



REDUCING DRIVERS OF CONFLICT ALONG THE LIBYAN BORDER

Ben Guerdane, a Tunisian city situated on the Tunisia-Libya border, relies heavily on the flow of undeclared goods through the sub-Saharan desert and Libya. The resulting informal economy of unlicensed street vendors is one of Tunisia's major sources of livelihood. In Ben Guerdane, informal vendors of smuggled goods account for a high percentage of local employment and are a de facto part of the local economy.

However, poor working conditions, arbitrary regulation from law enforcement and a deep lack of trust between traders and the state have driven conflict and instability in the area. Since the fall of President Qaddafi in neighboring Libya, tensions have been exacerbated by unclear border management procedures that tighten whenever security forces are faced with security threats — such as the ISIL uprising in March 2016, major offensives in Libya and the COVID pandemic — or whenever informal customs procedures shift arbitrarily in tit-for-tat conflicts between Tunisian and Libyan border authorities.

The situation requires comprehensive solutions from national and local authorities. In this fragile environment, USIP and local mediators have supported measures to enhance stability and resilience and improve local governance to resolve tensions and public grievances. With USIP's support, local mediators helped resolve longstanding tensions between informal vendors and local government to improve inclusive local governance and community resilience. The Institute has also carried out research on drivers of tensions along the Tunisia-Libya border to inform broader national border policy.

With support from USIP, members of the Tunisian Coalition of Facilitators (TCF) helped Ben Guerdane's informal traders collectively organize, define and articulate their demands toward the municipality — and helped the municipality develop ways to respond to these demands. In parallel, USIP launched research to identify the drivers of tensions and conflict at the border to inform future programming and national border policy.

Establishing an Agreement. USIP and TCF worked with the informal vendors to reach consensus on their demands; to lobby the government for a sustainable solution to the arbitrary practices on the border; and to improve the working conditions at the market in Ben Guerdane.

With USIP's support, the municipal council agreed to reduce the monthly rental fee at the market and offer additional financial incentives for informal vendors to formalize their legal status. A rental contract was developed and approved by the municipal council to regulate the vendors' legal status and define a symbolic monthly fee that would help facilitate market renovations.

Informing National Border Policy through Research. USIP, in partnership with the World Food Programme and U.N. Women, commissioned research to identify and analyze informal trade conflict dynamics and the drivers of tension along the Tunisian-Libyan borders. The research presented valuable information about the informal border economy, government policy challenges and their effects on the local community. USIP aims to apply the research findings to aid Tunisia's efforts to address the challenges in this region.

Looking to the Future. Unfortunately, the municipality paused its efforts under this project after the July 2021 presidential decree that dissolved the parliament and halted the decentralization process. As a result, USIP paused its work in Ben Guerdane as we await forthcoming changes in the local government system. The Institute continues to look for opportunities to resume its work supporting reform-oriented regulations of Maghreb markets.