

# Security Threats on the Tunisia-Libya Border

by [Dhia Otay \(/experts/dhia-otay\)](#)

Jan 24, 2019

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/thdydat-amnyt-thdq-balhdwd-altwnsyty-allybyt\)](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Dhia Otay \(/experts/dhia-otay\)](#)

Dhia Otay is a Tunisian journalist and political activist located in the United States.



## Brief Analysis

The French military's Maginot line—built during the 1930s in order to prevent the inevitable German invasion—is a classic example of how a false sense of security led to failed strategic planning. Lesser known is the Mareth Line of the same period, built in Tunisia to defend the French protectorate against attacks from Libya—then a colony of Fascist Italy, and similarly overrun during the course of battle. These twin failures are now brought to mind by a new defensive line in the Tunisian desert, constructed once again to defend against the threat of a destabilizing Libya.

Currently, the Tunisia-Libya border separates a struggling democracy and a country divided between two rival governments, each lacking real control over Libyan territory. The power vacuum within the latter has allowed for a plethora of local and foreign militias along with gangs of contraband smugglers that have flourished since the late 1980s to operate along the Tunisian-Libyan border with relative impunity—involved in drug dealing, human trafficking, and support for terrorist activities.

One of the major issues at stake is how forces monitoring the border can prevent increased destabilization from the variety of maligning forces at work there without suppressing the need for trade and exchange for those locals living in these border regions. No one doubts that the border presents a major security challenge to Tunisia. Yet despite the increase in the Tunisian defense budget and foreign aid from its strategic partners, terrorist groups like AQIM and the Islamic State (IS) are still able to challenge local armed forces in a low intensity but bloody conflict.

The defensive line built with U.S. and German help does not tackle the real terrorist threat. In fact, smugglers and terrorist groups have been able to bypass these defensive positions since late 2011. In particular, terrorist groups have **focused their activities ([http://The French military's Maginot line—built during the 1930s in order to prevent the inevitable German invasion—is a classic example of how a false sense of security led to failed strategic planning. Lesser known is the Mareth Line of the same period, built in Tunisia to defend the French protectorate against attacks from Libya—then a colony of Fascist Italy, and similarly overrun in the course of battle. These twin failures are now brought to mind by a new defensive line along a new defensive line in the Tunisian desert, constructed to once again defend against the threat of a destabilizing Libya. Currently, the Tunisia-Libya border separates a struggling democracy and a country divided between two rival governments, each lacking real control over Libyan territory. The power vacuum within the latter has allowed for a plethora of local and foreign militias along with gangs of contraband smugglers that have flourished since the late 1980s](#))**

—involved in drug dealing, human trafficking, and support for terrorist activities to operate along the Tunisian-Libyan border with relative impunity. The major issue at stake is how forces monitoring the border can prevent increased destabilization from the variety of maligning forces at work along the border without suppressing the need for trade and exchange for those locals living in the border regions. No one doubts that the border presents a major security challenge to Tunisia. Despite the increase in Tunisian defense budget and foreign aid from its strategic partners, terrorist groups like AQIM and the Islamic State (IS) are still able to challenge local armed forces through a low intensity but bloody conflict. Nevertheless, the defensive line built with U.S. and German help does not tackle the real terrorist threat. In fact, smugglers and terrorist groups have been able to bypass these defensive positions since late 2011. In particular, terrorist groups have focused their activities where Tunisia, Libya, and Algeria converge, where they control large mountainous areas and benefit from local complicity. On the one hand, Tunisians rely on the economic benefits of cross-border trade, legal or otherwise. On the other, the longstanding tacit support of militias in Libya since the 1980s has entrenched the groups' control over the area. Moreover, current method of monitoring the Tunisian-Libyan is contributing to a disillusionment with post revolution politics. Closed borders provide legitimacy to extremist narratives since these borders are seen as a colonialist legacy rather than an organic boundary by many Tunisians and Libyans alike, especially those who live along said border. Similarly, political polarization between secularists and Islamists has also bolstered extremist groups' support among certain demographics. The extremist organizations have disseminated effective propaganda highlighting the government's perceived policy towards social riots that have put the armed forces in a hostile position against frustrated and economically marginalized youth. Moreover, the government has been unsuccessful in creating an effective counter narrative to this extremist propaganda. Indeed, economic challenges have highlighted the value of smuggling and informal trade for many Tunisians living on the Libyan border and have increased frustration with the border's increased militarization and its summer 2018 closure. Since the Tunisian government remains unable to present either an economic development vision or a coherent policy that tackles the local terrorist threat and the return of Tunisian foreign fighters from the Levant region, local political leaders struggle to manage the social and economic needs of their populations. Within Libya, smugglers are also deeply entrenched in the fabric of society. The former Libyan regime saw smugglers as potential supporters and fighters, such as the force that attacked the Tunisian town of Gafsa in 1980 at the bequest of Qaddafi. The commanders of Libyan military units deployed near Tunisian borders provided political and logistical support for smugglers, allowing the latter to acquire 4x4 vehicles, illegally import oil, and provide low cost and subsidized products from Libya in exchange for food, alcohol, and drugs from Tunisia. Smugglers were even able to coordinate the flow of illegal immigrants, a fact used by Gaddafi as a tool to created political pressure in Europe. Both sides of the Libyan conflict activated alternative smuggling routes to tackle their urgent logistical needs. A large flow of fuel, equipments, and pick-ups came from Algeria to Libya through Tunisia. It became clear that contraband gangs-who work with terrorists-did not only run the transnational trade between north Africa-including Egypt- and the sahel region, but also they effectively control local economies. The Algerian town of Al Eulma with its ironically named "Dubai Market", started to substitute Libyan cities like Zouara or Misrata as a hub for importing smuggled products to Tunisia. Algerian experts consider that dynamic as an unofficial part of the Chinese Silk Road that contributes to the "globalization from below" that affects local societies. The border militias remain a particularly thorny element in a Libyan peace process. Libyan society is still influenced by the tribal system which was used by Gaddafi to enforce his dictatorship through an anarchist version of Arab socialism and rentier practices and later adopted by the General National Congress (GNC). The Amazigh minority like other Touareg and Toubou tribes felt excluded from power, and were recuperated by General Haftar. The failure of recent French mediation plans demonstrate the futility of organizing elections without a solid network of state institutions that could enforce their results. Potential Solutions Though there are a

**number of major obstacles to truly preventing terrorism and contraband activity from passing along the Tunisian-Libyan border, there are also a number of steps that can be taken to increase the likelihood of success. For instance, the training provided by the Italian San Marco brigade to Libyan military personnel could be up scaled to a more ambitious level. By creating the nucleus of a new Libyan military with a new structure based on clear and transparent recruitment procedures, unit cohesion that leans on local culture and social psychology, and the improvement of intelligence and information warfare capabilities, Libyan forces could finally be equipped with the training to fight terrorist groups in their current strongholds. Localized efforts are also key: dialogue between local elected representatives along the model of the meeting between the heads of Zouara and Benguerdane municipalities could be a successful alternative to the repeated failures of centralized negotiations between Libya and Tunisia. The recent sanctions imposed by the United States on Libyan entities and individuals could also be bolstered and focused into a coordinated effort to encourage the Libyan Government of National Accord's dependence on militias' power. The establishment of a new national military and security force is a cornerstone of any stabilization plan and will enable the GNA to have the monopoly over recruiting armed personnel, instead of the current situation in which the Libyan government is paying the salaries of the rogue militias who are contesting its authority. August clashes in Tripoli, along with Italy's choice to coordinate with local militias in an effort to prevent immigration, demonstrate the difficulty of reigning in these militias without a strong centralized military authority—a heteroclitite mixture of retired Soviet trained officers, adventurist civilians, and Islamist fighters who do not fit professional military requirements. The military cooperation between the United States and North African countries has reached a crossroads: parties must choose either to build an effective coalition against the Islamic State or continue to limit themselves to small scale cooperation, allowing a dangerous political ambiguity that could compromise the fight against terrorist groups. Support for regional actors along with an encouragement of nuanced strategies for border security comprise of the only guarantee that terrorists will not take over large territories of northwestern Africa. The establishment of the European Intervention Initiative (E2I) as an alternative to NATO and the renewal of anti-western rhetoric will lead to a continued reluctance to work with NATO—already demonstrated by Tunisia's rejection of a NATO grant of \$3.7 million designed to focus on border controls and combat terrorism despite earlier expressed state interest in cooperation. NATO must remember that North African countries will likely continue to prefer military to military cooperation programs. However, the current method of militarizing the Tunisian-Libyan border is the new Maginot line in the desert, a false feeling of security that should be reevaluated by all involved parties.)**

where Tunisia, Libya, and Algeria converge, as they control large mountainous areas and benefit from local support. On the one hand, Tunisians rely on the economic benefits of cross-border trade, legal or otherwise. On the other, the longstanding tacit support of militias in Libya since the 1980s has entrenched the groups' control over the area.

Moreover, the current method of monitoring the Tunisian-Libyan border is contributing to a disillusionment with post revolution politics. Closed borders help provide legitimacy to extremist narratives since they are seen as a colonialist legacy rather than an organic boundary by many Tunisians and Libyans alike, especially those who live along said border.

Similarly, political polarization between secularists and Islamists has also bolstered extremist groups' support among certain demographics. Extremist organizations have disseminated effective propaganda highlighting the government's perceived policy towards social protests that placed the armed forces in a hostile position against frustrated and economically marginalized youth. Moreover, the government has been unsuccessful in creating an effective counter-narrative to this extremist propaganda.

Indeed, economic challenges have highlighted the value of smuggling and informal trade for many Tunisians living on the Libyan border while growing frustration with the border's increased militarization and its summer 2018

closure. Since the Tunisian government remains unable to present either a clear vision of economic development or a coherent policy that tackles the local terrorist threat and the return of Tunisian foreign fighters from the Levant region, local political leaders continue to struggle in managing the social and economic needs of their populations.

Within Libya, smugglers are also deeply entrenched in the fabric of society. The former Libyan regime saw smugglers as potential supporters and fighters, such as the force that attacked the Tunisian town of Gafsa in 1980 at the bequest of Qaddafi. The commanders of Libyan military units deployed near Tunisian borders provided **political and logistical support (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-libya-un/human-smugglers-in-libya-have-links-to-security-services-u-n-report-idUSKBN1FR3BQ>)** for smugglers, allowing the latter to acquire 4x4 vehicles, illegally import oil, and provide low cost and subsidized products from Libya in exchange for food, alcohol, and drugs from Tunisia. Smugglers were even able to coordinate the flow of illegal immigrants, which Qaddafi leveraged as a tool to create political pressure in Europe.

Both sides of the Libyan conflict activated alternative smuggling routes to tackle their urgent logistical needs. A large flow of fuel, equipment, and pick-ups came from Algeria to Libya through Tunisia, and it became clear that contraband gangs who work with terrorists did not only run the transnational trade between north Africa—including Egypt and the Sahel region—but also effectively controlled local economies. The Algerian town of Al Eulma, with its ironically named “Dubai Market,” started to replace Libyan cities such as Zouara or Misrata as a hub for importing smuggled products to Tunisia. Algerian experts consider this dynamic an unofficial part of the Chinese Silk Road, which contributes to the “globalization from below” and affects local societies.

The border militias remain a particularly thorny element in the Libyan peace process. Libyan society is still influenced by the tribal system, which Qaddafi used to enforce his dictatorship through an anarchist version of Arab socialism and Rentier practices, later adopted by the General National Congress (GNC). And the **failure of recent French mediation plans (<https://www.ft.com/content/993cb870-0d2c-11e9-a3aa-118c761d2745>)** demonstrate the futility of organizing elections without a solid network of state institutions that can enforce their results.

### **Potential Solutions**

Though there are a number of major obstacles to truly preventing terrorism and contraband activity from passing along the Tunisian-Libyan border, there are a number of steps that can be taken to increase the likelihood of successfully securing the border. For instance, the training provided by the Italian San Marco brigade to Libyan military personnel could be scaled up to a more ambitious level. By creating the nucleus of a new Libyan military with a new structure based on clear and transparent recruitment procedures, unit cohesion that leans on local culture and social psychology, and the improvement of intelligence and information warfare capabilities, Libyan forces could finally be equipped with the training to fight terrorist groups in their current strongholds.

Localized efforts are also key: dialogue between local elected representatives along the model of the **meeting between the heads of Zouara and Benguerdane municipalities (<https://www.journaldekinshasa.com/tunisie-tribunes-nocturnes-dans-le-sud-frontalier-de-la-libye/>)** could be a successful alternative to the repeated failures of centralized negotiations between Libya and Tunisia.

The recent sanctions imposed by the United States on Libyan entities and individuals could also be bolstered and focused into a coordinated effort to encourage an end to the Libyan Government of National Accord’s dependence on militias’ power. The establishment of a new national military and security force is a cornerstone of any stabilization plan and will enable the GNA to have a monopoly over recruiting armed personnel, instead of the current situation in which the Libyan government is paying the salaries of the rogue militias who are contesting its authority. August clashes in Tripoli, along with Italy’s choice to coordinate with local militias in an effort to prevent immigration, demonstrate the difficulty of reigning in these militias without a strong centralized military authority.

The military cooperation between the United States and North African countries has reached a crossroads. Parties must choose to either build an effective coalition against the Islamic State or continue to limit themselves to small scale cooperation, allowing a dangerous political ambiguity that could compromise the fight against terrorist groups.

Support for regional actors along with support for nuanced strategies on border security is the only potential guarantee that terrorists will not take over large territories of northwestern Africa. In contrast, the establishment of the European Intervention Initiative (E2I) as an alternative to NATO and the renewal of anti-western rhetoric will lead to a continued reluctance to work with NATO, which has already been demonstrated by Tunisia's rejection of a **NATO grant of \$3.7 million (<https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2018/04/tunisia-reluctant-partnership-nato>)** designed to focus on border controls and combat terrorism despite earlier expressed state interest in cooperation.

NATO must remember that North African countries will likely continue to prefer military units themselves to military cooperation programs. However, the current method of militarizing the Tunisian-Libyan border is the new Maginot line in the desert, a false feeling of security that should be reevaluated by all involved parties. ❖

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

---

### [Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

---

### [Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

## [Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)