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Municipal Boundaries and the Politics of Space in Tunisia

Intissar Kherigi

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Municipal Boundaries and the Politics of Space

Intissar Kherigi

Sciences Po University – Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris

intissar.kherigi@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines Tunisia's 2015-17 municipal boundary reform process, undertaken in preparation for the decentralization process mandated under the 2014 constitution. It analyzes how municipal boundary decisions were made, the actors who were involved, and the logic that shaped the reform process. Through extensive fieldwork in the capital, Tunis, and in eight municipalities around Tunisia, this paper explores how the underpinning logics of national decision-making collide with the spatial realities of local actors. This paper argues that the municipal boundary reforms were guided by a combination of security-based and clientelist logics that imposed centralized conceptions of space and failed to engage with territories as lived spaces. Furthermore, it argues that, by failing to address the social, economic and spatial implications of boundary reforms, the reforms contributing to producing a despatialized decentralization process that ultimately has little meaning for residents and proves problematic for the resulting municipalities and their constituent relations. The process thus replicates many of the same logics and conceptions of space that have shaped territorial governance since the colonial era.

Keywords: Decentralization, administrative boundaries, Tunisia, local governance, municipalities, policy-making

1. Introduction

The work of Tunisian geographers and urbanists such as Amor Belhedi and Morched Chabbi has long highlighted the disconnect between central state policies, territorial planning, and the realities of territory as lived space in Tunisia. Government officials, experts, and academics recognize that regional development policies suffer from the excessive domination of centralized sectorial thinking, disregarding the needs and specificities of territories. Some attribute this missing link between policies and territorial realities to the post-independence state's efforts to construct a national identity that "imposes itself in the face of individuals, communities and the places that contain them, and of other forms of territoriality" (Belhedi, 2006, p. 311). Others attribute it to highly centralized policymaking processes that exclude local authorities and actors (Abbes, 2017), as well as the domination of the coastal regions' political and economic interests (Hibou, 2015).

In the aftermath of the 2010-11 uprising, decentralization was proposed as a structural solution to the inequalities caused by an economic model that favored coastal regions and demands for territorial justice for marginalized regions. Chapter Seven of the new constitution, adopted in January 2014, introduces decentralization as an organizing principle of the new institutional framework. The discussions by the National Constituent Assembly (NCA), which drafted the constitutional text, show that decentralization was conceived as a means to achieve a "definitive rupture with the former system of excessive centralization" (NCA, Chapter Seven Committee Report, 2 October 2012, p. 3) and to allow for the establishment of elected subnational bodies to take into account the "specificities of each region" (NCA, Chapter Seven Committee Minutes, 21 February 2012, p. 2).

As part of this "rupture" with the former system, Chapter Seven requires the generalization of municipalities to the entire Tunisian territory. Up until 2015, municipalities covered only 9.92% of Tunisian territory and two-thirds of the population (MLA, 2016b). Several municipal boundary reforms were adopted in 2015-16, which amended the boundaries of 191 existing municipalities (out of a total of 264) and created 86 new municipalities, bringing the total number to 350. These changes represented the most extensive reform of administrative boundaries since the years immediately following independence in 1956. Despite being a central element of Tunisia's decentralization reforms, and one of its most contested, the boundary reforms have received remarkably little attention in academic studies thus far.

This paper examines the municipal boundary reform process and analyzes how boundary decisions were made, the actors involved, and the logic that shaped this process. This paper draws on over

200 interviews, conducted between April 2016 and September 2020, with government officials, experts who worked on the border reforms, sociologists, geographers, and civil society activists. It also draws on fieldwork in eight municipalities, six of which were modified during the 2015-17 boundary reforms and have experienced some contestation of the changes. The remaining two saw initial decisions to modify the boundaries reversed. The municipalities were selected based on complaints submitted to the MLA following the boundary reforms.

The paper begins with a brief overview of the literature on administrative boundaries in the Arab region and the history of administrative boundaries in Tunisia before examining the recent municipal boundary reform process. Through interviews with decision-makers in the capital and local actors in eight municipalities, this paper explores how the logics that underpin national decision-making collide with the spatial realities of local actors. The paper argues that the boundary reforms were guided by a combination of highly centralized technocratic and clientelist logics that failed to engage with territories as lived spaces. Furthermore, it argues that, by refusing to address the social, economic and spatial implications of boundary reforms, the reforms contribute to producing a despatialized decentralization process that ultimately has little meaning for residents and proves problematic for the resulting municipalities and their constituent relations.

2. Law, Space and Power

Boundary delineation has always played a central role in state strategies to control territory and populations. By drawing boundaries, the state territorializes land and creates and allocates rights in new ways, giving rise to new legal relationships, and creating political rights and political communities within borders. Boundaries further shape social identities and practices, such as mobility, social and economic exchanges, and categories of belonging. By drawing boundaries, the state gives symbolic recognition to certain areas – economically empowering some regions or groups over others by granting access to state grants, credits, and other resources.

Borders – both international and internal – have been a critical focus of political geography for many decades (Gilbert, 1948; Minghi, 1963). Borders have been used to support the process of state-building in the Arab world, whether to enforce national identity as against infra-national forms of belonging (ordering) or external actors (othering) (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen, 2002). As Meier writes, “To define the Self, the materiality of the border plays a key role in the building of the Other” (2018, p. 497). The “spatial turn” in the political science literature since the 2000s has prompted a move away from a Weberian paradigm of borders as markers of sovereignty and statehood, towards studies of borders as social constructs (Parker et al., 2009), and their role in

identity formation (Albert et al., 2001).

Border studies on the Middle East and North Africa region have also received renewed interest since the 2000s. Much of this literature has focused on the borders of the nation-state, analyzing them in relation to modern Arab statehood and its contested legitimacy (Bocco and Meier, 2005; Migdal, 2004). This has produced a rich literature on notions of citizenship, belonging, and borders, but primarily regarding national borders (Burgis, 2009). This literature has grown in recent years in response to the rise of transnational actors, such as the Islamic State, that have questioned and reshaped borders both physically and rhetorically. It has also grown out of response to the eruption of armed conflict in Syria, Yemen, and Libya that has seen non-state actors carving out new internal borders (Del Sarto, 2017; Meier, 2018).

However, the literature on *internal* administrative borders in the region remains limited. In the Tunisian context, there is a small but growing literature on territorial boundaries, spurred by the revolution and decentralization reforms, which have brought questions of space, territorial justice and regional identities to the fore. Most of this literature falls within the disciplines of geography and urban studies. For instance, Amor Belhedi's work on territorial boundaries engages closely with questions of territorial relations and local identities. The renowned Tunisian geographer examines, in his numerous publications, how administrative boundaries have been used by the Tunisian state for purposes of control and population management, while also being a territorial expression of power struggles between the central and local levels (Belhedi, 1989, 1993, 2007, 2015, 2016). A significant body of work has also analyzed border spaces as a separate category of space (Lamloum, 2016; Meddeb, 2016; Tabib, 2011). There is also increasing interest in analyzing space as a key variable at the heart of the post-2011 Arab uprisings. Sebastiani's work, for instance, examines how the Tunisian revolution has brought about "the conquest of public space" as citizens use and create it in new ways (2019, p. 4). Sebastiani and Turki (2016) also analyze how new political and social practices have transformed public space since 2011, and how the uprising highlighted the fracture between the center and urban peripheries.¹

However, the literature on the municipal boundary reforms remains very limited. Turki and Gana's work on municipal boundaries is the first to examine the recent municipal boundary changes (2015). Based on fieldwork in the governorate of Siliana, they find that the reforms involved "a dominant role by the administration, and a technocratic approach to territorial reforms...that

¹ On public space and the Egyptian 2011 uprising, see Schwedler 2013; on public space and the Moroccan 20 February Movement, see Mohamed Naimi, 2016, *Les Cahiers d'EMAM*; on how urban and spatial planning intersect with sectarian contestation in the Middle East, see Mabon and Nagle 2020, and Fawaz 2009.

relegates to the background questions of social and economic development, the main preoccupations of local populations” (2015, p. 70). Ben Jelloul (2019) also examines the municipal boundary reforms, with a focus on the role of national decision-makers. However, this work has yet to include an examination of how municipal boundary changes have been received at the local level and how they shape relations between the central state, municipal councils, and local populations.

3. The history of administrative boundaries in Tunisia

Up until 2015, municipalities covered only 9.92% of Tunisian territory and two-thirds of the population, making municipal status a highly coveted one. Being designated as a municipality granted recognition to certain areas and populations, making them more visible to the state and giving them their own set of (nominally) representative local governance structures. Meanwhile, non-municipalized areas fell directly under the control of the *délegué* and governor. They were managed by rural councils, whose members were appointed by the governor on the nomination of the *délegué*, and relied on the regional development budget of the governorate. In contrast, municipalities had their own municipal budget, administration, council and mayor, which provided local notables with additional sources of prestige and patronage.

Tunisia’s administrative organization has passed through three key phases - pre-colonial, colonial and post-independence, each reflecting a political regime with a particular socio-economic model. The pre-colonial era saw a minimal military-bureaucratic state with an administrative organization based on natural divisions and social factors such as kinship and tribal affiliation (Belhedi, 1989; Charrad, 2001). The colonial era saw the construction of an increasingly extractive state and enlarged administrative apparatus that introduced significant boundary changes to facilitate the extraction of resources, the organization of colonial settlers, and management of the indigenous population by establishing parallel colonial structures. The post-independence period brought in a new state-building project and, accordingly, boundary reforms that sought to entrench the new vision of the nation-state and identity. Throughout these phases, the setting and modification of administrative boundaries can be explained by reference to three main logics, as analyzed below.

3.1. The Logics of Boundary-Making

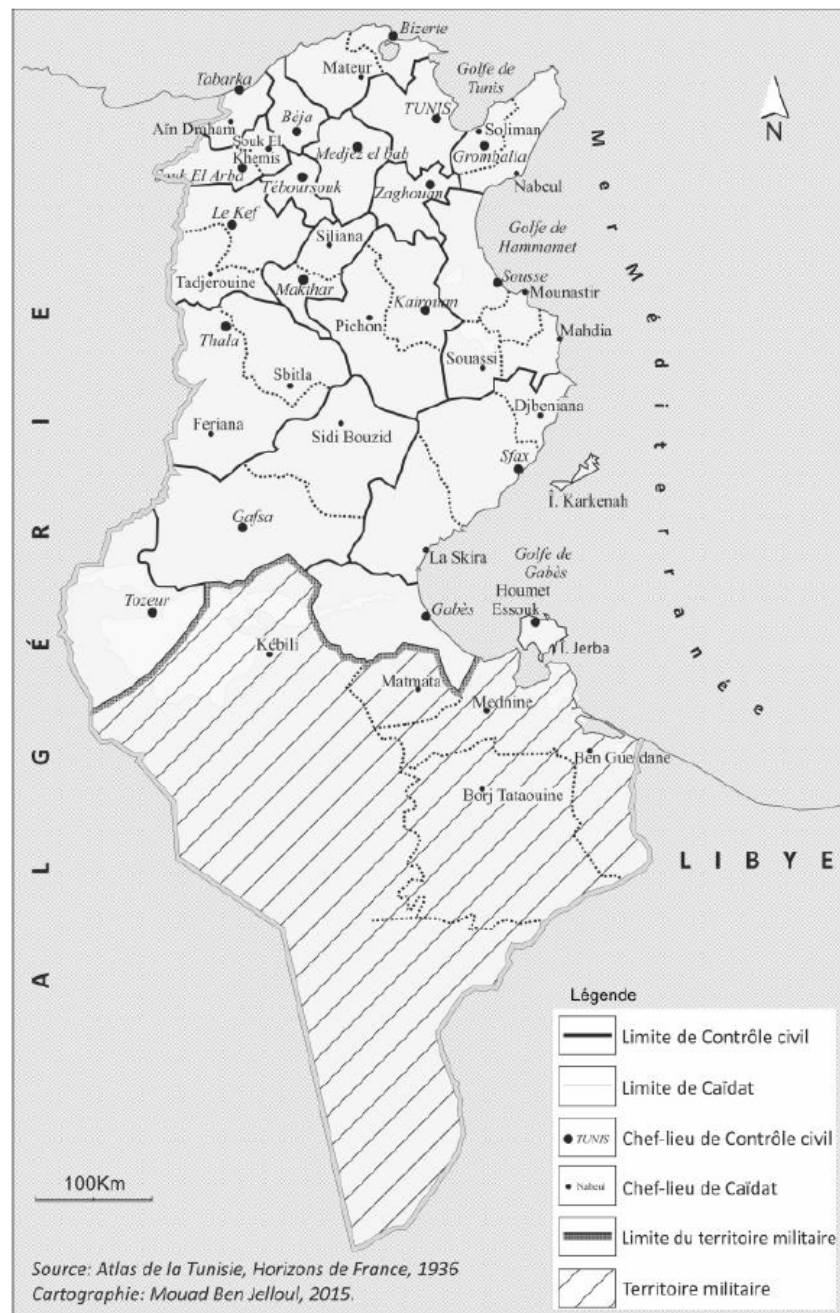
3.1.1. Security-based logics of control and surveillance

Upon the installation of the Protectorate in 1881, Tunisia was composed of 88 administrative units, *caidats*, each corresponding to the territory of a tribe (Ben Jelloul, 2018). Each unit was governed

by a *caid*, appointed by the Bey, and assisted by a *kebalifa* (chosen by the *caid*) and *cheikh*, each of whom oversaw a *macheikba* – a group of villages or sub-clans. The *cheikh*, who was elected by local notables, represented inhabitants to the *caid*, maintained order, and ensured the physical collection of taxes but exercised no judicial powers (Henia, 1996; Marcou, 1999).

The French colonial authorities largely maintained existing territorial divisions while superimposing new parallel entities to manage and control local populations and facilitating economic and extractive activities (Turki and Loschi, 2017). Tunisian territory was divided into 13 *controles civils* in the North and seven in the South, each under the control of a *controleur civil*, directly answerable to the French Resident-General. The 11 *controles* in the North were defined as a civil zone, while the seven *controles* in the South formed a military zone. The greater interest of the Protectorate authorities in the more fertile regions of the North was reflected in a greater density of *controles* in these regions, with less than 50km between *controles*. The *controles* in the South were much larger (Lamine, 1987).

Figure 1: Map of the *contrôles* introduced under the Protectorate, 1936



Source: Ben Jelloul, 2018

The introduction of territorial reforms was one of the first measures taken after independence in 1956; these reforms eroded the tribal basis of Tunisia's administrative divisions. The *caidats* were replaced with *délégations* based on spatial, rather than tribal, divisions (Decree of 21 June 1956). Like many newly independent nation-states around the region, different ethnic, religious, regional, or tribal identities were seen to threaten the national state-building project (Del Sarto, 2017). The redrawing of territorial divisions sought to remove any link between tribes and administrative

entities (Belhedi, 1989; Filippova and Guerin-Pace, 2008; Guerin-Pace and Guermond, 2006; Signoles and Troin, 1985). The 37 existing *caidats* were divided into 97 delegations designed to divide and weaken tribal power. For instance, in the Center, the *caidat* of the Jlass tribe was split into five delegations – Oueslatia, Haffouz, Hajeb, Nasrallah, and Bouhajla, the *caidat* of the Mejers and Frachiches was divided into seven delegations, while the *caidat* of the Hmamma tribe was split into four delegations (Belhedi, 1989, p. 5). The *macheikhat* were also replaced by *'imedats* (sectors), replacing the *cheikh* (a name that connotes traditional authority) with the *'omda* (Ben Jelloul, 2018).

This reorganization was “continuously refined to destroy the traditional framework of tribes” to counter the power of traditional forms of solidarity (tribes, religious authorities, local notables) and establish the authority of the central state (Belhedi, 1989, p. 6). Tribal and local identities were viewed as threats to the concept of a unified nation-state and the modernization project of Bourguiba and the new political elite (Kerrou, 2017).² The post-independence state sought to fashion Tunisian citizens “liberated from particularistic allegiances (tribal, ethnic, regional, class, etc.) and mentalities that it stigmatized as ‘archaic’” (Chouikha and Gobe, 2015, p. 14). In a speech made shortly after the creation of Sidi Bouzid governorate, he declared:

What I am most afraid of is that the old tribal struggles are reborn and that the struggle that was dominant between cities and certain parts of the countryside returns [...]. These struggles have been the cause of our weakness and our backwardness in the past and they are the ones that attracted colonialism. (Bardo, 18 March 1975, cited in Zaafouri, 1999)

The logic of national security also dictated the boundaries of governorates and delegations, particularly in regions that had experienced political unrest or opposition. For instance, the Bourguiba regime divided the Sahel region into three new governorates – Sousse, Monastir and Mahdia – in the 1960s, following widespread opposition to collectivist agricultural policies. Similarly, after the attempted armed insurrection in Gafsa in 1980, the region was divided into several new governorates – Kebili, Tozeur, Tataouine. New governorates were again created after the 1984 Bread Riots and the rise of a mostly urban-based Islamist movement. This led to the division of Tunis governorate into three – Tunis, Ariana and Ben Arous.

² See, for instance, Habib Bourguiba’s opening speech at the opening session of the National Constituent Assembly on 8 April 1956: “We must preserve the unity of the nation within this assembly because each of us, even if we were elected in a specific place, represents the entirety of this nation and does not defend private interests or the interests of a region rather than another, or the interests of a class over that of another” (National Constituent Assembly Archives, 1956, vol. 1, p. 3).

This perception that administrative boundaries largely follow a security-based logic frequently appears in local discourses, particularly among those from interior regions:

Do you know why we went from 11 governorates to 24? Due to political problems. At independence, there was a terrible conflict in Tunisia between Bourguiba and Salah Ben Youssef. Bourguiba won, therefore the interior regions which were predominantly “Youssefist” were punished. He created new governorates to break the old fiefdoms of power and to control the country, and Ben Ali did the same. Administrative divisions obeyed a logic of control and security surveillance for him. The creation of 13 new governorates since independence was purely political; it made no economic sense (Municipal administrative official, quoted in Yousfi, 2018).

Siliana was a much smaller, much less important town than Makther. Why was it chosen as the center of the governorate [of Siliana]? Because most of the people of Makther were opponents to Bourguiba, along with the South. When you look at Bourguiba’s speeches, he stigmatized certain regions – Kasserine, Gafsa, Makther, etc. He marginalized Makther because it was a threat to him, and he put it in Siliana and refused to make it the center of the governorate. He chose small towns that had no historical weight as the *chef-lieux* so he could control them. Till today, the people of Makther resent this because their town had historical importance. Even the natural location of Makther, it is strategic, it was chosen by the Romans for a reason. But it has been purposely marginalized (Native of Siliana, Tunis, 4 March 2020).

The same security-based logic has also shaped the proliferation of lower administrative units. The number of delegations (*mu’tamadiyya*) and sectors (*imeda*) has greatly increased in recent decades, with the latter rising from 643 in 1956 to 2073 in 2011. Delegations and sectors, as deconcentrated administrative units, are the territorial divisions on which the Ministry of Interior bases its interventions and local and regional presence. As Baron et al. note, the vast expansion in the number of delegations and sectors between 1959 and 1969 has clear security implications. This expansion took place mainly in the South, where the ruling party had the weakest presence, creating “a mesh for exerting power and control” (2015, p. 17) to “reinforce surveillance...and monitoring of tribal populations” (*Ibid.*, p. 9). The number of sectors also rose sharply in the Center, increasing in Sidi Bouzid from 37 in 1974 to 112 in 2010, with 96% of them containing less than 5000 inhabitants (*Ibid.*, p. 9).

3.1.2. Clientelist logics – using municipal boundaries for the purposes of reward and punishment

The recognition of an area as a municipality confers legal rights to a range of basic services such as water, electricity, public lighting, waste collection, civil status registrar and others. It also facilitates access to other public services, such as post offices, state grants, credits and equipment. This designation has economic and territorial planning implications, particularly in the Tunisian economic system where “the role of public authorities is very determinant and where all other activities are linked to their role” (Belhedi, 1989, p. 3).

The creation of a new municipality was an important resource that could be distributed by the head of state to reward allies, facilitated by the fact that, as Baron et al. note, the decision to confer the status of commune was “a purely political act” (2015, p. 17). Before the adoption of the Local Authorities Code in 2018, political officials enjoyed complete discretion in awarding municipal status, as there were no criteria governing the creation of a municipality. The decision was simply taken by the central government and issued by government decree. The creation of a municipality could be used to mobilize support in particular regions or punish opposition in others, as Amor Belhedi explains:

At each political or electoral occasion, we created a municipality. There was no scientific basis for it. It was done simply to show that the state was present and to win support. It was a donation more than a right. In 1985, around 80 municipalities were created in one go before elections without any clear criteria or methodology - simply because the ruling party, the Neo-Destour, wanted to win elections. While those areas that were against the party, they sanctioned them by dividing them up. Why did the division of governorates happen? It was never neutral. It was always part of a political or electoral strategy (Interview, Tunis, 22 April 2019).

The map of administrative boundaries shows an overlap between regions where there was a strong Neo-Destour presence in the Bourguiba era and the awarding of municipal status (Ashford, 1967; Parks, 2011). Whereas Sahel regions and Tunis, where the ruling party was firmly anchored, were historically highly “municipalized”, Southern, Central and Western regions had a low number of municipalities in proportion to their inhabitants (Ben Rebah, 2011; Parks, 2011).³ The most famous example of this is Monastir, the birthplace of Bourguiba. The entirety of Monastir’s

³ 76% of municipal populations live in coastal regions (Ben Jelloul, 2019). It should be noted that the majority of the population live in coastal regions, due to internal migration. However, even when population density is accounted for, coastal regions still have a higher number of municipalities per inhabitant.

territory is covered by municipalities, having the highest number of municipalities (31) of any region but with only the ninth-largest population (MLA, 2016b).

The table below provides a comparison between the number of sectors, delegations and municipalities in two governorates – Monastir, the governorate with the largest number of municipalities and Kairouan, the governorate with the highest incidence of poverty. As can be seen, Kairouan, which has a larger population than Monastir, has a far lower number of municipalities but a greater number of sectors. This allows the creation of a much closer “grid” without providing residents with the basic services guaranteed by law to those in municipalized areas.

Table 1: Comparison between the number of administrative units in the governorates of Monastir and Kairouan before the 2015-16 municipal boundary reforms

	Monastir	Kairouan
Number of inhabitants (2014 census)	548,828	570,559
Number of sectors	79	114
Number of delegations	13	13
Number of municipalities	31	12

Source: Ministry of Interior, 2015

Personal relations also played an important role in boundary decisions. Municipalities were created in areas where local leaders enjoyed privileged relations with the central state (Turki and Gana, 2015, p. 56). For instance, one of the smallest communes in Tunisia, with 6000 inhabitants, is described as a “political accident” and was created in 1982 to please a local notable close to the former regime (Interview, Mokhtar Hammami, Minister of Local Affairs and the Environment, Tunis, 27 November 2019). Another small rural area – Mida, in the Cap Bon – was given municipal status thanks to the “privileged relations” of a local notable with President Bourguiba (Turki and Gana, 2015, p. 56). Ben Ali continued the practice of the discretionary distribution of municipal status as a reward, personally announcing the creation of new municipalities at the national conference of municipalities held every two years (*Ibid.*).

3.1.3. Technocratic logics of centralized sectorial planning

The political and security logics analyzed above have jostled with a technocratic logic that views territories and administrative boundaries largely through the prism of centralized economic or

sectorial planning. In the language of central technical planners, territory is described through figures and statistics, and engaged with through official documents, not through direct fieldwork or observation. This is not necessarily the case for regional-level and local technical planners who are in direct contact with the territories under their administration. However, these regional and local officials are largely excluded from decision-making, as one regional planner in the Ministry of Infrastructure explained:

The central ministry does not consult us when it writes laws... even though we are the ones who are in daily contact with the territory. They create processes that have nothing to do with reality, that are simply impossible to implement. When you go down to the field, when you deal with the public, with local administrations, you see a totally different reality. There is theory up there, then there is the reality here (Interview, Tunis, 4 March 2020).

This highly centralized approach to territorial planning has long been criticized for “not taking sufficient account of specificities” in particular regions (Abbes, 2017, p. 26) such as social, cultural and environmental contexts, sociological composition, the local economy, and environmental needs. The outcome, according to many officials, is that policies – including the setting of boundaries – are shaped by centralized planning logics that are disconnected from local realities, needs and specificities,

The current governorate boundaries are administrative and sometimes not at all suited to territorial planning... To create development, you need to think territorially... This is one of the causes of imbalance we have between regions. Proper territorial planning enables you to think of the needs of an area... about what is needed to create development in that area... The sectorial logic [of central ministries] does not really think about space (Interview, retired former Director General, Ministry of Infrastructure, Tunis, 22 April 2016).

As a whole, the various logics that shape administrative boundaries – security-based, clientelist and technocratic – have set aside local specificities and the ways in which space is used and viewed by inhabitants. This tendency towards a centralized conception of space means that administrative boundaries seldom reflect how space is perceived, used, and produced by individuals and groups. In an analysis of the history of decentralization in Tunisia, Marcou notes that “The Tunisian commune is a creation of central power, which responds to functional necessities, but does not genuinely constitute a human community... Municipal organization in Tunisia follows a functional logic, and not a communitarian logic” (1998, pp. 23, 28). This functional logic – whether to serve security, clientelist or technical functions – contributes to the weak legitimacy of municipalities,

and reflects a wider “relative disconnect [of the state] from local social and economic forces” (Yousfi, 2019).

4. 2011 and the Rethinking of Territory and Space

4.1. Contestation of administrative boundaries

The outbreak of the 2010-11 uprising in marginalized interior regions and urban peripheries disrupted existing territorial hierarchies by giving these areas visible roles as political agents. The question of the relationship between administrative boundaries and identities erupted after 2011 in the form of border disputes and demands to modify the administrative map. Towns that had long contested their inclusion within various governorates used the post-2011 context to draw attention to their plights. For instance, the town of Makther in northwestern Tunisia had long contested its status within the governorate of Siliana. The protests by Makther residents since 2011 to highlight this issue have been referred to as “the revolt of Ouled Ayar” (Jeune Afrique, 2012).⁴ This movement drew on feelings of historical injustice, linking the drawing of administrative boundaries with economic and political exclusion:

When the territorial boundaries were set, the status of *chef-lieu* of the region was given to a less important town – Siliana. Bourguiba accentuated our isolation. The result is rampant unemployment, complete under-development, the absence of all industrial activity, and totally neglected natural resources (Jeune Afrique, 2012).

The large protest movement led to President Marzouki agreeing to meet a delegation from the town, which put forward several demands, including making Makther the *chef-lieu* of the governorate.

Governorate boundaries themselves have become the subject of open contestation since 2011. For instance, residents of Mezzouna, a small town on the outskirts of the plains of Sfax, had long contested their town’s removal from the Sfax governorate, and its integration into the Sidi Bouzid governorate in 1974. Public protests had taken place since January 2011 calling for the town’s return to the Sfax governorate. The islands of Djerba and Zarzis, whose residents have long resented their integration into the Medenine governorate, have also pushed for recognition as separate governorates. The town of Hamma in Gabes has also made similar demands. While seen as worrying signs of the weakening of the state, the eruption of these demands also points to a

⁴ Ouled Ayar is historically the largest clan in the region.

desire for an open debate regarding the relationship between territory, authority, and identity, which had long been suppressed.

5. Chapter Seven and the rationale for generalizing municipalities

The NCA, elected in October 2011 to draft a new constitution, formed six constitutional committees to draft the constitutional text. One of these six was the Committee on Public Regional and Local Authorities (the “Chapter Seven Committee”). The Committee’s task was to draft a chapter on decentralization, designed to address regional inequalities and the systematic marginalization and exclusion of interior regions, which were seen as key causes behind the uprising. The Chapter Seven Committee identified the issue of territorial boundaries early on and dedicated a significant portion of its discussions to debating whether to generalize municipalities to cover all Tunisian territory or reinforce the role of existing rural councils in non-municipalized areas (NCA Committee Meeting Minutes, 7 March 2012).⁵ The discussions reflected a tension between the principle of equality between all citizens, which would require giving all citizens access to a municipality, and practical considerations, such as how to municipalize rural areas with a low population density (NCA Committee Meeting Minutes, 13 March 2012). Despite the Ministry of Interior’s Department for Local Authorities (DGCPL)’s advice to not generalize municipalities, the Committee chose to prioritize political and economic equality and territorial justice, issues that were high on the public agenda in the post-revolution context. Committee members condemned the division of Tunisian territory into municipal and non-municipal territory as a form of discrimination against the third of the population – largely in interior regions – who had been denied the same rights as other citizens.

At a time when interior regions had gained great symbolism in public discourse, the idea of maintaining administrative divisions that served to exclude residents of these regions appeared politically unacceptable. This debate related to municipal service access, as well as the right to local political participation – a fundamental objective of decentralization for the Committee’s members. Since Chapter Seven required the holding of free and fair municipal council elections, failing to generalize municipalities to all Tunisian territory would mean the exclusion of 3.5 million Tunisians from voting in municipal elections, violating their right to equality before the law. This led the Committee members to agree that the generalization of municipalities should be a constitutional principle, and key to achieving territorial justice (Interviews, NCA Chapter Seven Committee members, Tunis, April 2016, March-April 2018).

Accordingly, Article 131 of the Constitution sets out that decentralization is based on three levels of decentralized territorial units – municipalities, regions and districts – which are collectively

⁵ Raised at the committee’s third working meeting on 21 February 2012.

known as “local authorities”. It also stipulates that “each of these categories covers the entirety of the territory of the Republic in line with a division determined by law.” However, while calling for the expansion of municipalities, the Committee avoided the question of setting new regional boundaries, leaving an implicit understanding that regional boundaries should follow those of governorates to avoid stoking regionalism.

6. 2015-17: The municipal boundary reform process

The Ministry of Interior’s DGCPL opposed generalizing the municipal system during the constitutional drafting process in 2011-14. When it embarked on drafting the new decentralization law in March 2014, the DGCPL faced two contradictory preferences. The first was the department’s preference for a gradual and cautious approach. The DGCPL sought to maintain municipalities as they were and to hold municipal elections only in existing municipalities, while slowly generalizing municipalities to all territory over several years (Interview, Mokhtar Hammami, Director General of the DGCPL, Tunis, 18 May 2016). This preference clashed with the preferences of political parties, which took the view that if municipal elections were to be held, it would be unacceptable to deprive one-third of the population of the right to participate. This could be seen as a violation of Article 21 of the Constitution, which stipulated that “citizens are equal in rights and duties” and equal before the law. Furthermore, given that the vast majority of the municipal population (76%) resided in coastal regions, it would go against the constitutional principle of positive discrimination in favor of marginalized regions. It would also risk provoking anger within interior regions, many of which were already witnessing widespread protests and significant grievances.⁶

Pressure from international donors was another important factor for consideration. Studies carried out by international partners strongly encouraged the generalization of municipalities at an early stage (Interviews, DGCPL officials, Tunis, April 2019). Municipalization was one of the conditions or expected results written into various international decentralization programs.⁷ Significant funding and technical assistance were tied to the generalization of municipalities in the short-term. By launching the process of an immediate large-scale redrawing of municipal boundaries, the DGCPL obtained substantial funds to recruit technical experts for the studies needed, as well as

⁶ The issue of the unfair distribution of municipalities among coastal and interior regions was frequently raised by members of the public at regional consultations on the draft Local Authorities Code held in October 2015 (Al Bawsala, 2015).

⁷ See, for instance, the EU’s 43 million Euro “Cap program towards an integral decentralization and development of territories.” One of the expected results is “the completion of the communalization of 50 rural areas of more than 5000 residents” and their publication in the Official Gazette (JORT) (European Union, 2014, p. 23). This is specifically built into the technical assistance to be provided to the Tunisian state via “service contracts and twinning” (p. 26).

for the creation of special support programs for the municipalities.⁸ This encouraged a move towards rapid generalization of municipalities, to be completed before the holding of municipal elections.

The process for the most extensive reform of municipal boundaries since independence was a remarkably quiet and discreet one. It took place in parallel to the drafting of a new Local Election Law and Local Authorities Code to set out the new legal framework for decentralization. However, while the drafting of these texts involved various public drafts, consultations, a lengthy parliamentary debate, and the participation of civil society organizations, the municipal boundary reforms were conducted without any public input. The reforms received little attention in the media, and civil society organizations, experts, and even the municipalities concerned were largely unaware that new boundaries were being drawn until the process had been completed and published in the Official Gazette in 2015 and 2016.

6.1.1. The application of “technical” criteria

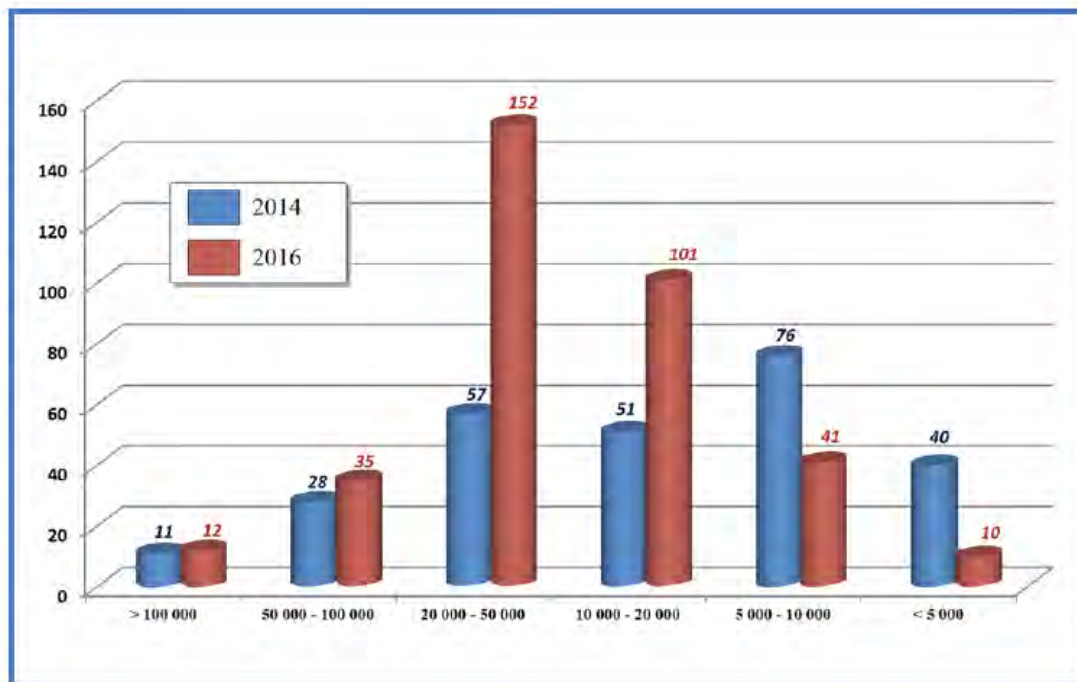
The process of drawing the new municipal boundaries began in March 2014, when the DGCPL engaged an external expert, an economist from the private sector, to oversee the boundary reforms. Although the boundary reforms formed a central part of the broader decentralization process, the work was carried out separately from the teams of experts who were working on the draft Local Election Law and Local Authorities Code. The external experts were all funded by international organizations, such as the European Union and the AFD. The first task was the technical step of obtaining geographic and socio-economic data and territorial maps from various government departments. These provided the basis for developing scenarios to identify whether non-municipalized areas could be integrated by expanding the nearest municipality within their delegation. These scenarios were then assessed according to two main criteria: a demographic index – indicating the demographic capacity of the municipality after extension, and a geographic index – indicating the geographical diffusion of each area. These two indices helped to calculate an “extension index” indicating whether the relevant municipality could reasonably be extended to integrate all non-municipalized areas within the same delegation without becoming too big in terms of population and surface area. The second stage was to apply a set of development-related indices – namely a Rural Area Integration Index, Regulated Rural Area Integration Index, Local

⁸ For instance, the AFD, Italian Development Cooperation and the German development bank KfW launched a 30 million Euro assistance program targeting the 86 new municipalities created in 2015-16.

Development Index, Regulation Index and Positive Segregation Index. The declared aim of applying these indices was to reduce inequalities within and between governorates.

An overview document on the boundary reform process published by the Ministry of Local Affairs (MLA) in 2016⁹ sets out the technical criteria and indices referred to above, which it explains are aimed at achieving two objectives. The first is to “rationalize” the size of municipalities so that they are closer to the national average of 20,000 to 50,000 residents. According to Mokhtar Hammami, the head of the DGCPL who led the process within the administration, 63% of municipalities had fewer than 20,000 residents, which the DGCPL saw as being problematic (Interview, Tunis, 27 November 2019). The second objective was to bring all municipalities’ developmental index scores closer to the national average through the drawing of new boundaries, thus “achieving a reduction in regional gaps to acceptable degrees in relation to all governorates” (2016b, p. 13). The overview document does not explain how these indices were applied or how they operated to reduce developmental inequalities.

Figure 2: Population of municipalities before and after the new municipal boundary reorganization



Source: MLA, 2016b

⁹ The MLA was created as a separate ministry in February 2016, with the DGCPL and a number of other departments being transferred from the Ministry of Interior to the new ministry. The MLA took over the work of completing the boundary reforms from the DGCPL, with the same experts continuing to oversee the process.

6.1.2. Adjusting technical criteria to political pressures

When the proposed new boundaries were presented to the Ministerial Council on 9 February 2016, members of the government objected on the grounds that the distribution of new municipalities still favored the coast (MLA, 2016b). Given that a key objective of the municipal boundary reforms and the decentralization process as a whole was to address regional inequalities – and for politicians to be seen to be addressing them – this was politically unacceptable. A decision was made to add another criterion to the process – positive discrimination in favor of interior regions (Speech by Minister of Local Affairs Youssef Chahed, OECD event, 5 June 2016). An index was developed based on each governorate’s share of municipalities and regional development score. As a result, 24 additional municipalities were created in interior regions (Beja, Kairouan, Kef, Sidi Bouzid, Siliana).

The process led to the overall creation of 86 new municipalities (25 in 2015 and 61 in 2016) and the expansion of the 191 existing municipalities through several government decrees.¹⁰ The MLA’s overview document presents its combination of demographic and developmental indices as “a comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach” (2016b, p. 11). However, the Ministry’s approach made no mention of sociological indicators, which were completely absent from this document and the Ministry’s various public statements. In numerous interviews and speeches by the expert and the leading bureaucrat who oversaw the reform, the emphasis was placed on purely “technical” criteria as the basis for the new boundaries. As Mokhtar Hammami explained, “The big accomplishment is that we applied the criteria in a way that was neutral... It was an IT application with indicators. So tomorrow they can question us, why did you do this or that... But that was our approach” (Interview, Tunis, 27 November 2019). The idea of neutral and technical criteria as the best way to manage the boundary reforms is present throughout Hammami’s discourse as a means of legitimating the boundaries. The assumption is that sociological factors relating to social ties, local identities, and local patterns of social and economic exchange are too non-technical, subjective, and problematic to be taken into account. When questioned further on why sociological factors were not taken into account, Hammami acknowledged,

When we did all this work - the sociological aspect, we did not take it seriously... We need sociologists by our side to study it, is this tribe or group there compatible with that one. It was very difficult. We could not get into these discussions... It’s not necessary, that was our position because we were working on things that were - neutral. That was our goal...

¹⁰ Decrees 205, 1262 to 1278, 2131 and 2132 of 2015, and Decrees 600, 601, 602 in May 2016.

Sometimes there are two clans that...want to be integrated in one' *imeda*... But if we get into this issue, we will never get out of it. We cannot allow municipalities to become identity-based (Interview, Tunis, 27 November 2019).

This refusal to take into account the “sociological aspect” is also linked to the second general critique made against the boundary reform process: its closed and non-participatory nature. A number of academics and observers have criticized the DGCPL (later MLA) for not considering the views and preferences of residents, despite the significant implications thereof (Ben Jelloul, 2019). In addition, they noted that the process was dominated by senior bureaucrats, to the exclusion of civil society and even political parties, resulting in “a technocratic approach” that focused exclusively on technical criteria and “sideline[d] social questions of territorial development, which are the main concern of local populations” (Turki and Gana, 2015, p. 70).

Time constraints played a role in the decision to adopt a closed process, given that the municipal election date was initially set for 2016 (which was subsequently delayed to 2017 then to 2018). The pressure by international donors to complete the municipalization reforms, and the commitments made by the government to push ahead with the decentralization process and municipal elections, constrained the scope for a lengthier and more comprehensive process. However, the time constraint appears to be only one factor in the DGCPL's approach, as Hammami's explanation above illustrates. The decision to exclude sociological factors was also shaped by the conviction that such factors were inherently problematic and were best avoided. This was further supported by statements by the expert who led the boundary reform process, who explained that engaging the public in the boundary reform process “would provoke unrest” and regionalism (*jihawiyya*) and that addressing sociological factors was “out of the question” (Interview, Djerba, 16 April 2019).

This fundamental fear of waking the sleeping giant of local and tribal identities often emerges in senior bureaucrats' discourse on decentralization in general, and the municipal boundary reforms in particular. The perceived weakening of the state after 2011 and the emergence of local and regional demands, particularly for a share of natural resource revenues, fed these fears.¹¹ The technical language and criteria used by senior bureaucrats and experts were thus grounded in the same security-based logic that guided post-independence territorial reforms. This approach views local and regional demands and the existence of different local identities as a threat to national security and unity. Articulating abstract and “neutral” technical rules is thus a means of imposing

¹¹ See, for instance, protests in Kamour in the South, which have consistently included demands that a share of natural resource revenues be invested in the region, “Tunisia: In Tataouine, socio-economic marginalization is a time bomb”, Alessandra Bajec, Arab Reform Initiative, 24 July 2020.

the vision of a homogenous and unified society that underlies the nation-building project. It echoes Bourguiba's view that there should be "no Beni X or Beni Y¹², only 'Tunisians'" (Sidi Bouzid, 12 November 1956, quoted in Camau and Geisser, 2004, p. 304).

This vision of the nation-state continues to shape the institutional practices of the highly centralized Tunisian administration and its framework for managing social diversity. Technical criteria and language serve as a means of insulating the decision-making process from sociological considerations and the influence of local and regional identities and demands. Thus, as the lead expert involved in the boundary reform process explained, the aim from the beginning was to undertake the process with the minimum level of public debate in order to exclude thorny issues; "It passed without too much fuss, and that's what we wanted. It could have become a very controversial issue. It would have been catastrophic. It passed quietly, under the radar, without too many problems" (Interview, Djerba, 16 April 2019).

6.1.3. The intervention of clientelist logics

6.1.3.1. Modification of *'imeda* boundaries

While appearing to be a highly technical process, a comparison between the DGCPL's discourse and the new administrative map reveals the operation of divergent logics. The map shows that, in many instances, technical criteria were modified or wholly flouted. For example, a strict rule that the DGCPL repeatedly affirmed as a core principle of the new boundary reforms was that municipal boundaries should not cut across the boundaries of an *'imeda* (sector) (MLA, 2016b). Thus, each *'imeda* would be kept intact in all circumstances to keep the municipal boundaries as coherent as possible with the boundaries of the *'imedat* and *mu'tamdiyat* (delegations), the territorial units used by the central state for planning, and by the Ministry of Interior for security purposes.

However, as explored in the case studies below, several instances have emerged where the boundaries of *'imedat* were altered. These cases gave rise to complaints that the boundaries were modified to benefit individual economic interests. For instance, in the governorate of Nabeul, the DGCPL created the new municipality of Chrifet-Boucharray in 2016 out of territory taken from the existing municipality of Slimene. While the new boundary was supposed to keep the boundaries of the *'imedat* within both municipalities intact, the boundaries of the new municipality cut into an *'imeda* that was part of Slimene, which contained several factories, including Delice, the

¹² "Beni" is the prefix frequently used in the names of clans and tribes.

largest dairy company in Tunisia. This meant the transfer of a large percentage of Slimene municipality's tax revenues to the newly created municipality of Chrifet-Boucharray.

The municipality of Slimene presented a complaint dated 23 June 2017 (before the May 2018 municipal elections) to the governor of Nabeul, who transmitted it to the MLA, complaining that the territory of the new municipality overlapped with its own. MLA sent the complaint to the National Center for Topography to request that they look into the matter in coordination with the governorate of Nabeul. No response was made to the complaint, and a decree was issued on 9 September 2019 setting the precise boundaries of the new municipality of Chrifet-Boucharray – including the territory that was the subject of Slimene's complaint. This was, according to the MLA, due to an “administrative oversight” (Interview, senior MLA official, Tunis, 24 June 2020).

Slimene's new municipal council submitted a complaint to the MLA soon after its election in May 2018 and has sought to find a solution with Chrifet-Boucharray. However, the mayor and municipal councilors of Chrifet-Boucharray have refused to reconsider the boundaries, threatening to collectively resign and provoking an ongoing conflict between the two municipalities (Nessma, 2019). In November 2019, when a meeting was held to discuss the issue with regional officials, the municipal council of Chrifet-Boucharray closed the municipality in protest, causing significant anger among its residents (Mosaique FM, 2019). The municipal council of Slimene has accused those who carried out the boundary reform of corruption and accepting bribes from certain local businessmen in exchange for integrating a part of Slimene into the new municipality.¹³

The municipality of Enfidha in the governorate of Sousse presents a similar case. It was divided in two, with the new municipality of Krimet Hicher created out of its former territory (Decree No. 601 of 2016). A dispute arose over the location of a factory, with the boundaries of the new municipality going around the factory so Enfidha could retain it, thus cutting across the borders of the relevant *'imeda*. The new boundaries have caused significant contestation, as well as violent conflict between the two municipalities, as one MLA official described:

I joined a meeting in Enfidha with the mayor and secretary-general [of Enfidha] and some of the people from the new municipality. It got heated, and one of the men hit the mayor with a chair. There was a big glass behind him, and it completely shattered. We thought he was going to die. This was all about the boundaries and the problems now between Enfidha and the new municipalities. Enfidha was split – and this factory was taken out

¹³ In addition, the mayor of Chrifet-Boucharray has been accused of several counts of corruption, with at least two cases currently under investigation by the national anti-corruption commission, the INLUCC (Assarih, 2020; Babnet, 2019).

because the factory owner is friends with the governor. It's a big mistake (Interview, Tunis, 17 February 2020).¹⁵

Thus, just as with the drawing of administrative boundaries between 1956 and 2011, we see how divergent logics can simultaneously intervene in setting boundaries. Apparently rigid and “neutral” technical criteria for decision-making sit alongside, and are often contravened in order to accommodate clientelist logics. Similar practices of applying seemingly neutral, technical criteria in ways that benefit politically well-connected individuals are also highlighted in Ben Jelloul's study of urban rehabilitation programs under the Ben Ali regime (2013).¹⁶ As Ben Jelloul notes, while technical conditions are ostensibly at play, the reality is that “the political dimension... very clearly overrides technical aspects” (*Ibid.*, p. 8).

While Ben Jelloul argues that technical criteria are entirely illusory, both technical and clientelist logics play a role at different stages of decision-making. Administrative officials propose technical logics, which do guide the early stages of policymaking, as seen by the Ministerial Council's acceptance of most of the DGCPL's proposals and technical criteria. Additionally, in the context of large programs, particularly those funded by international donors, technical criteria provide the indispensable function of legitimating choices to donors and external partners, as well as domestic audiences. Government officials clearly give importance to setting technical criteria and frequently refer to them as a means of justifying their choices, as seen in the way technical criteria were deployed in official speeches and statements on the municipal boundary reforms.¹⁷ However, while they may be a starting point, technical criteria can subsequently be set aside or circumvented when they conflict with other interests of a security, political, or economic nature.

6.1.3.2. Reversing municipal boundary decisions

A similar process of selectively applying technical criteria can also be seen in decisions to divide large municipalities. One of the criteria officially set by the DGCPL was that large municipalities should be divided where a large population size or geographical surface area would impede residents from having easy access to the municipality, based on the indices explained above. Consequently, a number of large municipalities such as Sidi Bouzid, Gabes, Mhamdia-Fouchana, and Ettadhamen-Mnihla were divided into two or more municipalities. This separation had

¹⁵ Residents in Enfidha contested the new boundaries when they were first announced in 2016, blocking a highway and demanding that the Minister of Local Affairs revise the boundary changes (Zoom Tunisia, 2016).

¹⁶ As a regional governor who had responsibility for implementing the program in Medenine governorate, Ben Jelloul was particularly well placed to observe decision-making processes and practices within the program.

¹⁷ Observation notes, conferences – OECD (April 2016); MLA (April 2018); CILG-VNG (January 2020); GIZ (February 2020).

significant economic consequences for the original municipality, which saw part of its infrastructure and revenue sources taken away.

One example is Mhamdia-Fouchana, a municipality with 200,000 inhabitants. The municipality was divided into two separate municipalities – Mhamdia and Fouchana. Fouchana municipality contained virtually all of the former municipality's industrial zone, which brought in 95% of Mhamdia-Fouchana's local business tax revenues. Meanwhile, Mhamdia was left with almost no industry and very few revenue sources. According to MLA officials, it was apparent that a separation would leave Fouchana with all the economic potential while Mhamdia would have few sources of revenue, but no steps were taken to mitigate this or put in place transitional arrangements (Interview, Tunis, 19 November 2019). As the mayor of Mhamdia, who was also a member of the interim municipal council prior to the 2018 municipal elections, explained:

Each delegation took whatever resources it had. They [Fouchana] inherited the industrial zone, and we inherited anarchic construction... Before the separation, I met with the governor in 2015, and I involved civil society in the meeting, to ask for the industrial zone's revenues to be split between the two municipalities for the first five to ten years. They gave us assurances that this would be done, but after the revolution they make lots of promises then you see nothing. They promised us maybe it could happen... Nothing happened. They said no, it's against the law. On top of it, the territory of Mhamdia was extended, so we now have to cover a bigger territory and provide services to a larger number of residents with fewer resources (Interview, Mhamdia, 28 January 2020).

Other large municipalities, however, were not divided or saw the initial decision to divide them reversed. For instance, the municipality of Jendouba, the *chef-lieu* of Jendouba governorate, was to be split into two municipalities under the reforms. However, after protests organized by residents and local civil society organizations, and the intervention of the region's members of parliament and political parties in early 2017, the decision was reversed.

Similarly, in the Bizerte governorate, the DGCPL proposed the division of Bizerte municipality, the *chef-lieu* of the Bizerte governorate, into two, with the delegation of Zarzouna to be separated off into its own municipality. However, local notables mobilized to oppose this in light of the economic impact that losing the municipality's industrial zone and all of its large markets, located in Zarzouna, would have. As one local notable, a former governor, explained:

The economic elites of Bizerte mobilized. There was great pressure... by the economic actors – businessmen particularly, via UTICA, the region's MPs, via corporatist structures

and professional associations... Taking away the wholesale market alone would cause 1.5m dinars a year loss to the municipality... There was enormous pressure by the residents of Zarzouna [for a separate municipality]. But they're largely migrants. They're not Binzartis... The most influential actors are the Binzartis. They would never accept that that territory becomes its own municipality - that their city would lose 30-35% of its budget; and sociologically, they consider that Zarzounis are 'nouzouh', they're not real Binzartis. They would never say this openly but as a Binzarti, I know this (Interview, Tunis, 19 June 2020).

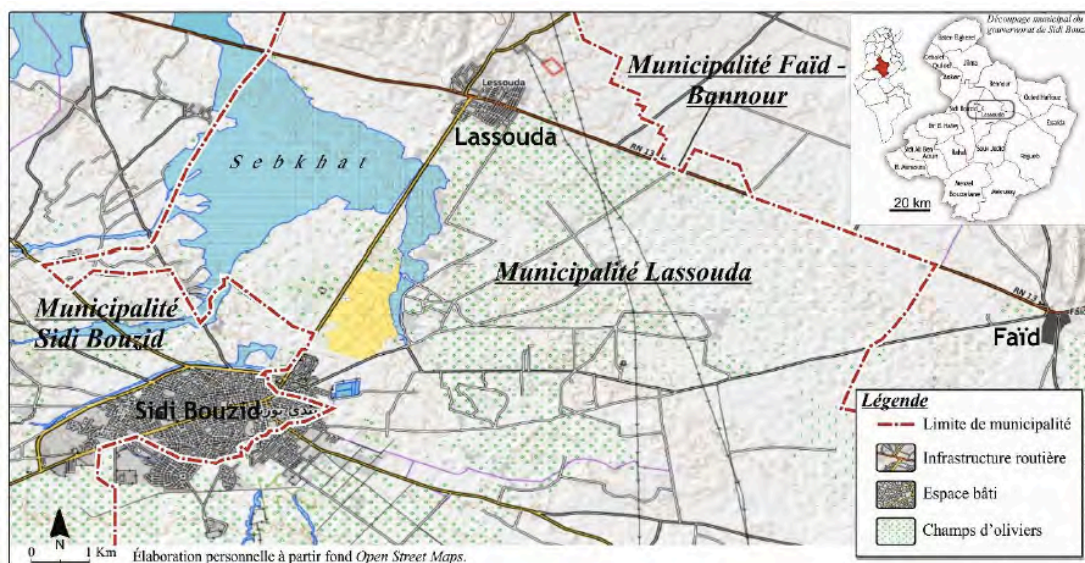
While official discourse presents technical criteria as the sole basis of boundary drawing, analyzing the details of individual cases reveals the operation of a relational logic. The cases of Jendouba, Mhamdia-Fouchana, and Bizerte show that where there is social mobilization for and against boundary decisions, *who* mobilizes and *how* are essential factors. While mobilization by civil society and local elites at the regional level in Mhamdia-Fouchana was unsuccessful, it was successful in Bizerte and Jendouba, where local notables were able to leverage ties to national decision-makers, whether individually or via representative structures, and thus overturn the application of "neutral" technical criteria. The influence of these relational resources does not necessarily correlate to the economic weight of the area; while Bizerte is certainly wealthier than Mhamdia-Fouchana, Jendouba municipality was also able to prevent its division while being located in one of the poorest governorates. What appears to be more significant is the positioning of local notables and their abilities to effectively access national decision-makers through various channels.

The case of Sidi Bouzid further illustrates the importance of local elites' capacity to access national decision-makers, and the ineffectiveness of broad social mobilization alone when it comes to determining municipal boundary decisions. In the case of Sidi Bouzid municipality (the *chef-lieu* of Sidi Bouzid governorate), the DGCPL decided to divide the municipality into three municipalities – Sidi Bouzid (which contains most of the city of Sidi Bouzid), Al Ahouaz-Al Assouda, and Fayedh-Bennour (Decrees no. 600 and 601 of 26 May 2016). These decisions provoked widespread and sustained local contestation that began shortly after the new municipalities were announced.

Residents of several *imedit* in Sidi Bouzid began organizing protests outside the governor's office in August 2016 against the division of the municipality, threatening to boycott municipal elections if the decision was not reviewed (Babnet, 2017; Karama FM, 2016). Residents of several neighborhoods of Sidi Bouzid rejected their incorporation into the two newly created municipalities because they saw themselves as part of Sidi Bouzid, claiming strong family and social

ties to the town. The neighborhood of Aouled Chelbi, for instance, was divided in two by the new boundaries, with one part incorporated into the new municipality of Al Ahouaz-Al Assouda and the other part remaining in the municipality of Sidi Bouzid. The residents of Al Ahouaz-Al Assouda also contested their integration as they were physically divided from the center of their new municipality by mudflats (*sebkha*) and could not access municipal services.

Figure 3: Map of New Municipal Boundaries Separating Sidi Bouzid, Al Ahouaz-Al Assouda and Fayedh-Bennour



Source: Ben Jelloul, 2019

When their protests received no official response, residents organized sit-ins in front of the MLA in Tunis and submitted a petition signed by 600 residents. There were also calls to boycott the elections, which may have contributed to the municipalities' low voter turn-out (27.42% for Al Ahouaz-Al Assouda and 24.92% for Fayedh-Bennour compared to the regional average of 35%).

The new boundaries have had enormous economic consequences for the municipality of Sidi Bouzid. In the new division, the *'imeda* of Al Ahouaz was annexed to the new municipality of Al Ahouaz-Al Assouda, depriving Sidi Bouzid municipality of the revenues from the significant economic infrastructure there, including the livestock market, the municipal depot, and the industrial zone. The new municipal council of Sidi Bouzid has rejected the division and brought a claim in the administrative court.

Table 2: Population Size and Surface Area of the Four Case Studies

	Bizerte	Sidi Bouzid	Jendouba	Mhamdia-Fouchana
Population	167,759	122,676	74,421	113,156
Surface area (km²)	457.97	422,96	294.26	122
Divided?	No	Yes – into three	No	Yes – into two

Source: MLA, 2016a

This relational logic and the influence of local elites on decisions regarding municipal boundaries once again replicate historical practices prior to 2011. Under the Ben Ali regime, the central government issued a decision to create the municipality of Raoued (in the Ariana governorate) in 2003. The wealthy neighboring municipality of La Marsa, whose municipal council was composed of local elites closely allied to the regime, issued a decision in 2004 to integrate part of Raoued's coastal land into La Marsa, without the permission of Raoued. This land was sold to property developers in highly lucrative deals. The influence and economic interests of La Marsa's elite, close to the ruling circle, were seen to play a role in the decision. Meanwhile, Raoued, a relatively poor and semi-rural municipality, had little influence over the decision.¹⁹ The long-dormant dispute was revived after the 2018 municipal elections when the newly elected mayor and council decided to bring legal proceedings against La Marsa for appropriating the land in question (Webmanagercenter, 2019).

7. The Impact of Boundary Reforms on Local Spatial Practices

The combination of security-based and clientelist logics that shaped the 2015-17 municipal boundary reform process has produced territorial boundaries that have little connection with local spatial practices. Residents in a number of municipalities have discovered that they have become part of a new municipality that is physically inaccessible to them. For instance, the residents of the *'imeda* of Rhima in Kairouan have found themselves attached to the newly created municipality of Chaouachi.²⁰ However, there is no road to link them Chaouachi. Residents are now contesting the decision (Interview, MLA official, Tunis, 27 January 2020). Similarly, residents of the *'imeda* of

¹⁹ Interviews, mayor of La Marsa, mayor of Raoued, MLA officials, November 2019.

²⁰ Decree 601.

Aouled Aoun have protested against their inclusion within the municipality of Sbikha in the Kairouan governorate, which is 40km away and difficult to access. Meanwhile, they are only 4.5km from the municipality of Nadhour in Zaghouane governorate.

Residents of the area of Hichria in the Sidi Bouzid West delegation (Sidi Bouzid governorate), which is composed of three *imedat* and over 20,000 residents, have contested the new boundaries for not taking into account the mountains that lie between them and the nearest municipal center, situated 40km away. They have demanded their own municipality and delegation on the basis that they have “suffered many injustices by successive governments” reflected in poor infrastructure and the fragmentation of their administrative services (Assabah, 2017). Residents in Sidi Bouzid and Kebili have found that municipal boundaries run through their houses, which did not appear on outdated or insufficiently detailed Ministry of Interior maps. MLA officials only became aware of these oversights when members of the public submitted complaints as they tried to register to vote in the 2018 municipal elections (Interview, MLA official, Tunis, 27 January 2020).

These concrete, geographical realities were overlooked in a process that, according to even those who were most closely involved, was “carried out in offices behind closed doors” with little engagement with spatial realities (Interview, MLA official, 11 March 2020). The DGCPL justified this approach based on the sensitive nature of the reforms and the difficulties in balancing competing considerations and demands. However, the decision to set aside sociological and economic factors in initial criteria has simply meant that they have had to be integrated at a later stage. The MLA has, since 2016, found itself facing hundreds of complaints over the boundaries. In 2017, it was forced to issue several decrees modifying the boundaries set in 2015 and 2016. The Ministry set up a department charged with investigating complaints and carrying out field visits to correct basic geographical errors in the boundaries. Meanwhile, a separate committee is investigating the more contentious cases involving conflicts. As of June 2020, the Ministry had yet to complete the drafting of all the final, detailed municipal boundaries (Interview, MLA officials, 24 June 2020).

The question of how municipalities can effectively govern the spaces assigned to them has been raised across all municipalities. In addition to the 86 new municipalities, 191 existing municipalities were expanded to cover territory around them that was previously not municipalized without consulting these municipalities and without increasing their budgets. This meant, in some cases, municipalities drastically increasing in size and population. For instance, the municipality of Kebili, the *chef-lieu* of the Kebili governorate, is situated in the largest governorate by surface area, much

of which was not municipalized before 2015. With the municipal expansion, Kebili municipality went from 34 km² to 1902 km² and doubled in population. As the mayor explained:

They added 13 villages to Kebili. This doubled the population but also our costs. Our electricity bill went from 650,000 to 1.3 million dinars. At the same time, there was no help, no support, no assistance. We have the same budget as before. This was a big challenge for us. These [newly added] areas have expectations of local governance and of services... It was a challenge to establish a relationship with the new villages at first. The issue is we don't even have enough drivers to provide waste collection. Sometimes between villages, there's 50km, and our engines can't go beyond 15km (Interview, Kebili, 3 February 2020).

A less quantifiable, but nevertheless tangible, impact of the reforms relates to how residents view and interact with their newly expanded, modified, or created municipalities. The boycotting of the municipal elections in many areas due to boundary disputes illustrate how local representations of space shape the way in which people think about political community and participation. This has an impact, not only on belonging and participation but also on municipalities' capacity to govern their territory. Where boundaries are drawn in ways that have little connection with the daily spatial practices of residents, this can impact residents' perceptions of their municipality its legitimacy. In particular, uncertainty over municipal boundaries in some areas and ongoing contestation has undermined municipalities' capacity to exert authority. In a polarized post-authoritarian and fragile democracy, boundary conflicts can also provide a lever for stoking conflicts within municipal councils and between the municipality and residents (Interview, mayor, Naassen municipality, 17 February 2020).

8. Conclusion

Questions of spatial practices and representations – of how people use and view the space around them – are at the heart of territorial governance. Far from being “neutral,” “technical,” and “objective,” abstract criteria that deny or overlook the existence of local specificities act as a “codification of dominant representations of space, and a technical mechanism for reproducing that dominance” (Butler, 2009, p. 313). By imposing their own representations of space that ignore or erase spatial practices, central planners' abstract approaches serve “to eliminate contradictions, establish coherence, and ... reduce reality in the interests of power” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 367).

The municipal boundary reforms of 2015-17 largely demonstrate historical continuity in administrative boundary-making practices in Tunisia. Before 2011, boundary changes were made in line with a combination of security-based, clientelist, and technocratic logics. The security-based

logic continues, fed by perceived risks of a revival of tribal and regional identities and the weakening of the state. The tension between clientelist and technocratic logics continues, with clientelist logics continuing to dominate where there is a conflict between the two. Technocratic views of space continue to be used to legitimate central state decisions and frame territorial issues as essentially technical questions to be determined by experts and technocrats in closed arena, away from public participation. Boundary decisions continue to be framed in “neutral” technical language, whereas in reality, decisions are subject to the influence of political and economic interests.

While some municipalities are seeking to overcome the challenges associated with the new municipal boundaries through resident outreach, many of the municipalities examined above express concerns that boundary conflicts and anomalies have weakened municipal authority. They argue that the creation of units that have little connection to how residents use and perceive space undermines the capacity of municipalities to govern effectively. This demonstrates that municipal boundaries, as political institutions in themselves, do matter, and serve to structure local interactions, as well as shape the authority and legitimacy of municipal institutions.

The next step in Tunisia’s decentralization reforms is a regionalization process that requires the creation of elected regional councils. Regional boundaries are likely to adopt existing governorate boundaries. However, the challenge here is that, as Ben Jelloul notes, regions have “never been a reality in the Tunisian territorial mosaic” (2018, p. 13). Transforming regions from administrative entities created by the central state for centralized control into political and economic actors with their own economic vision and a say in national development policies will be a crucial challenge in Tunisians’ quest for territorial justice.

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