

PROTEST IN GABÈS: AN UNUSUAL COALITION

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It's June the 5th 2015 in Gabès, a coastal city in south-eastern Tunisia. A confrontation seems to be imminent in front of the *Groupe Chimique Tunisien* (GCT). Along the railway at the gates of the huge chemical complex, hundreds of unemployed men who've been affected by the economic crisis in the country, have organized a sit-in to demand a job in the chemical industry.

But on the other side of the railway, 2000 inhabitants of Gabès have also gathered, under the slogan "Stop Pollution". These are fishermen, farmers, students, parents, children, men and women who are demanding the closure of the chemical factory because of its devastating impact on the environment.

The police had tried to convince these environmentalists not to mobilize that day, warning them that safety cannot be guaranteed. The police chief even predicts a skirmish between those who want to work in the factory and those who want to close it. Eventually, the demonstration is banned by the security services and they try to arrest its organisers. That fails, however, and the mobilisation goes ahead. About two hundred activists depart from an oasis in Gabès, march through the city, along the beach and to the site of the *Groupe Chimique Tunisien*. By the time they arrive there, they have grown into a mass of two thousand demonstrators.



Figure 1: Demonstrators, ecological activists and villagers from Gabès march towards the GCT production unit on the beach of Chatt Essalem. Source: <https://nawaat.org/portail/2017/07/07/reportage-a-gabes-immersion-au-coeur-de-la-lutte-citoyenne-contre-la-pollution/>

THE ENCOUNTER

However, despite the fears of the security forces, there is no violent confrontation upon arrival, but rather an exceptional act of solidarity. After a few speeches, the unemployed and the environmentalists both cross the tracks, join forces and hold a final, unplanned march through the streets together. In the end, the unemployed even form a cordon around the environmental activists to protect them from the police and march into the complex together to make their demands.

How did these two groups with seemingly opposite motivations manage to unite? How did they manage to bring together workers and environmental activists and make collective demands? What makes Gabès so special that it found that success formula while so many others failed? And where is this environmental movement now, four years later? In the context of a Tunisian-Belgian shared week of fieldwork, we discussed these questions with activists, trade unionists, farmers and fishermen, but also with representatives of the *Groupe Chimique Tunisien*.

NOSTALGIC FOR THE OASIS AND THE SEA

Older Gabesians speak with a lot of nostalgia about their hometown before the arrival of "the chemical monster". For them, Gabès was an almost mythical city, "*the princess of the desert*", an oasis on the Mediterranean Sea with a unique location. Bordering the Sahara, the mountains, the steppe and the sea, the town was an attractive destination for tourists from home and abroad. However, the natural wealth of the region and its strategic location on the Mediterranean Sea also made it attractive to extractive and agricultural industries.

In 1972, the first phosphate plant was installed in Gabès. Over the years, this factory developed into the enormous chemical complex that includes the *Groupe Chimique Tunisien*. This state-run company extracts and processes phosphate in Tunisia before transporting it to other countries in the world. The bulk of those exports is destined for the European markets. There, it is mainly used to produce artificial fertilizer, a continuously growing market with large profits.

THE PROMISES OF MODERNISATION

The establishment of the chemical complex in 1972 fitted in perfectly with the post-colonial modernisation project initiated by former president Habib Bourguiba. This is discussed in more detail in the next article of this dossier, "*Fallujah: 'illegal' agriculture on state land?*". Like many other leaders of Third World countries, Bourguiba believed that the state had to play a central role in the economic development of the country in order to catch up with the former colonial rulers.

His focus was on the intensification of agriculture and on the development of large-scale industrialisation. Enormous state-led projects were intended to generate immediate national income and prosperity. The establishment of the phosphate complex in Gabès is a good example of such types of projects. It was sold to the population with the promise of jobs, social mobility and development. No mention of the possible impact on the environment was ever made. A fisherman who told us about this 'betrayal' swore to us: '*If Bourguiba were here now, I would kill him with my own hands*'.

Today, it has become clear that the promised wealth never materialised, even though the GCT became and remains the largest employer in the region. The destruction of the local ecosystem by the production of phosphate ruined every single economic activity outside of the chemical complex. Air, land and water contain high concentrations of heavy metals and many harmful substances. The oasis has dried up and the soil has become increasingly infertile. The beaches have evolved from tourist paradises into chemically polluted landfills. In the Gulf of Gabès, once an exceptionally rich fishing area, only a few species, mainly shellfish, survive. However, they are so polluted that they are mostly unsuitable for consumption or sale.

POLLUTION AND IMPOVERISHMENT

The pollution of the *Groupe Chimique Tunisien* therefore causes the impoverishment and marginalisation of all those who are not employed by the company. Moreover, we constantly heard from activists that the profits from the chemical industry are channelled directly to the north of Tunisia, where they end up in the hands of the wealthy elite. Regions such as Gabès, which bear the ecological and human cost, see little or nothing of the money generated by their labour and natural resources. This means that the regional inequalities that have existed in Tunisia since the colonial period remain in place. Even after the 2011 revolution, public investment in the South remains low and no compensation is paid for the damage suffered.

That damage is not limited to the purely economic side. The emission and dumping of toxic waste obviously also has a direct impact on the health of the population. Workers at the GCT who are exposed to toxic and sometimes even radioactive substances on a daily basis receive an additional payment from the state as compensation. But the other inhabitants of the city have also reported a remarkable increase in cases of cancer, infertility and osteoporosis since the arrival of the GCT. However, they do not receive any support or compensation. The state has not even acknowledged that there is a large-scale health problem. This despite the extensive studies carried out by the

European Union and others, which acknowledged the disastrous effects of industrial pollution on human health.¹



Figure 2: On January the 22nd 2019, the chemical complex emitted this orange smoke for hours on end. No one every confirmed what it contained and what possible effects it could have had on the population and the environment. Installing a filter, like the population demands, would probably prevent such things from happening.

Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/StopPollution2/photos/a.177044142451808/1196216933867852/?type=3&theater>

FIRST SIGNS OF RESISTANCE

In every conversation we had in Gabès, it was emphasized that these problems and the broken promises of the GCT have been present for decades. But because there was little room for protest during Ben Ali's repressive regime, the demands of the population remained unspoken and unanswered. Only the powerful national trade union UGTT was able to withstand some pressure from the state. In an attempt to put pollution on the authorities' agenda, the local branch of the UGTT in Gabès therefore declared 2010 to be the 'Year of the fight against pollution' and organised several seminars and debates on the subject.

¹ Bard, D. & Ouertani, M. A. (2017). Étude d'impact de la pollution industrielle sur la santé de l'homme à Gabès. International Consulting Expertise. Retrieved from <http://pge-gabes.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/rapport-sante-pge.pdf> ;

European Commission. (2018). Etude d'impact de la pollution industrielle sur l'économie de la région de Gabès. Retrieved from http://www.ods.nat.tn/upload/Rapport_Final.pdf

When the regime fell at the beginning of 2011 and there was suddenly room for political protest. Gabès quickly became a very fertile ground for environmental activism. The population had seen the situation in the area get worse with their own eyes. Moreover, the local trade union had already put the theme on the agenda before the revolution and with the *Groupe Chimique Tunisien* they had an easily identifiable cause and enemy. This led to an explosion of actions against pollution and against the chemical complex. At first by associations of residents in different neighbourhoods of Gabès, but soon other groups took the initiative as well.

As such, fishermen blocked the port of the chemical complex with their boats for ten days, workers of the GCT carried out internal actions to denounce the pollution, students protested at the university and independent civil forums were organised to find solutions. However, all these actions remained unconnected and divided, with different demands based on their different experiences and specific problems.

STOP POLLUTION

The first movement that managed to unite a large group in one joint action, was '*Stop Pollution*'. It was this movement that brought two thousand inhabitants of Gabès face to face with the hundreds of unemployed from the sit-in in 2015. But that was not the first time they mobilized.

Stop Pollution was created when some activists of the '*Jeunes Défenseurs de Droits de l'Homme*' and of the '*Association de Sauvegarde de l'Oasis de Chatt Essalem*' launched a call for an action on the World Environment Day of 5 June 2012. These two organisations had already taken smaller initiatives on their own against pollution but in order to reach a wider audience, they decided to work together this time. When that action turned out to be even more successful than expected, they set up a more sustainable framework of cooperation under the name '*Stop Pollution*'.

From the beginning, *Stop Pollution* was organized horizontally. The movement has no leaders, no official spokespersons, no formal hierarchy and is not officially registered as an association with the state. Everything is decided by general vote at meetings that are open to everyone. The tasks are divided between different committees that, where possible, have an equal gender ratio. *Stop Pollution* also remains explicitly independent with regard to other organizations and political parties. In this way, they hope to always be open to different groups and to facilitate identification with the movement.

This turned out to be a successful formula. The 5th of June is now a tradition and an annual protest day in Gabès. *Stop Pollution* succeeds in bringing together almost all the different groups in the city in their fight against pollution and thus sending out a powerful signal. At the end of last year, the organisation even travelled 300 km north to the capital Tunis to hold a manifestation and has also sent delegates to the international climate meeting COP22 in Marrakech.

Stop Pollution is thus an exception in the landscape of political organisations. They succeeded in bringing together groups with divergent interests into one movement with one set of demands and under one slogan; even with the closure of the chemical complex as the ultimate goal. Their cooperation with labour movements in particular has attracted some attention in other regions of Tunisia and in the rest of the world. Because often the opposite happens in these types of cases: tense conflicts arise between those who work in a factory and those who protest against it. *Stop Pollution* managed to avoid that, however.

PILLARS OF SUCCESS

There are three main reasons why they succeeded in achieving this solidarity. The most obvious explanation is that it's due to the extreme situation in Gabès. The almost complete destruction of an ecosystem over a forty years' time-period is a disastrous event that affects everyone. And its cause is clear. The inhabitants of Gabès have seen the environment and their own health deteriorate drastically since the arrival of the chemical complex. This complex can be seen from almost everywhere in the city and can usually also be smelled and felt. The GCT also hardly makes any effort to hide its pollution. The dumping in the air and the sea is omnipresent (Figure 3). A GCT representative confirmed this in his conversation with us: "*It is catastrophic, they are right (...) if I were on the other side, I would also ask to end this nightmare*".

Such a miserable situation, that concerns everyone with one obvious cause and antagonist, makes it easier to mobilise broadly. Especially when - and this is the second reason - there was already a tradition of protest against pollution under the old regime. The seminars and discussions organised by the local trade union in 2010 were the most visible examples of this, but they were preceded by smaller, more cautious actions. When the regime fell in 2011, there was already an anti-pollution sentiment in Gabès and people had the necessary experience to set up new and larger mobilisations.



Figure 3: One of the main ways in which the GCT pollutes the environment is by dumping unprocessed, chemically polluted water directly into the sea. This picture shows the pipes through which this dumping happens, as well as the accumulation of phosphate residues and heavy metals in a floating black mass on this publicly accessible (!) beach. **Source:** Juliette Billiet, a fellow student who took part in the fieldwork trip.

The fact that the trade union was the only organization under Ben Ali able to mobilise against the pollution still plays a role in the protest movement today. The workers of Gabès remain loyal supporters, because they were involved in the environmental actions from the very beginning. They have even entered into a partnership with *Stop Pollution*, who ultimately have the intention of closing down the factory.

However, this is not what they communicate to the outside world. The third reason for the success of *Stop Pollution* is the relative vagueness of their discourse. At first sight, they seem to succeed in doing this without losing their effectiveness. Nevertheless, the core of the movement is convinced that the only solution to the problems in Gabès is the closure of the factory. But they also realise that the balance of power is not in their favour yet to make such strong demands. A young activist told us: "*We need to take what we can get to improve the situation*". So, in order to make negotiations possible, they have taken a moderate stance and they try to seem willing to compromise. This position also allows *Stop Pollution* to build a broader base in Gabès, hoping to change the balance of power one day.

For each individual sympathizer, the openness of the discourse allow them to participate in actions according to their own principles, without distancing oneself from *Stop Pollution*. The horizontal structure, through which everyone has a say, ensures that each participant has input about the actions and thereby binds themselves to the movement. In this way, fishermen, workers and students can participate in an action of *Stop Pollution*, without getting the feeling that their specific position is not represented.

As mentioned before, the movement is also not officially registered with the state. By doing this, and by refusing to formally associate themselves with other organisations or political parties, they avoid the many accusations of corruption or opportunism that plague other (subsidised) associations in Tunisia². *Stop Pollution* has the reputation of being an independent, apolitical movement that stands up exclusively for the people of Gabès.



Figure 4: A *Stop Pollution* action in Tunis. The banner mentions the cooperation between *L'Association de Sauvegarde de l'Oasis de Chatt Essalem* and *Stop Pollution*.

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/StopPollution2/photos/a.177044142451808/1163680723788140/?type=3&theater>

² The European Union has invested €5 million in the “civil society” of Gabès through the “*Projet d'appui à la Gouvernance Environnementale*” (PGE), but *Stop Pollution* has not accepted any of this money. The organisations and associations that did, regularly get the accusation that they have been bribed to be less radical in their demands.

"I AM STARTING TO WORRY"

Nevertheless, the story of Stop Pollution has a downside. The many joint actions have yielded few concrete results, and certainly not the structural transformations which were hoped for. A member of Stop Pollution confided to us. "*I am starting to worry. We have tried everything and nothing has really worked*". Meanwhile, among the inhabitants of Gabès, the enthusiasm of the post-revolutionary context is slowly diminishing, and feelings of disillusion and powerlessness are seeping through.

Even though the GCT itself developed a comprehensive plan with promises of "social responsibility" and "green energy", they have not even taken the step of installing a simple filter that would significantly reduce emissions. When a wave of mobilizations a few years ago led to a constructive debate and new agreements, these were quickly nullified as "*irresponsible promises*" and the CEO who took the decision was dismissed by the Ministry of Industry.

AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

The current deadlock has caused *Stop Pollution* to look for an alternative approach. They have now realized that it is necessary to go beyond the local level to be able to exert the necessary pressure on the government. On their own, they will never win the battle against the *Groupe Chimique Tunisie*. *Stop Pollution* therefore began to manifest in the capital and started establishing contact with movements in other Tunisian cities.

Gabès is only the last step in the chain of Tunisian phosphate production. In the cities where phosphate stone is mined, the protest has also increased because the population there is equally confronted with the devastating impact of the chemical industry and with the deep inequalities in Tunisia. *Stop Pollution* is taking the first steps towards establishing a national social-ecological network so that movements in different cities can cooperate more effectively.

But even under such national pressure, the Tunisian state will not easily give up the polluting practices of the GCT. After the revolution of 2011, Tunisia has fallen into a deep economic crisis. In 2016, the state borrowed €2.9 billion from the IMF. State-owned, export-oriented companies such as the GCT are - despite their harmfulness to the environment - ideal instruments for paying off these loans. Especially if the international demand for phosphate remains constant or even increases.

AN INTERNATIONAL COALITION

The protests and strikes have dealt a serious blow to the GCT's profitability, but *Stop Pollution* realises they need to continue. They advocate for international pressure on Tunisia to improve its environmental standards. At the same time, they stress that the rich countries, which continue to buy the polluting phosphate, must also assume their responsibilities. These countries should not only be stricter with regard to their own purchases but should also support Tunisia in an ecological transition that is currently being slowed down by the debt policy and the imposed reforms of the IMF.

In order to spread these demands outside of Tunisia, *Stop Pollution* has, among other things, participated in a coordinated action with other Mediterranean ecological movements and has sent a delegation to Marrakech to take action at the COP22 climate conference. In the end, they hope to be part of an international coalition of movements that recognises that pollution, inequality and exploitation are global problems that transcend national borders.

This change of scale by *Stop Pollution* seems inevitable, but it could also lead them losing their grassroots presence in the local community and with it, their strongest powerbase. While we were in Gabès, there was even a discussion going on about the structure of the organization. Voices were raised to abandon the principle of horizontality and create an official, registered association. The supporters of this change hope to gain more power in negotiations and conflicts with state institutions, but here too they risk undermining one of the pillars of their own popularity.

The coming months and years will show whether these initiatives succeed in overcoming the obstacles that stand in the way of a sustainable solution for Gabès. Will *Stop Pollution* be part a national alliance that forces the state to change its policy? Will there be shifts in the global development and debt system that will allow Tunisia to make such a change? Or will *Stop Pollution* lose their momentum due to changes in their strategy and will Gabès continue to suffer from the heavy pollution of the phosphate industry?