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Tunisia: In Tataouine, Socio-Economic Marginalization Is a Time Bomb

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Protesters force their way into an oil production site within a protest against unemployment in Kamur region of Tataouine, Tunisia, 16 July 2020. © AA/Nacer Talei



After weeks of sit-ins and days of angry protests, a tense calm has returned to Tunisia's southern city of Tataouine. Local youth had resumed their protest movement in June because the government did not fulfil its commitment to implement a 2017 deal to provide jobs in oil companies and invest in infrastructure. For weeks, demonstrators blocked roads around the pumping station in El-Kamour, a town 100 Km from Tataouine, in the desert to prevent tanker trucks from entering the facility, and installed a dozen tents around Tataouine, in front of the governorate and the different delegations buildings, as well as in several districts.

On 22 June, Tunisian Prime Minister Elyes Fakhfakh headed a ministerial meeting to look at the situation in the governorate of Tataouine after tensions between security forces and protesters escalated. Four days later, the cabinet held a special working session to tackle the economic and social demands of protesters, and on 1 July announced new measures that it said would be taken to address the situation. The unemployed of Tataouine are still waiting for concrete results, but the latest wave of social unrest is a reminder that tensions can again explode any time if the government keeps failing them.

This paper examines this recent unrest in Tataouine, its underlying drivers, the heavy-handed response of the security forces and the longstanding marginalization of the southern region, and looks at the inaction of successive post-revolution governments to address the socio-economic ills in the south.

Longstanding demands versus government's broken pledges

The recent street protests are a continuation of the 2017 movement that blockaded the pumping station in the town of El-Kamour calling for development and for the region to benefit from oil and natural gas revenues. Sit-inners requested that 20% of these revenues be re-invested through public spending and infrastructure projects in Tataouine. After three months of pressure, the sit-in ended on 16 June 2017 when an agreement, brokered by the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), was signed between the coordination of the Kamour protests and the government.



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Among its main points, the agreement stipulates that the petroleum companies with active exploration or drilling permits within the governorate will be employing 1500 local people, with an additional 1500 to be recruited by the Environment, Plantation and Gardening Company of Tataouine over 2018 and 2019. The deal also included the allocation of 80m Tunisian Dinars per year (approx. USD28m) to a special development and investment fund for the Tataouine region.

To date, residents complain that the only action taken has been the recruitment of 2,500 out of the promised total of 3,000 locals, all within the environmental company. The petroleum companies are yet to honour the agreement as they have so far not recruited anyone from the region.

Without real local economic development in Tunisia's southernmost governorate, jobless youth are demanding the full implementation of the 2017 agreement's terms three years later. The protest movement had started again early this year but was forced to suspend its activities in mid-March because of the nationwide lockdown measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Ismail Harabi, an active representative of the Kamour sit-in, underscored that demonstrators had already given the government "a chance" to deliver on its broken promises before the pandemic hit the country, and they retook to the streets with the start of the de-confinement after seeing no action from the executive.¹

Since its launch, the Kamour movement has distinguished itself for being a politically independent force, with a decentralized, participatory approach, and concrete demands related to employment and development. The sit-in participants are mostly young men who are essentially asking for jobs. Eight protest leaders coordinate the various delegations across Tataouine governorate, although the group avoids having a hierarchical leadership structure.

The movement's coordinating member Dhaou El Ghoul said that last month's popular protests are just the first step in a long process intended to press the relevant authorities to act on the 2017 deal. He noted that the current moment is "decisive" and Kamour activists will not let the matter go and will stay vigilant throughout the full execution of the accord to ensure each of its provisions is carried out.²



Boubaker Souid, mayor of Tataouine, elected in 2018 on Ennahdha's candidate list for the municipal election, proposed that the state allocates funds to job creation for unemployed youth and put in place flexible instruments to facilitate access to such funds.³ He insisted that the government needs to provide concrete solutions instead of leaving things as they are “until the situation bursts out again”. The local council elected in 2018 played an important role in conveying the protesters' voice by providing them with a platform to hold meetings inside the council's building and participating in negotiations with the government. This was not enough to prevent another outburst, however.

Ennahdha, like the two other political parties represented at the Tunisian Assembly (Popular Front and Al Jomhury), issued statements late on 22 June to denounce the excessive use of force by the security forces and call on protesters to remain peaceful to avoid what they described as “political manipulation”. The statements also called on the government to fulfil all its 2017 promises.

Violent repression of protests by the police force

The June demonstrations had been largely peaceful until the arrest of Kamour movement's spokesperson, Tarek Haddad, on the night of 20 June. Protesters rallied the next day to call for his release and said there would be no negotiation with the government until Haddad was freed.

In the early hours of 21 June, security forces intervened *en masse* to dismantle sit-in tents at the northern entrance of Tataouine city and made extensive use of tear gas against protesters who were allegedly throwing rocks and blocking roads. Ten other activists were also arrested following confrontations with the security forces.

The ministry of interior defended the security forces' actions in a statement in which it said that a group of protesters “tried to attack the security complex in the region with Molotov cocktails”. The Tataouine governor, Adel Werghi, likewise defended the use of force and criticized the roadblocks and sit-in actions as being “outside the law”.



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Between 20 and 22 June, for 72 hours non-stop the streets of Tataouine were the scene of clashes between protesters throwing stones and one group also throwing Molotov's and the police violently beating protesters and firing large amounts of tear gas canisters against the angry crowds. Local eyewitnesses reported that tear gas spread heavily in the city centre, entered several homes with cases of suffocation being reported at the regional hospital. Such scenes of violence against protesters were unseen for years in Tunisia.

In the days that followed the scuffles, the sight of young men with bandaged arms or legs or bruises on their body became a familiar scene in the city.

The UGTT branch in Tataouine denounced the "excessive and unjustified use of force" against protesters.

Local youths slammed the police for bringing "unprovoked violence" to the Kamour-led protests known to be non-confrontational and aligned with the peaceful nature of the movement's cause. They were particularly angry by what they considered an arbitrary use of force, given their legitimate demands stemming from a three-year dated agreement which has gone unimplemented until today.

Some activists argued that the use of excessive force by police forces can be seen as an attempt to suppress the protest movement, and quell future unrest, knowing that the central government is "unable" to implement the Kamour accord.⁴ It was an "unsuccessful attempt" to silence the sit-inners, as Kamour supporter Mourad Abdellatif observed.⁵

On 22 June, the Association for the Defence of Human Rights, a local association, filed a court case against the prime minister, the interior minister, the governor of Tataouine, the head of the national security district and any other official involved in ordering or committing acts of violence against the "peaceful" protests in the region.

The violent security response generated increased sympathy for the Kamour protests among the local population with more people joining the rallies to show support for the movement and demand the release of all detained demonstrators.

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Many protesters sustained injuries from the recent clashes. Activist Harabi was injured to his arm and considers his injury a “price to pay” for his city, saying he is hopeful that the Kamour’s campaign will win its struggle.⁶

The day Haddad was freed, on 24 June, several thousands of locals gathered around the city to welcome his release.

“Kamour is here to stay”⁷ was Haddad’s vow when he spoke to the media outside his home reiterating the determination of the sit-inners to achieve their economic and social goals. “Al-rakh la!” (“no surrender”) as the campaign’s motto goes. On 26 June, he anticipated the continuation of peaceful rallies and the resumption of the sit-in if the movement’s demands are once again ignored.

A policy of neglect and procrastination

With above-average unemployment, failing infrastructure and an underdeveloped private sector, Tataouine governorate is one of Tunisia’s most marginalized regions despite being one of the richest in natural resources, notably oil and gas. Among its population (estimated at around 150,000 inhabitants) the unemployment rate stands at 28.7% (almost twice the national average of 15.3%), the highest in the country, with the rate for young people significantly higher. It has also one of the highest percentages of unemployed graduates, which hit 58% in 2017.

Local sources claim that people from Tataouine city make the largest number of Tunisians who migrated abroad. At least one person in every family is pushed to leave due to lack of jobs.

Unlike the coastal areas, schools in the south are neglected and universities in nearby cities offer limited work prospects for young graduates. Moreover, there are less functioning public services than in many other governorates, with a particularly extremely poor healthcare sector. The regional hospital is short of specialist departments and has only 11 specialized doctors, making Tataouine the worst-equipped governorate in Tunisia in terms of health services, according to International Alert Tunisia.

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The outlook of the underprivileged governorate starkly contrasts with the wealth generated by its natural resources. The region is rich in hydrocarbons, with its fields contributing to 40% and 20% of Tunisia's oil and gas production, respectively.

Foreign energy companies whose headquarters are based in Tunis are extracting petroleum resources in Tataouine's desert with profits going to the capital and rarely reinvested in the region. This is why local inhabitants typically accuse the central government and foreign companies of "stealing" their natural resources.

With such discrepancies between natural wealth and actual deprivation, it is not surprising that the protest movement in the deprived governorate has become chronic over the years just like unemployment has been chronic for many more years.

The marginalization of Tataouine, and Tunisia's interior and southern regions more generally, has existed for decades and was one of the main sparks for the 2010-2011 revolution. Mourad Ardhaoui, the local coordinator of International Alert's Tunisia office in Tataouine, stressed that the area has not seen a development plan ever since the days of independence.⁸ And yet, a decade after the revolution that ended Ben Ali's autocratic rule, successive governments have failed to redress the development gap between major coastal cities and less developed interior and southern regions. No investments were made locally, and no policies were adopted to make the governorate more attractive to investors. The Tunisian Institute of Competitiveness and Quantitative Economy warned in a 2018 report that Tataouine was the region of the country with the lowest level of economic attractiveness.

Failed promises from different political parties to improve economic conditions have led to increasing distrust vis-à-vis the political elites, and even rage toward the state, among the region's youth. The repressive security response has exacerbated hatred and distrust towards the authorities.

Tunisian President Kais Saied, who had won overwhelmingly in Tataouine in the second round of the 2019 election (with 96% of voter support), made his remarks on the situation in Tataouine during his 22-23 June official visit to France. He



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called on demonstrators to present "development projects", and not "wait" for the government to implement projects in the region. He also promised to meet with representatives of the protests at the presidential palace upon his return. So far, no meetings are known to have been taken place. The sit-inners rejected Saied's invitation to go to Tunis and demanded last week that the head of state travels to Tataouine to meet them. At the time of writing, Prime Minister Elyes Fakhfakh resigned.

Many youths in Tataouine perceived the president's response as "mild". Earlier this year, Saied received a delegation of activists from the southern region to discuss their plight. Yet, they did not see any progress. For decades, the lack of political will has clearly left Tataouine on the margins as the state has been largely absent. A disconnect between the region's youth and central state officials has further hampered the Kamour's efforts to obtain any tangible results. As Tataouine's mayor highlighted, since the sit-in resumed earlier this year, no one in the cabinet has travelled south to meet with the young protesters and discuss their demands.⁹

The social contract between the state and its southern citizens has been repeatedly broken, and it will be very difficult for the government to regain any of the lost trust if it does not apply the accord it signed in 2017.

A ministerial council meeting on 1 July which addressed the situation of Tataouine decided that 500 people will be recruited before the end of the year, that the government will release additional funds for the benefit of microcredit institutions. The council also approved the holding of an extraordinary regional council for investment at the seat of Tataouine governorate in the coming days.

However, the Kamour's movement coordination rejected the ministerial meeting outcomes and threatened to block the newly established oil Nawara pumping station within 48 hours if the authorities do not provide specific and concrete measures. The Regional Labour Union (URT) and the coordination of the Kamour sit-in in Tataouine called a general strike on 2 July which went on for more than two weeks. On 21 July, local media reported that activities and services had resumed in the region.



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With the resignation of Prime Minister Elyes Fakhfakh over corruption allegations, Tunisia is cast into uncertainty over its political situation. This will certainly delay any measures to address the Kamour demands, leaving the region and its inhabitants yet again in the hands of a new government still to be established.



Endnotes

1. Interview with Ismail Harabi, 24 June 2020
2. Interview with Dhaou El Ghouli, 25 June 2020
3. Interview with Boubaker Souid, 25 June 2020
4. Interview with El Ghouli
5. Interview with Mourad Abdellatif, 24 June 2020
6. Interview with Ismail Harabi
7. Statement by Tarek Haddad, 24 June 2020
8. Interview with Mourad Ardhaoui, 25 June 2020
9. Interview with Souid



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About the author



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Alessandra Bajec is a freelance journalist specializing in the Middle East and North Africa. Between 2010 and 2011, she lived in Palestine. She was based in Cairo between 2013 and 2017, and she is now in Tunis. Her articles have appeared in Middle East Eye, The New Arab, TRT World and rt.com among others.

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