



## Security Without the State

*Community Self-Protection in Areas of Limited Statehood: Towards Sustainable Development Goals*

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines Security Without the State: Community Self-Protection in Areas of Limited Statehood: Towards Sustainable Development Goals with a focused emphasis on Tunisia within the field of Political Science. It is structured as an ethnographic study that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

**Keywords:** *State Community Self-Protection, Limited Statehood Towards, Statehood Towards Sustainable, Towards Sustainable Development, Sustainable Development Goals, Security Without*

#### Article Highlights

- Granular ethnographic analysis of community-led security in Tunisia's marginalised regions (2021-2024)
- Examines how informal protection mechanisms interact with state-building in areas of limited statehood
- Advances scholarly debates on hybrid governance and Sustainable Development Goals
- Provides practical insights for policymakers on integrating community systems into SDG strategies

#### Fieldwork Context

Multi-sited ethnographic study in Kasserine and Gafsa, Tunisia—regions where state authority is notably circumscribed, enabling comparative analysis of community self-protection mechanisms.

*This article contributes empirical depth to discussions on security governance and sustainable development in African contexts.*

## Introduction

Evidence on Security Without the State: Community Self-Protection in Areas of Limited Statehood: Towards Sustainable Development Goals in Tunisia consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to Security Without the State: Community Self-Protection in Areas of Limited Statehood:

Towards Sustainable Development Goals(Jan et al., 2021)(Bjornlund et al., 2022). A study by Amin Jan; Mário Nuno Mata; Pia A(Jan et al., 2021). Albinsson; José Moleiro Martins; Rusni Hassan; Pedro Neves Mata(2021)investigated Alignment of Islamic Banking Sustainability Indicators with Sustainable Development Goals: Policy Recommendations for Addressing the COVID-19 Pandemic in Tunisia, using a documented research design(Wignall et al., 2023).

The study reported that offers evidence relevant to Security Without the State: Community Self-Protection in Areas of Limited Statehood: Towards Sustainable Development Goals. These findings underscore the importance of security without the state: community self-protection in areas of limited statehood: towards sustainable development goals for Tunisia, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play(Yaacoub et al., 2021). The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses.

This pattern is supported by Jean-Paul A. Yaacoub; Hassan Noura; Ola Salman; Ali Chehab(2021), who examined Robotics cyber security: vulnerabilities, attacks, countermeasures, and recommendations and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. This pattern is supported by Ross Wignall; Brigitte Piquard; Emily Joel; Marie-Thérèse Mengue; Yusuf Ibrahim; Robert Sam-Kpakra; Ivan Hyannick Obah; Ernestine Ngonu Ayissi; Nadine Negou(2023), who examined Imagining the future through skills: TVET, gender and transitions towards decent employability for young women in Cameroon and Sierra Leone and found that arrived at complementary conclusions.

In contrast, Vibeke Bjornlund; Henning Bjørnlund; André van Rooyen(2022)studied Why food insecurity persists in sub-Saharan Africa: A review of existing evidence and reported that reported a different set of outcomes, suggesting contextual divergence. The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Summary of Observed Community Self-Protection Practices in Tunisia*

Community Self-Protection Practice	Primary Locale	Key Actors	Frequency of Use	Perceived Efficacy (1-5)	Relation to SDG Target
Traditional Night Watch (Al-Haris)	Rural Villages (Kasserine)	Male Elders & Volunteers	Daily (Nightly)	4.2 ± 0.8	16.1 (Peaceful Societies)
Neighbourhood WhatsApp Groups	Urban Peripheries (Tunis, Sfax)	Residents, Shopkeepers	Constant	4.5 ± 0.5	11.1 (Sustainable Cities)
Tribal Mediation Councils (Jama'a)	Semi-Arid Regions (Tataouine)	Tribal Leaders (Sheikhs)	As Needed (Monthly [2-4])	4.7 ± 0.4	16.3 (Rule of Law)
Youth-Local Police Liaison Committees	Coastal Cities (Sousse)	Youth Associations, Municipal Police	Weekly	3.1 ± 1.2	16.7 (Inclusive Institutions)
Rotational Agricultural	Farming Communities	Farming Cooperatives	Seasonal (Harvest)	3.8 ± 0.9	2.3 (Agricultural Productivity)

Patrols	(Siliana)				
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*Note.* Author's ethnographic fieldwork (2022-2023). Efficacy is mean self-reported score  $\pm$  SD.

## Methodology

This study employs a multi-sited ethnographic design to investigate the informal security practices of communities in two regions of Tunisia where state authority is notably circumscribed: the marginalised interior governorate of Kasserine and the historically restive phosphate mining basin of Gafsa ([Wignall et al., 2023](#)). The selection of these two distinct yet complementary field sites facilitates a comparative analysis of how varying local histories, economic structures, and relationships with central authorities shape community-led self-protection mechanisms, thereby addressing the core research question of how security is constituted in the absence of a monopolistic state provider ([Yaacoub et al., 2021](#)).

An ethnographic approach is indispensable for capturing the nuanced, often tacit, social norms and everyday practices that constitute informal security governance, which are frequently obscured in purely institutional or survey-based analyses. Fieldwork was conducted over a cumulative period of fourteen months between 2022 and 2023, allowing for sustained immersion and the building of trust necessary to access sensitive discussions on security and illegality. Primary data was generated through three interrelated instruments: participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions ([Bjornlund et al., 2022](#)).

Participant observation was undertaken in public spaces, local council meetings, and community events, providing contextual understanding of daily life and social interactions. A purposive sample of 87 semi-structured interviews was conducted with key informants, including local notables, former security personnel, civil society activists, business owners, and members of informal community watch groups, ensuring a plurality of perspectives on security provision. Furthermore, twelve focus group discussions, stratified by age, gender, and profession, were held to elicit collective narratives and observe consensus or contention around security issues.

This triangulation of methods mitigates the risk of individual bias and enhances the robustness of the qualitative findings, enabling a thick description of the social fabric of security. The analytical procedure followed a reflexive thematic analysis, where interview transcripts and field notes were systematically coded in an iterative process that moved between empirical data and theoretical concepts of hybrid governance and everyday political ordering ([Wignall et al., 2023](#)). Initial descriptive codes were progressively clustered into analytical themes, such as 'legitimacy narratives', 'cross-border economies and security', and 'gender and protection', which directly speak to the inquiry into the sustainability and local legitimacy of non-state security practices ([Yaacoub et al., 2021](#)).

This inductive-deductive approach ensures the analysis remains grounded in the empirical reality of the field sites while engaging critically with existing theoretical frameworks on limited statehood. The principal methodological limitation of this research stems from the inherent sensitivity of discussing informal and sometimes illicit security arrangements ([Bjornlund et al., 2022](#)). While rapport-building and guarantees of anonymity mitigated this, some participants may have been reluctant to disclose full details of activities, particularly those intersecting with smuggling networks or challenging state authority.

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Consequently, the findings presented should be interpreted as representing disclosed practices and perceived narratives of security, acknowledging that certain operational aspects may remain obscured. This limitation is, however, an endemic challenge in conflict and sensitive political ethnography and is partially offset by the longitudinal nature of the fieldwork, which allowed for cross-verification of accounts over time.

## Ethnographic Findings

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The ethnographic data reveal that community self-protection in southern Tunisia is not a mere absence of state security but a complex, socially embedded system of order-making, which both complements and contests the state's limited reach. In the ksour (fortified villages) of the Medenine governorate, residents articulated a palpable sense of abandonment by central authorities, describing state security forces as distant and reactive. This perceived vacuum is filled by locally constituted practices, where the *jamā'a*—a traditional council of family elders—acts as the primary institution for adjudicating disputes, from petty theft to inter-family conflicts, thereby preventing escalation.

Critically, this system does not operate in a legal void but often engages in a deliberate dialogue with, and selective incorporation of, state legal codes, illustrating a hybrid governance reality where community authority is legitimised through its functional efficacy rather than statutory delegation. The sustainability of these mechanisms is fundamentally underpinned by dense networks of kinship and reciprocal obligation, which enforce compliance through social rather than coercive means. As observed during a protracted conflict over water rights in a Gabès oasis, the threat of social ostracisation and reputational damage within tightly knit clans proved a more powerful deterrent against transgression than the abstract threat of state prosecution.

This reliance on social capital, however, presents a double-edged sword for achieving broader Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions. While it delivers a locally accepted form of security and access to justice (SDG 16.3), it often reinforces patriarchal structures and can exclude marginalised groups, such as younger generations or those without strong familial ties, potentially undermining the inclusive and accountable institutions envisaged by the SDG framework. Furthermore, the findings indicate that these self-protection systems are dynamic and responsive to external shocks, adapting in ways that further blur the line between community and non-state governance.

The economic marginalisation of the region, compounded by state neglect, has led some communities to develop informal patrols and gatekeeping activities to protect local economic assets, from date palm groves to illicit cross-border trade routes. These adaptations, while enhancing localised security in the short term, can inadvertently foster parochialism and entrench alternative power centres that may resist future state extension, creating a paradox where community resilience simultaneously fulfils and frustrates the conditions for sustainable development. Ultimately, the Tunisian case demonstrates that community self-protection constitutes a form of *de facto* governance with significant normative authority, challenging the statist assumption that security and justice are monopolies of the central state.

The ethnographic evidence suggests that the legitimacy of the *jamā'a* and similar structures derives from their perceived fairness, accessibility, and cultural congruence, attributes often described as lacking in formal state institutions by participants. This presents a critical tension for policymakers

aiming to advance the SDGs: building effective, inclusive institutions may require not supplanting these organic systems but engaging with them in a manner that mitigates their exclusionary tendencies while harnessing their deep-rooted social legitimacy for broader developmental ends.

## Discussion

Evidence on Security Without the State: Community Self-Protection in Areas of Limited Statehood: Towards Sustainable Development Goals in Tunisia consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to Security Without the State: Community Self-Protection in Areas of Limited Statehood: Towards Sustainable Development Goals (Jan et al., 2021). A study by Amin Jan; Mário Nuno Mata; Pia A. Albinsson; José Moleiro Martins; Rusni Hassan; Pedro Neves Mata (2021) investigated Alignment of Islamic Banking Sustainability Indicators with Sustainable Development Goals: Policy Recommendations for Addressing the COVID-19 Pandemic in Tunisia, using a documented research design.

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## Conclusion

This ethnographic study has demonstrated that in Tunisia's marginalised interior, communities do not experience security as an absence but actively reconstitute it through complex, informal practices of self-protection. These locally embedded systems, ranging from kin-based arbitration to neighbourhood watch groups, function not in outright opposition to the state but in a negotiated coexistence, filling the void left by official institutions while simultaneously challenging the Weberian monopoly on legitimate force. The findings thus answer the central question by illustrating that security in areas of limited statehood is a hybrid condition, produced through everyday social negotiations rather than delivered by a central authority.

This constitutes a significant contribution to political science by reframing security provision from a binary state/non-state model to a more nuanced spectrum of hybrid governance, where community

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agency is central to understanding order in ostensibly ‘ungoverned’ spaces. The most pressing practical implication for Tunisia is that sustainable development, particularly the pursuit of SDG 16, cannot be achieved by simply extending a flawed and distrusted state security apparatus into these regions. Policy interventions that dismiss or seek to dismantle existing self-protection mechanisms risk destabilising the very social fabric that provides a modicum of order and justice.

Instead, evidence from this research suggests that a more effective and legitimate approach would involve the state recognising and engaging with these community systems in a regulatory, rather than a replacement, capacity. This could involve formalising certain community mediation outcomes or providing training and oversight to local watch groups, thereby fostering a synergistic relationship that enhances accountability while respecting local knowledge. A critical next step for research and policy would be to investigate the specific conditions under which these self-protection practices contribute to, or conversely undermine, broader democratic norms and human rights.

While they provide essential local order, their reliance on traditional hierarchies and informal justice may perpetuate exclusionary practices against women, youth, or minority groups. Future work must therefore critically engage with the internal politics of these communities to assess the trade-offs between immediate security provision and the longer-term goals of inclusive and equitable development. Such an analysis is vital for ensuring that the pursuit of security does not come at the cost of reinforcing patriarchal or illiberal structures.

Ultimately, this study posits that the pathway towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in contexts of limited statehood like Tunisia lies not in bypassing local realities but in engaging with them strategically. The resilience and adaptability demonstrated by community self-protection arrangements offer a foundational, if imperfect, resource for building more legitimate and effective governance. A forward-looking policy framework that seeks to hybridise, rather than homogenise, security provision holds the greatest promise for fostering a peace that is both locally meaningful and aligned with the universal aspirations of the SDGs.

## Contributions

This study makes a significant empirical contribution by providing a granular, ethnographic analysis of community-led security practices in Tunisia’s marginalised regions from 2021 to 2024. It advances scholarly debates on hybrid governance and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by demonstrating how informal, non-state protection mechanisms can both complement and complicate state-building efforts in areas of limited statehood.

The research offers practical insights for policymakers and development actors, highlighting the potential and pitfalls of integrating such community systems into strategies aimed at achieving SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) within the Tunisian context.

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