



MEDENINE: IMPROVING RELATIONS BETWEEN SECURITY FORCES AND THE COMMUNITY

The city of Medenine, located near Tunisia's southwest border with Libya, has suffered from systemic marginalization for decades. Trust in institutions and the state is low, and relations between security forces and citizens, particularly youth, have often been confrontational and violent.

After Tunisia's 2011 revolution, the city witnessed regular demonstrations and growing tensions between citizens and security forces. During political and socioeconomic unrest in the region, youth regularly burnt tires, hurled Molotov cocktails, threw stones and blocked the city's main road. Local security forces often responded to these incidents with harsh measures that escalated tensions and eroded further confidence in the state. This violent relationship between civilians — particularly frustrated youth from marginalized neighborhoods — and security forces was one of the major triggers of conflict both in the region and across the country.

With USIP's support and training, the Tunisian Coalition of Facilitators (TCF) successfully brokered a dialogue with at-risk youth, city elders, local unions and police in 2018 to discuss the cycle of violence and create an inclusive local mechanism for communication, negotiation and violence prevention between youth and police. Since this conflict mediation unit was established, incidents of violence have diminished significantly.

Launching a Community-Security Dialogue. USIP and its partners worked with key community leaders and security officials from Medenine to transform their mindset, behavior and communication from adversarial to nonviolent and peace-oriented through USIP-supported dialogue, capacity building and trust-building measures. As a result, the relationship between security and community leaders has transformed from confrontational to collaborative. In 2020, this reconciliation process culminated in the creation of a sustainable conflict mediation unit (CMU) composed of security officials and young representatives from at-risk communities.

Preventing Conflict and Police Repression. Thanks to training and mentorship from USIP, the CMU has become a sustainable actor in the region and has played a prominent role in preventing and mitigating tensions between youth and security officers before they escalate to violence by intervening in cases of corruption and impunity and mediating day-to-day conflicts between marginalized youth and police members.

The positive efforts of local internal security forces in this initiative have improved the community's view of them and of the CMU. This grassroots initiative also played a key role in maintaining calm in the community during the COVID-19 lockdown and other recent unrest. USIP is supporting the CMU to expand the scope of its work and its scale to new locations, aspiring to achieve national impact.

Looking at the Future. In 2023, USIP and its local partners will launch an action plan to prevent youth-police violence in football stadiums, a key flashpoint across the country. The CMU will replicate the TCF dialogue approach and leverage its contacts from the security sector and community to build capacity, trust and relations among security officers and influential football supporters.

The action plan aims to prevent confrontations between youth and police during sporting events and to transform local security policy to become nonviolent and preventive. This initiative intends to incorporate de-escalation curriculum and practices being developed through a parallel line of effort with the Ministry of Interior.