point to an increase in crime since the fortification of the border with Algeria. ‘Petty crime has always existed, but in the present era it is increasing continuously, especially in the big and densely populated cities. This includes, for example, beatings and injuries with light weapons, theft, rape, fraud,’ an official in Oujda said.¹⁷⁵

‘More members of border communities are involved in organised criminal groups because they don’t have choices,’ a community leader from a border town echoed.¹⁷⁶ Community leaders in Algeria’s far south have raised similar concerns, with one educator explaining that ‘the attempts to eliminate [smuggling] have led to the emergence of armed groups that waylay their Algerian brothers and steal their money and property’.¹⁷⁷ ‘Criminals are now more involved in organised criminal groups – they start as opportunists and end as an organised group,’ a Moroccan community leader said.¹⁷⁸

It is worth noting that this form of adaptation still seems largely restricted to those borderlands in the region that have been hardest hit by the recent trends in border

politics. In the Tunisia–Algeria borderland, for example, where smuggling is still relatively common, local residents and law enforcement personnel have not reported similar increases in criminal activity.

Migration

Migration is another major mode of adaptation in the region’s borderlands. Migration has historically been part of a wider set of livelihood strategies in economically vulnerable regions. However, it has been considerably politicised in recent years. It includes internal migration within the respective countries, and migration to Europe.

On the Morocco–Algeria border, officials and community leaders across north-eastern Morocco say that internal migration from the immediate rural borderlands to the cities has occurred for years. More recently, particularly after the border fortification, migration out of Morocco has become more common.

‘It is really hard to face this situation,’ said a community leader near Saida. ‘Borderland populations have migrated to urban areas throughout the last decade, but now everybody wants to leave the country.’¹⁷⁹ Similar dynamics can be found in Tunisia. ‘Everyone is thinking of leaving,’ a smuggler from Feriana said.¹⁸⁰

The governorates along Tunisia’s border with Algeria have seen a steady and significant decline in population over the last decade, with the exception of Kasserine, which has witnessed a moderate increase in its urban population.¹⁸¹ ‘Entire families are seeking shelter in other governorates or even urban areas,’ a farmer in Jendouba explained.¹⁸²

The ability to leave – and potential destinations – depends on capital and connections. Tunisia’s southern border region of Medenine and Tataouine have both recorded net emigration, with employment noted as the most common reason.¹⁸³ Furthermore, increases in irregular migration out of Tunisia in 2017 saw an over-representation of Tunisia’s southern border regions, at a time when the local smuggling economy was under particular pressure.¹⁸⁴

The population decline in the Maghreb’s border regions likely has a mixed impact on contraband and smuggling. Smaller populations in frontier areas limit the potential recruitment base for smugglers, which probably lessens the intensity of some forms of subsistence-level smuggling.

However, a declining population in border regions is also a boon to smugglers, as this limits the recruitment of informants by security forces. 'With fewer people in the area, smuggling becomes easier,' explained a Tunisian civil society organisation official. 'There are fewer people to keep an eye on everything.'¹⁸⁵

Organisation

In the face of increasing pressure on local livelihoods, borderland communities in North Africa have not been passive or atomised. Although a full discussion of this is beyond the scope of this report, it is worth noting that people have also organised in order to lobby, protest, plan and pool resources to protect their communities, livelihoods, trades and youth.

These forms of organisation are extremely diverse, and include local forms of organising around cultural festivals and youth projects. They also include protest movements and public demonstrations in southern Tunisia and northern Morocco. These protests call for the easing of cross-border trade, for the re-opening of the land border between Morocco and Algeria, and for formal development projects in border regions.

Frequently, these movements show an awareness of the social bargain in which smuggling has been tolerated to sustain livelihoods, and note that the clampdown must be accompanied by alternative development projects.¹⁸⁶ While many of these activities are aimed at engaging with state structures, and reminding states of their responsibilities to their border communities, they frequently remain unanswered or are answered with more unfulfilled promises. This gives rise to disappointment and frustration.¹⁸⁷

One noteworthy form of adaptation through organisation has been the development of a 'popular diplomacy process' on the Tunisia–Libya border. Here civil society groups, informal traders and municipalities on both sides of the border have developed a process of negotiation and informal rule-making to facilitate livelihoods and resolve conflicts in the absence of formal communication channels. After initial scepticism, Tunisian authorities are becoming more involved in the process, but it is still limited by structural economic challenges.¹⁸⁸

Social tension and instability

Finally, the changes to the border security policies of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia risk enflaming social tensions and instability in these areas. As noted earlier, in some border areas there has been a moderate uptick in violence directed at state agents, with firefights between smugglers and military patrols on the Libya–Tunisia border becoming more common, leading to the death of a Tunisian soldier in the summer of 2020.

There are rumours on that border that large-scale smugglers have contracted with Libyan armed groups to provide security services. Armed violence is not the norm as a response to heightened border security activity. Rather, social tensions and limited unrest are the more common response. 'When a smuggler now is killed or captured by security forces, they close the roads and burn tyres; the gendarmerie or customs headquarters are closed,' explained one Algerian businessman. 'Essentially, the entity that caused the accident is closed.'¹⁸⁹

Identifying the strategic impact that limitations on smuggling have had on stability in the borderlands is complex, with many factors playing into unrest. In some cases the connection is clear, such as protests in northern Morocco in 2017 linked to the cessation of fuel smuggling, and protests in Tunisia after the military killed a trafficker. In another instance in Algeria, a businessman explained, in the wake of the barrier's construction on the Algeria–Morocco border, 'a real tension was palpable among thousands of fuel traffickers'.¹⁹⁰

Large-scale smugglers have apparently contracted with Libyan armed groups to provide security

However, in most cases the link between unrest in the borderlands and the heightened border security policy is more opaque, similar in many ways to the impact of the shifting policy on migration.

As the emergence of repeated protest movements in southern Tunisia in the past decade has shown, there is often an overlap between concerns about formal employment and economic development, especially in the region's petroleum extraction industry, and stress

on the region's informally generated livelihoods. This is reinforced by wider grievances over state authorities' lack of credibility and accountability, and the resultant lack of trust in these authorities.

It is likely that the enhanced border closures put in place by Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia in response to the COVID-19 pandemic will, in their impact on local and national economies, create even more pressure and instability in the borderlands. The abandonment of traditional tools of control will make it far more difficult for regional governments to address these issues and adapt to meet the coming challenges in borderland areas.

Conclusion

Border security policies and strategies are changing across the Maghreb. In Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, borders were viewed as relatively non-threatening for decades, with smuggling and contraband seen as a solution to domestic stability challenges rather than a threat. This led to the adoption of pragmatic, tolerant approaches to border security.

Financial need, social connections and official tolerance enabled the development of a robust regional smuggling system, which informally knit together the region's economies in a way not reflected in official trade data. Everything from food to fuel to cannabis resin transited back and forth across the region's internal and external frontiers.

This began to change in 2011 as the wars in Libya and then Mali and the growing reach of cross-border terrorist groups, against the backdrop of rising global anxiety around mobility, led states in the region to increasingly accommodate the framing of borders as threats to be secured. Barriers were constructed, militaries were deployed, and an increasingly zero-sum approach was taken towards cross border mobility. Contraband

smuggling dropped dramatically, with small traders in licit consumer goods and fuel often the most affected.

The impact of these policy shifts on borderland populations has been profound. Livelihood options have evaporated in many locations, with economic development assistance either limited or unable to spur the creation of jobs in the licit borderland economy.

Border closures due to COVID-19 could increase pressure and instability in the borderlands

In the face of this challenge, some borderland residents have turned to petty crime or deepened their involvement in drug trafficking, one of the few contraband categories seemingly unaffected by heightened border security. Others have migrated, forming part of a wave of departures from Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia to Europe between 2017 and 2020. Still others have organised, protested and tried to remind states of their promises.

The COVID-19 pandemic seems set to worsen the complex challenge faced by borderland populations, as the governments of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia have shuttered their frontiers. The Maghrebi states must now plot their course in the post-pandemic world, addressing what are likely to be significant domestic risks and challenges. It could be useful for them to review the basic question inherent in border security, and the security sector more broadly: what is it meant to accomplish, and for whom is it meant to be accomplished?

Acknowledgements

This work rests on the efforts and dedication of a team of researchers across North Africa, in particular Ali Zoubeidi and Mohamed Ben Hamida.

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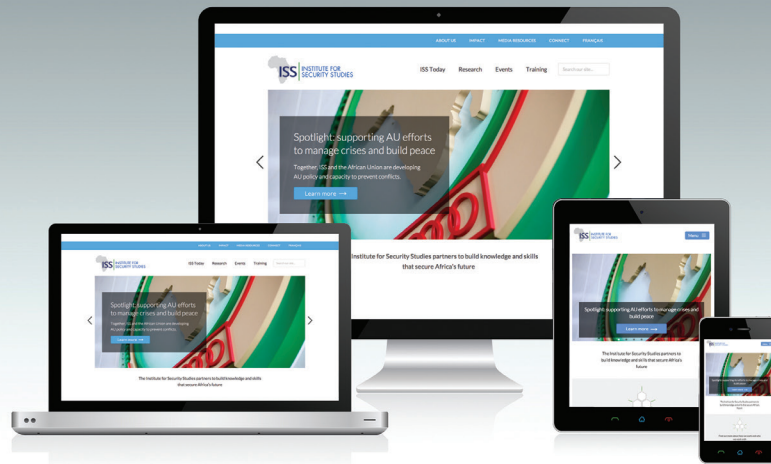
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This report is funded by the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The ISS is grateful for support from the members of the ISS Partnership Forum: the Hanns Seidel Foundation, the European Union, the Open Society Foundations and the governments of Canada, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the USA.

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