

**COI QUERY**

Country of Origin	Tunisia
Main subject	Security situation in Kasserine Governorate
Question(s)	1. Information on the security situation in Kasserine Governorate between 2016-2018 2. Information on the impact of the security situation on the everyday life of Kasserine inhabitants (i.e. access to schools, hospitals, workplace) 3. Information on documented attacks targeting Soltani's clan in Kasserine 4. Within the region, is there any denied/restricted area for civilians? If so, how extended is this area?
Date of completion	31 October 2018
Query Code	Q129
Contributing EU+ COI units (if applicable)	

Disclaimer

This response to a COI query has been elaborated according to the [Common EU Guidelines for Processing COI](#) and [EASO COI Report Methodology](#).

The information provided in this response has been researched, evaluated and processed with utmost care within a limited time frame. All sources used are referenced. A quality review has been performed in line with the above mentioned methodology. This document does not claim to be exhaustive neither conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to international protection. If a certain event, person or organisation is not mentioned in the report, this does not mean that the event has not taken place or that the person or organisation does not exist. Terminology used should not be regarded as indicative of a particular legal position.

The information in the response does not necessarily reflect the opinion of EASO and makes no political statement whatsoever.

The target audience is caseworkers, COI researchers, policy makers, and decision making authorities. The answer was finalised on the 31 October 2018. Any event taking place after this date is not included in this answer.



COI QUERY RESPONSE

1. Information on the security situation in Kasserine Governorate between 2016-2018

Kasserine is one of the 24 governorates of Tunisia and located in the central west of the country, along the Algerian border (200 km). The administrative centre is the town Kasserine and the total population of the governorate is approximately 440 thousand (total population of Tunisia is approximately 11,4 million)¹.

For the last seven years, Tunisian security forces have been combatting two jihadi groups: Katiba Uqba ibn Nafi (KUIN)², affiliated with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and Jund al-Khilafah-Tunisia (JAK-T)³. The latter is a splinter group of KUIN that, after 2014, pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State in 2014⁴.

Both groups are active in five northwestern governorates (Kasserine, Kef, Jendouba, Sidi Bouzid, and Gafsa). 'The governorates of Kasserine and Kef are at the center of the KUIN and JAK-T challenge', while the three other governorates are affected by 'intermittent clashes'⁵. Security forces were able to weaken both groups by dismantling 'suspected terrorist cells in counterterrorism operations'⁶. Especially, KUIN 'has been significantly weakened by the army and the national guard'⁷. The annually 'Crime & Safety Report', published by the Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC) of the US State Department, reported that 'Police and military are engaged in operations to combat terrorism and disrupt terrorist cells, especially near the Algerian and Libyan border areas, included but not limited to Kasserine, El Kef, Jendouba, Sidi Bouzid, and Ben Guerdane. Most border operations were reported in the closed military area of Mount Chaambi'⁸.

Researcher and Tunisia-expert Max Herbert says both jihadi groups 'are roughly the same size'. However, he expects that 'due to continued KUIN defections and heightened JAK-T recruitment, the latter will soon become the largest group in the northwest'⁹. In June 2018, Herbert estimated the number of JAK-T fighters between 90 and 100¹⁰. Furthermore, he reported that 'At least 127 militants

¹ CIA Factbook, *Tunisia*, last updated 17 October 2018, ([url](#)); Invest in Tunisia, *Kasserine in a Nutshell*, last update 31 October 2018 (http://www.investintunisia.tn/En/kasserine-in-a-nutshell_114_536)

² KUIN is also known by the abbreviation KUBN (Katibat 'Uqbah Bin Nafi). See Zelin, A.Y., *Katibat 'Uqbah Bin Nafi/al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib Attacks in Tunisia*, 8 October 2018 ([url](#))

³ Herbert, M., *The Insurgency in Tunisia's Western Borderlands*, Canergie Endowment for International Peace, 28 June 2018 ([url](#))

⁴ ACLED, *Shepherds – An Overrepresented Insurgent Target Group*, 7 September 2018, ([url](#))

⁵ Herbert, M., *The Insurgency in Tunisia's Western Borderlands*, Canergie Endowment for International Peace, 28 June 2018, ([url](#))

⁶ GardaWorld, *Tunisia: State of emergency extended through November 6 /update 3*, 7 October 2018, ([url](#))

⁷ International Crisis Group, *Jihadist Violence in Tunisia: The Urgent Need for a National Strategy*, Briefing N°50, Middle East & North Africa, 22 June 2016, ([url](#)), p. 5

⁸ OSAC/US DoS, *Tunisia 2018 Crime & Safety Report*, 7 July 2018, ([url](#))

⁹ Herbert, M., *The Insurgency in Tunisia's Western Borderlands*, Canergie Endowment for International Peace, 28 June 2018

¹⁰ Warner, J. and C. Hulme, 'The Islamic State in Africa: Estimating Fighter Numbers in Cells Across the Continent', in: *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 11, Issue 7, August 2018, ([url](#)), p.25



and 118 soldiers, national guardsmen, and police officers have been killed in the northwest' since 2011¹¹.

In September 2018, ACLED reported that 'While civilians ("non-shepherds") have been subjected to a larger number of violent assaults, the shepherds have suffered more incidents of fatal violence and IED attacks' since 2015. ACLED registered 5 shepherds were killed against 3 (other) civilians. 'The use of shepherds by the army and national guard personnel for intelligence gathering' make them a target for the aforementioned jihadi groups. ACLED also reported that 'at least six incidents related to militant activity have involved shepherds during the first six months of 2018'¹².

Overview of incidents in the Kasserine Governorate (2016 -2018)¹³

On 30 March 2016, a border guard was injured after a vehicle was ambushed 'by more than a dozen "terrorists" in the Kasserine region near Tunisia's frontier with Algeria'¹⁴.

On 29 August 2016, 'Islamist militants killed three Tunisian soldiers and wounded seven', after their convoy hit anti-tank landmines in the Mount Sammama area, Kassarine¹⁵.

On 7 November 2016, 'an Army corporal was killed when 20 terrorists stormed his home in Kasserine. Additional forces were immediately deployed to the area and search operations were conducted'¹⁶.

On 9 November 2016, 'Tunisian Army forces located and killed Talal Saïdi, the leader of JAK-T, the group responsible for the [aforementioned] attack'¹⁷.

On 17 February 2017, according to a statement by the defence ministry, a military unit shot dead 2 suspected jihadist and wounded others on Mount Sammama, in Kasserine. Furthermore, a suspected person was detained and three firearms and ammunition were seized during the operation¹⁸.

On 22 August 2017, two soldiers were injured when a landmine exploded while they were patrolling in the military zone in the mountains of Kasserine¹⁹.

On 11 December 2017, the detonation of an explosive device left at least one soldier dead and six others wounded during a military patrol near Mount Chaambi, Kasserine²⁰.

¹¹ Herbert, M., *The Insurgency in Tunisia's Western Borderlands*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 28 June 2018 ([url](#))

¹² ACLED, *Shepherds – An Overrepresented Insurgent Target Group*, 7 September 2018, ([url](#))

¹³ This overview should not be regarded as exhaustive.

¹⁴ Al Arabiya, *Tunisia border guard wounded in 'terrorist' ambush*, 31 March 2016, ([url](#))

¹⁵ Reuters, *Militants kill three Tunisian soldiers in ambush near Algerian border: army*, 29 August 2016, ([url](#))

¹⁶ US DoS, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2016 - Tunisia*, 19 July 2017, ([url](#))

¹⁷ US DoS, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2016 - Tunisia*, 19 July 2017, ([url](#))

¹⁸ News24, *Tunisian soldiers kill 2 suspected jihadists: ministry*, 18 February 2017, ([url](#))

¹⁹ Mosaique, *Kasserine : Deux soldats blessés dans l'explosion d'une mine*, 22 August 2017, ([url](#))

²⁰ GardaWorld, *Tunisia: Mine explosion leaves one dead, six wounded in Kasserine Dec. 11*, 13 December 2017, ([url](#))



On 1 August 2018, an armed group robbed a Tunisian bank in the town of Kasserine near the Algerian border. According to a Tunisian security official the attack had a “terrorist background”²¹.

On 23 August 2018, a 28-year-old shepherd was captured and tortured by KUIN militants, while grazing his sheep in a closed military zone on Mount Chaambi, Kasserine. Although the man was transferred to a military hospital in Tunis, he succumbed to his wounds the day after²².

On 24 September 2018, two civilians were killed when a car hit a landmine in a military zone in Kasserine said the Ministry of Defence a statement. The landmine is allegedly ‘planted by terrorists’²³.

On 3 October 2018, KUIN militants carried out two improvised explosive device (IED) attacks in the area of Mount Chaambi, Kasserine. At least two soldiers were killed and multiple others were wounded in the attacks²⁴.

2. Information on the impact of the security situation on the everyday life of Kasserine inhabitants (i.e. access to schools, hospitals, workplace)

Due to ‘the region’s long-standing marginalization’, residents of Kasserine governorate ‘have limited socioeconomic opportunities and poor access to education and healthcare’ and ‘many are unemployed’²⁵. Several sources reported that the Kasserine Governorate has one of the most worst socioeconomic indicators in the country²⁶.

Beside the marginalization of the region, the security situation affects the daily life of the population as well. In an article published by Al-Monitor in June 2017, it was mentioned that:

‘the deteriorating security and economic conditions in the Tunisian mountainous areas affected by the jihadi groups in the Kasserine, Jendouba and Sidi Bouzid governorates. Residents have been suffering under the decline of agricultural and pastoral activity in the area due to the unstable security situation and the state’s inability to provide alternatives to help’²⁷.

Al-Monitor also reported that:

‘In April 2014, the Tunisian authorities declared Mount Chambi and some of its adjacent areas, such as Semmama, Salloum and Mghila mountains, a closed military zone, after jihadi groups

²¹ Reuters, *Armed raid on Tunisian bank treated as terrorism-related: official*, 1 August 2018, ([url](#))

²² ACLED, *Shepherds – An Overrepresented Insurgent Target Group*, 7 September 2018, ([url](#)); News24, *Tunisia shepherd dies after jihadist attack: ministry*, 26 June 2018, ([url](#))

²³ Xinhua, *2 civilians killed in landmine explosion in western Tunisia*, 26 September 2018, ([url](#))

²⁴ GardaWorld, *Tunisia: AQIM militants kill two soldiers near Jebel ech Chaambi October 3*, 4 October 2018, ([url](#))

²⁵ Herbert, M., *The Insurgency in Tunisia’s Western Borderlands*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 28 June 2018, ([url](#))

²⁶ Conversation (The), *Why Tunisians are back on the streets seven years after the Jasmine Revolution*, 18 January 2018, ([url](#)); TRT World, *In Tunisia’s hotbed of revolution people now struggle to find work*, 19 July 2018, ([url](#))

²⁷ Al-Monitor, *Tunisia’s poor population face death by terrorists*, 24 June 2017, ([url](#))

claimed the area as their stronghold. Getting access to this region now requires permits from the military authorities. This reduced the size of the pastoral area used by the local population. The decision also ended wood and coal production and the harvesting of wild plants that are sold for oil extraction, all of which are daily activities that allow residents to put food on the table in a primitive economy that lacks services'²⁸.

Furthermore, Al-Monitor quoted a civil society activist in the Sammama area, Kasserine, who stated that 'rural activities such as beekeeping, coal production, livestock breeding and agriculture' are no longer practiced 'due to the landmines' which are spread across the area and 'killing many farmers and herders'. According to the activists, the closed military zone in the mountain area 'has further complicated the lives of the residents'²⁹.

Also ACLED reported in September 2018, that locals in the governorate of Kasserine are dependent on the closed military zones in the mountains for their access to pasture, water and firewood³⁰.

3. Information on documented attacks targeting Soltani's clan in Kasserine

On 13 November 2015, a 16-years-old shepherd, named Mabrouk Soltani, was kidnapped and beheaded by JAK-T at Mount Mghila³¹ in Sidi Bouzid governorate. The teenager was accused of having informed the army. A 14-year-old cousin, Chokri Soltani, was ordered to witness the assassination and to bring the young man's head wrapped in a plastic bag to his family³². According to another cousin, Nassim Soltani, Mabrouk Soltani was kidnapped before by 'terrorists' and threatened that his entire family would be executed if he should pass on information about their presence in the mountains³³. On 21 November 2015, The Ministry of Interior announced that 5 individuals linked to the murder of Mabrouk Soltani were arrested³⁴.

On 23 November 2015, the Ministry of National Defense announced in a statement that the video broadcast on social networks by terrorists who murdered Mabrouk Soltani is an 'attempt to misinformation'. In the video the young shepherd confessed that had collaborated with the security forces by giving them the positions of the armed groups entrenched in the mountains. According to the Ministry of Defense, they never handed over any money to Mabrouk Soltani and that he made the confession under threat of terror³⁵.

²⁸ Al-Monitor, *Tunisia's poor population face death by terrorists*, 24 June 2017, ([url](#))

²⁹ Al-Monitor, *Tunisia's poor population face death by terrorists*, 24 June 2017, ([url](#))

³⁰ ACLED, *Shepherds – An Overrepresented Insurgent Target Group*, 7 September 2018, ([url](#)),

³¹ Mount Mghila is on the border between the governorates of Kasserine and Sidi Bouzid, see Google Maps, *Jebel Mrihila*, n.d. ([url](#)),

³² ACLED, *Shepherds – An Overrepresented Insurgent Target Group*, 7 September 2018, ([url](#)); Jeune Africa, *Tunisie : l'assassinat d'un berger près de Jelma revendiqué par un groupe affilié à Daesh*, 22 November 2015, ([url](#))

³³ Qantara.de, *The tragic fate of shepherd boy Mabrouk Soltani*, 18 December 2015, ([url](#))

³⁴ Tunis Webdo, *Arrestation de terroristes impliqués dans l'assassinat de Mabrouk*, 21 November 2018, ([url](#))

³⁵ Tunis Webdo, *Les aveux de Mabrouk Soltani ont été faits sous la menace, selon la Défense*, 23 November 2018, ([url](#))

On 2 June 2017, the elder brother of Mabrouk Soltani, Khelifa Soltani, was kidnapped in the same region. One day later, he was found by a unit of the Tunisian Army. The body of the shepherd was mutilated³⁶. The assassination happened 'less than a week after a top militant was shot and six others arrested in the Kasserine region's Mount Salloum area near the border with Algeria'³⁷. JAK-T 'claimed the killing, accusing the boy of betraying their movements to the army'³⁸.

4. Within the region, is there any denied/restricted area for civilians? If so, how extended is this area?

Tunisia has been under a nationwide state of emergency since June 2015. The state of emergency was shortly lifted in October 2015, but reinstated in November 2015. On 6 October 2018, the state of emergency was extended till 6 November 2018³⁹. The state of emergency gives the Minister of Interior the power to impose curfews, ban large assemblies, censor the media without judicial approval, and restricting movement⁴⁰.

On 11 April 2014, the presidency issued republican order n° 2014-70, wherein it was declared that the region of 'mont Chaâmbi', and the adjacent areas of the mountains 'Essammama, Salloum, Mghila, Khchem-El-Kelb, Doulab, Abdelâdhim', are closed military zones till the end of operations. Furthermore, it was stated that people are only allowed to enter these areas with permission of the local military authorities⁴¹.

On 6 July 2015, the republican order was followed up by a presidential decree, n° 2015-120, wherein it was stated that all dispositions which were not in line with the aforementioned order were invalidated. In this decree it was declared that the mountains 'Chaâmbi, Essammama, Salloum,' and 'Mghila' of the governorate of Kasserine and the adjacent areas are closed military zones till the end of the operations. Furthermore, it was stated that the mountains 'Khchem-El-Kelb, Doulab, Abdelâdhim, Tom Smida, Dernaya, Teyoucha, Birinou' and 'Lajred' of the governorate of Kasserine and the adjacent areas are military zones till the end of operations⁴².

³⁶ ACLED, *Shepherds – An Overrepresented Insurgent Target Group*, 7 September 2018, ([url](#)); Tunis Webdo, *Mont Mghila: Khelifa Soltani égorgé par des terroristes, son corps mutilé!*, 3 June 2017, ([url](#))

³⁷ New Arab (The), *Brother of IS beheaded Tunisian shepherd killed*, 4 June 2017, ([url](#))

³⁸ New Arab (The), *Brother of IS beheaded Tunisian shepherd killed*, 4 June 2017, ([url](#))

³⁹ GardaWorld, *Tunisia: State of emergency extended through November 6 /update 3*, 7 October 2018, ([url](#))

⁴⁰ AI, *'We want to and the fear': Abuses under Tunisia's state of emergency*, 13 February 2017, ([url](#)), p. 12; Anadolu Agency, *Tunisia extends state of emergency for one more month*, 10 February 2018, ([url](#))

⁴¹ République Tunisienne/Présidence du Gouvernement - Legislation.tn, *Arrêté Republicain n° 2014-70 du 11 avril 2014, portant proclamation d'une zone d'opérations militaires*, ([url](#))

⁴² République Tunisienne/Présidence du Gouvernement - Legislation.tn, *Décret Présidentiel n° 2015-120 du 6 juillet 2015, portant proclamation de zones d'opérations militaires et de zones d'opérations militaires clôturées*, ([url](#))



As of 30 October 2018, no other republican order, presidential degree, or any other official government statement regarding the areas of the (closed) military zones in the Kasserine governorate could be traced in the governments portal of legal information⁴³.

The United Kingdom's Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) reported on their travel advice, last updated to Tunisia that 'Mount Salloum, Mount Sammamma and Mount Mghila' are 'designated military operations zones'⁴⁴.

⁴³ République Tunisienne/Présidence du Gouvernement - Legislation.tn, *Accueil - Recherche avancée dans les textes législatifs et réglementaires*, 30 October 2018, ([url](#))

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