Impunity Watch

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GABÈS

Environmental Harm, Civic Resistance, and the Limits of Accountability in Tunisia



Gabès

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A Report on Environmental Justice, Governance, and Accountability

Protecting Green Voices Initiative

Impunity Watch







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1. Executive Summary

For more than fifty years, the governorate of Gabès has occupied an uneasy place in Tunisia's development story. It is one of the country's most important industrial centres and the heart of its phosphate-processing economy, and it is also one of its most environmentally damaged regions. The concentration of industrial activity around the Groupe Chimique Tunisien (GCT) has left a heavy mark on air quality, marine ecosystems, water resources, and the historic oasis system that sustained local life long before the first processing units were built.[1]

This report looks at that history through the lens of environmental justice, drawing on interviews with activists, journalists, scholars, and civil society figures in Gabès, alongside legal and policy analysis. It asks how environmental harm has shaped, and been shaped by, the relationship between residents, state institutions, and industry.

The findings show that environmental deterioration in Gabès extends beyond ecological harm and raises serious human rights and governance concerns. Residents expressed worry about air pollution, repeated toxic emission incidents, marine contamination, decreased agricultural output, and the state of the oasis environment. These environmental consequences have harmed livelihoods, public health, and quality of life, contributing to the common belief that local populations incur a disproportionate part of the environmental costs associated with national industrial expansion.

Tunisia's own constitutional history offers a useful vantage point on this problem. Both the 2014 and 2022 constitutions recognise the right to a healthy environment, and both place binding obligations on the state.[2] Yet the distance between that recognition and daily experience in Gabès is wide. Access to environmental information, meaningful public participation, and effective legal remedy all remain difficult to obtain in practice, whatever the text of the constitution promises.

1 Tarek Amara, "Once an Idyll, Tunisian Protest Hotspot Gabès Now an Environmental 'Nightmare,'" Reuters, October 20, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/climate-energy/once-an-idyll-tunisian-protest-hotspot-Gabés-now-an-environmental-nightmare-2025-10-20/; Ghaya Ben Mbarek, "The Gabès Chemical Complex: A Monster Destroying Lives and Poisoning Children," The Legal Agenda, January 30, 2026, https://english.legal-agenda.com/the-Gabés-chemical-complex-a-monster-destroying-lives-and-poisoning-children/.

2 Constitution of the Republic of Tunisia (2014), art. 45; Constitution of the Republic of Tunisia (2022), art. 47.

In response, an environmental movement has grown around campaigns such as Stop Pollution, along with a wider set of grassroots groups working to document harm and demand accountability. Environmental grievance has become one of the few issues in Tunisia capable of drawing together people across otherwise quite different social, political, and economic backgrounds.

An important conclusion concerns environmental activism's ability to establish wide coalitions. Interviewees emphasised how environmental mobilisation has broken down conventional social and political barriers, fostering new forms of cooperation among communities, civil society organisations, journalists, workers, youth groups, and female activists. Women, in particular, have played critical roles in recording environmental damage, coordinating community responses, and maintaining environmental advocacy initiatives.

At the same time, the state's usual response to environmental protest has been to treat it as a public-order problem rather than a policy one. Interviewees pointed to arrests, heavy policing, repeated summonses, and various forms of administrative pressure directed at people doing little more than demanding cleaner air. This pattern suggests that, in practice, environmental grievances in Gabès are handled through the logic of security rather than through participatory environmental governance, which raises real questions about civic space and about how far environmental rights are protected in practice when exercised through public assembly.

The research into governance systems indicates ongoing contradictions between nominal decentralisation and centralised decision-making. Although municipal governments are frequently expected to respond to environmental concerns, essential decisions on industrial strategy, environmental regulation, and pollution management are still centralised in central state institutions. This concentration of authority at the central level inhibits local actors' ability to affect environmental outcomes and adds to accountability gaps in environmental governance.

The courts occupy an equally uncomfortable middle ground. Litigation has become an important, if imperfect, tool for communities seeking redress, but claimants routinely face high evidentiary bars, particularly around proving a direct causal link between a specific industrial source and a specific harm, a standard that sits awkwardly with the cumulative, diffuse nature of pollution in Gabès. The Gabès court's February 2026 rulings on demands to halt polluting activity illustrate the point: courts are willing to recognise environmental claims in principle, but reluctant to issue orders that would meaningfully disrupt industrial operations.

The February 2026 court hearings over demands to halt polluting industrial activity highlight the limits of existing legal processes. While environmental claims may be acknowledged in principle, courts generally exercise caution when assessing demands that might have a major impact on industrial activities. This leads to a larger sense among affected populations that environmental degradation is easier to document than to remedy through existing legal and administrative channels.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that Gabès is a clear example of a broader pattern of environmental inequality, in which the people who carry the heaviest environmental burden have the least influence over the decisions that produce it. That decades of protest and public debate have not resolved the underlying problem says something important about the limits of the current governance and accountability architecture, and about what would need to change.

The report closes with a set of recommendations built around several linked priorities: stronger legal protection for environmental rights, better public access to environmental information, greater judicial capacity to handle environmental evidence, real protection for environmental defenders, independent environmental monitoring, more meaningful authority for local government, and a genuine just-transition strategy for the phosphate sector. None of this can be achieved through technical pollution controls alone. It will require institutional reform that puts accountability to affected communities, rather than industrial continuity, at the centre of environmental decision-making.



2. Introduction

The right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment has been formally recognised by the UN General Assembly (Res. 76/300, 2022) and Human Rights Council (Res. 48/13, 2021), and is protected as a treaty right under Article 24 of the African Charter and Article 38 of the Arab Charter on Human Rights. As commonly understood, this right is not limited to protection from direct environmental harm; it also covers access to environmental information, participation in environmental decision-making, and access to legal remedy when that right is violated.[3] Environmental degradation, in other words, is no longer treated purely as an ecological problem. It has become a matter of human rights, social justice, and state accountability in its own right.[4]

Gabès offers a particularly clear illustration of where environmental harm and human rights concerns meet. Located on Tunisia's southeastern coast, the governorate is home to a distinctive oasis ecosystem that has long supported farming, fishing, and a range of other local livelihoods.[5] That picture began to change with the arrival of phosphate-processing

3 United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), "What Are Environmental Rights?," accessed June 23, 2026, https://www.unep.org/explore-topics/environmental-rights-and-governance/what-we-do/advancing-environmental-rights/what-are-environmental-rights.

4 Ibid.

5 Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP), "Gabès: A Victim of Industrial Pollution in Tunisia," October 27, 2022, https://timep.org/2022/10/27/Gabés-a-victim-of-industrial-pollution-in-tunisia/.

industry in the early 1970s. The growth of the Groupe Chimique Tunisien turned Gabès into a central node in Tunisia's phosphate economy, and, alongside that, into one of the country's most environmentally and medically burdened regions.[6]

Residents, researchers, and civil society organisations have frequently described Gabès' environmental crisis as the formation of an environmental "sacrifice zone," in which local communities bear disproportionate environmental and health burdens in order to achieve broader national economic goals.[7] For decades, locals have reported respiratory diseases, skin disorders, and other health consequences linked with industrial emissions, while fishermen and farmers have suffered the destruction of natural resources on which their livelihoods rely.[8] The dumping of phosphogypsum and industrial waste into the Gulf of Gabès has led to the deterioration of marine habitats, while overexploitation of water resources has hastened the demise of the ancient oasis system and endangered traditional livelihoods.[9]

That crisis reached a new peak in 2025. Over September and October of that year, episodes of severe industrial emissions were reported to have caused widespread respiratory distress, sending more than 180 people, many of them children, to hospital.[10] These events triggered a wave of public anger and gave new force to long-standing demands for accountability, environmental remediation, and a rethink of how industry operates in the region. Protests, community organising, and advocacy campaigns expanded sharply in scale, drawing both national and international attention to what residents of Gabès were living through.[11]

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6 Amara, "Once an Idyll, Tunisian Protest Hotspot Gabès."
7 Lasoued, "The Gabès Chemical Complex."
8 Hortense Lac, "For the Gabès Chemical Group, a Population Is Sacrificed," Inkyfada, November 12, 2019, https://inkyfada.com/en/2019/11/12/pollution-Gabés-lutte-gct-2/.
9 Stefano Liberti, "Refugee from the Dying Oasis: The Gabès Case and the Debate on Forced Migration for Environmental Reasons," *FIERI*, April 10, 2024, https://fieri.it/en/refugee-from-the-dying-oasis-the-Gabés-case-and-the-debate-on-forced-migration-for-environmental-reasons-by-stefano-liberti-10-april-2024/.

10 Sofien Jaballah, "Living, Breathing, Resisting: Gabès and the New Political Landscape in Tunisia," Arab Reform Initiative, February 20, 2026, https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/living-breathing-resisting-Gabés-and-the-new-political-landscape-in-tunisia/
11 Dhouha Djerbi, "We Want to Breathe: Dispatch from Gabès, Tunisia," Middle East Report Online (MERIP), November 13, 2025, https://www.merip.org/2025/11/we-want-to-breathe-dispatch-from-Gabés-tunisia/.

Simultaneously, the emerging environmental movement in Gabès revealed deeper conflicts within Tunisia's growth strategy. While national authorities have often stressed the strategic relevance of phosphate production for economic growth and public revenue, local communities have raised concerns about the model's social and environmental implications.[12] These tensions have commonly appeared as disagreements over access to environmental information, involvement in decision-making processes, law enforcement reactions to environmental demonstrations, and the efficacy of judicial institutions in resolving environmental harm.[13] Consequently, the case of Gabès provides an important lens through which to examine broader questions concerning environmental governance, democratic accountability, decentralisation, and the realisation of environmental rights in Tunisia.

This report examines the Gabès environmental crisis through the combined lens of environmental justice and human rights, tracing the connections between environmental deterioration, public health, civic mobilisation, state response, and legal accountability. It looks in turn at the growth of environmental activism, the treatment of environmental defenders, the legal and institutional barriers affected communities face, and the role that courts and public authorities have played, and have not played, in addressing environmental harm.

The research underlying this report is qualitative. It draws on semi-structured interviews with environmental activists, community members, and civil society representatives, combined with a review of legal texts, judicial developments, policy documents, and secondary literature. Where possible, interview material is set alongside documentary evidence, with the aim of giving weight to the experiences of those most directly affected by environmental degradation in Gabès, without losing sight of the wider legal and institutional picture.

Ultimately, the Gabès case raises questions that go well beyond one region of Tunisia: about how a country balances economic development against environmental protection, about who bears the risks and who reaps the benefits of that balance, and about whether legal and political institutions

12 Jaballah, "Living, Breathing, Resisting."
13 ARTICLE 19, "Tunisia: Uphold the Right to Protest and Access to Environmental Information," October 20, 2025.

are capable of enforcing accountability over the long timescales on which environmental harm actually unfolds. As environmental rights gain wider international recognition, the experience of communities in Gabès offers a sobering account of how far there still is to go in turning legal commitment into lived protection.

3. Methodology

This report is based on primary qualitative research combined with a review of legal texts, judicial rulings, policy documents, and secondary literature.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight individuals in Gabès between May 2026 and July 2026: seven named interviewees (Ameni Bouaziz, Aya Lghrissi, Khouloud Zaidi, Nabil Zitouni, Adel Azouni, Aziz Chebbi, and Zakaria Hechmi) and one participant who requested anonymity. Interviews were conducted both in person and online in Arabic, and were audio-recorded with consent. Interviewees were identified through prior professional contacts, reflecting the researcher's access to civil society, journalist, and activist networks in Gabès. This is a purposive, not representative, sample, and the findings of this report should be read as an account of how this crisis is experienced and interpreted by civically engaged residents, rather than as a representative survey of the Gabès population.

All named interviewees provided informed, written consent to be identified in this report, including explicit acknowledgment of the risks associated with public identification given the security context described in Sections 6 and 7. Signed consent forms are held on file with the author and are available for donor or editorial review on request, subject to interviewee privacy. The one participant who requested anonymity is referred to throughout as "an anonymous participant," and no identifying details are included.

Specific factual allegations concerning state conduct, including arrests, use of tear gas, denial of detainee access, and administrative harassment, are presented according to the following standard: where an allegation is corroborated by two or more independent interviewees or by documenta-

ry or journalistic sources, it is presented as a finding of this report. Where an allegation rests on a single source, it is explicitly attributed to that individual's testimony and flagged as such, rather than stated as established fact.

This is a small, civil-society-weighted sample and does not include first-hand interviews with GCT employees, security personnel, or state officials. Health-related claims in Section 5.1 draw on interviewee testimony and secondary reporting rather than verified epidemiological or health-ministry data, which the author was unable to obtain; where such data exists but was inaccessible, this is noted in the relevant footnotes. Findings should be read as documentation of lived experience and civil society perspective, triangulated with legal and documentary sources, rather than as an independently adjudicated factual record.



4. Conceptual and Analytical Framework

This report draws on four connected bodies of thought: environmental rights, environmental law, ecological integrity, and environmental justice. Together they offer a way of reading the Gabès crisis that treats pollution not as a narrow technical problem but as something embedded in wider legal, political, social, and economic structures that determine who bears environmental risk and who captures environmental benefit.

4.1 Environmental Rights

Environmental rights have emerged as a central component of contemporary human rights discourse. They encompass both substantive rights, such as the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment, and procedural rights, including access to environmental information, participation in environmental decision-making, and access to justice in environmental matters.[14] Environmental rights are based on the notion that environmental deterioration has a direct impact on the enjoyment of basic human rights such as life, health, water, food, shelter, employment, and human dignity.[15]

While civil and political rights guarantee civic space and protection from arbitrary state interference, the substantive protections for affected com-

14 UNEP, "What Are Environmental Rights?"

15 UNEP, "What Are Environmental Rights?"

munities in Gabès derive fundamentally from international economic, social, and cultural rights frameworks. In particular, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) obligates states to guarantee the right to an adequate standard of living (Art. 11), including food and housing, and the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health (Art. 12), which explicitly encompasses environmental and industrial hygiene.

Furthermore, environmental rights are firmly entrenched in regional human rights instruments ratified by Tunisia. Article 24 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights establishes that "all peoples shall have the right to a general satisfactory environment favorable to their development," binding the state to preserve natural resources and protect ecosystems from severe degradation[16]. Similarly, Article 38 of the Arab Charter on Human Rights explicitly recognises every person's right to live in a clean environment and requires states to take the necessary measures to protect the environment and combat pollution[17].

At the global level, international recognition of these standards advanced considerably when the UN General Assembly formally recognised the human right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment (Res. 76/300, 2022)[18]. Understood through this integrated framework, the long-term exposure to industrial pollution, marine degradation, and water depletion experienced in Gabès is not merely a technical or ecological concern; it constitutes a structural violation of substantive human rights guarantees codified across international and regional law.

Gabès makes the practical stakes of this framework hard to miss. Long-term exposure to industrial pollution, the decline of marine habitats, and the depletion of water resources have all had a serious and widely reported effect on residents' health, livelihoods, and quality of life. Read through an environmental rights lens, the demands raised by residents and civil society in Gabès are not simply requests for less pollution. They are, in substance, claims for the protection of fundamental rights.

16 African Union. African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. Adopted June 27, 1981. Entry into force October 21, 1986. https://au.int/en/treaties/african-charter-human-and-peoples-rights.
17 League of Arab States. Arab Charter on Human Rights. Adopted May 22, 2004. Entry into force March 15, 2008. https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3821c.html.
18 United Nations General Assembly. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Adopted December 16, 1966. Entry into force January 3, 1976. https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights.

4.2 Environmental Law: Constitutional Protection and Institutional Change

The Constitution of 2014 marked an important step in the constitutionalisation of environmental rights in Tunisia. Article 45 guarantees the right to a healthy and balanced environment and the right to participate in the protection of the climate. It also requires the State to provide the necessary means to eliminate environmental pollution. The provision reflected the post-revolutionary emphasis on environmental protection as a constitutional responsibility while linking environmental governance to broader principles of democratic participation and sustainable development.[19]

Article 47 of the 2022 Constitution maintains constitutional protection for environmental rights, ensuring that everyone has the right to a healthy and balanced environment and requiring the state to provide the necessary tools to reduce pollution.[20] The 2022 Constitution introduced a more centralised executive system and is widely assessed as strengthening presidential authority, while the 2014 Constitution had established decentralisation and local self-government as foundational principles of Tunisia's governance framework.[21]

This constitutional history is especially pertinent in Gabès, where environmental issues usually include confrontations between local populations demanding more control over environmental decision-making and central authorities favoring national industrial and commercial goals. Environmental governance in Tunisia therefore cannot be understood merely through the existence of constitutional provisions; it must also be evaluated through the institutional structures that control how environmental rights are implemented, enforced, and challenged in reality.

4.3 Ecological Integrity

The concept of ecological integrity provides an essential foundation for comprehending environmental impact beyond isolated instances of contamination. Ecological integrity refers to ecosystems' ability to sustain

19 Constitution of the Tunisian Republic (2014), Art. 45.
20 Constitution of the Tunisian Republic (2022), Art. 47.
21 Library of Congress, "Tunisia: New Constitution Consolidates Powers in the Hands of the President," Global Legal Monitor, 23 August 2022. https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2022-08-23/tunisia-new-constitution-consolidates-powers-in-the-hands-of-the-president/

their structure, functions, resilience, and biodiversity across time.[22] Rather than focusing exclusively on individual pollutants or regulatory thresholds, ecological integrity emphasises the overall health and sustainability of ecological systems.

According to this perspective, Gabès' environmental dilemma extends beyond regulatory compliance. The dumping of industrial waste into the Gulf of Gabès, alongside observed declines in marine biodiversity, groundwater stress, and oasis degradation, indicates broader ecosystem disruption when assessed through the lens of ecological integrity.[23] Such deterioration has an impact not just on environmental quality, but also on social and economic institutions that rely on healthy ecosystems.

The notion is especially important since the environmental impacts of industrial phosphate processing are cumulative and linked. Air pollution, marine contamination, water shortages, agricultural decline, and biodiversity loss all reinforce each other, resulting in long-term ecological alterations that may be difficult or impossible to restore. An ecological integrity approach emphasises the importance of evaluating environmental governance based on its ability to sustain ecosystem functionality rather than focusing just on individual environmental consequences.

4.4 Environmental Justice and Sacrifice Zones

The effects of industrial pollution in Gabès are not spread evenly across the population. Environmental degradation touches the entire region, but interview evidence suggests that exposure to environmental hazards, and the capacity to manage the consequences, vary significantly by socioeconomic position, occupation, gender, and proximity to pollution sources. These patterns reflect a broader environmental justice concern: the disproportionate concentration of environmental harm among communities with the least economic and political power to protect themselves from it.[24]

22 Peter Bridgewater, Rakhyun E. Kim, and Klaus Bosselmann, "Ecological Integrity: A Relevant Concept for International Environmental Law in the Anthropocene?," Yearbook of International Environmental Law, Vol. 25, no. 1 (2014): 61, https://doi.org/10.1093/yiel/yvv059.
23 Jaballah, "Living, Breathing, Resisting"; Bridgewater, Kim, and Bosselmann, "Ecological Integrity."
24 Rae Cade et al., "Environmental Justice in Indigenous Communities: The Disproportionate Effects of Environmental Contamination," Sustainable Futures, 10 (2025): 101348, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sftr.2025.101348.

Gabès illustrates this dynamic clearly. Residents living close to industrial sites face heavier exposure to air pollution and related health risks, yet often have few realistic options for relocating or otherwise reducing that exposure. Environmental degradation therefore compounds existing social and economic inequality, deepening vulnerability in communities that were already comparatively disadvantaged.

Interviewees consistently drew a connection between environmental exposure and social inequality. Aya Lghrissi observed that, while pollution affects the whole region, wealthier households are generally better placed to limit its worst effects, whether by living further from industrial zones or by accessing private healthcare when problems arise.[25] Lower-income residents, by contrast, tend to be concentrated near pollution sources and have less access to specialised medical care. Environmental risk and its consequences, in other words, are distributed unevenly across socioeconomic groups.

Occupational vulnerability is another important dimension of environmental injustice in Gabès. Several interviewees pointed to the disproportionate impact of environmental decline on people whose livelihoods depend directly on local ecosystems (farmers, fishermen, and craftspeople among them) since environmental degradation reduces the productivity of the natural resources their income depends on. One anonymous participant stressed that this makes communities reliant on agriculture and fishing especially vulnerable to poverty and social marginalisation.

The interviews also surfaced clear gendered dimensions of environmental harm. Women often work in roles that expose them directly to environmental hazards while also carrying most of the responsibility for household care and resource management. Khouloud Zaidi noted that women working in agriculture face particular vulnerability, given their sustained and direct exposure to contaminated environments through resource-dependent economic activity.[26] Environmental decline, in that sense, affects not only women's economic prospects but their health and general well-being.[27]

25 Aya Lghrissi, interview by the author, June 2026.
26 Khouloud Zaidi, interview by the author, May 2026.
27 Nawaat, "Women Lead the Struggle Against Industrial Pollution in Gabès," February 17, 2026, https://nawaat.org/2026/02/17/women-lead-the-struggle-against-industrial-pollution-in-Gabés/; Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, "Carrying the Toxic Burden: Women's Invisible Environmental Labor in

Adel Azouni raised a related concern, drawing on discussions among residents and healthcare workers about the possible effects of environmental pollution on maternal health. He noted that environmental risk features regularly in local conversations about pregnancy complications and reproductive health.[28] Such accounts do not establish direct medical causation, but they show how closely environmental degradation has become linked, in the minds of residents, to concerns about family health and the wellbeing of future generations.

Environmental decline also shapes the opportunities available to younger generations. Several participants noted that deteriorating conditions have narrowed access to public space, recreation, and economic opportunity, adding to a broader sense of social marginalisation. Adel Azouni observed that many young residents now see migration as the most realistic route to a better life, a sign of how environmental degradation intersects with wider processes of social exclusion, shaping the aspirations, mobility decisions, and expectations of the next generation.[29]

Aziz Chebbi, an activist with the Stop Pollution campaign, framed this unequal exposure in explicitly structural terms. In his account, those who bear the heaviest environmental costs (workers employed by the chemical complex, families living in its immediate vicinity, and residents without the financial means to relocate) are also those with the least influence over the decisions that produce that exposure. He noted that affected communities were not consulted when the complex was first established, nor when it was later expanded, and continue to be excluded from decision-making even as they demand the dismantling of the most polluting production units. By contrast, he observed, those who hold real decision-making authority, whether within company management or the state, do not share the same daily exposure to pollution as residents living alongside the industrial facilities.[30]

28 Adel Azouni, interview by the author, June 2026.
29 Adel Azouni, interview by the author, June 2026.
30 Aziz Chebbi, interview by the author, July 2026.

[31]Read through an environmental justice lens, these findings suggest that the Gabès crisis is not simply a story of ecological decline. Environmental harm is distributed unevenly, and disadvantaged groups carry a disproportionate share of the resulting social, economic, and health consequences. The cumulative effects of pollution and resource depletion reinforce existing inequality while generating new forms of vulnerability, dynamics closely connected to the idea of the environmental sacrifice zone, in which particular communities absorb the environmental costs of a growth model designed to serve broader national goals.[32]

What these interviews suggest, above all, is the importance of examining environmental degradation not only through ecological indicators but through questions of equity, participation, and social justice. The Gabès crisis shows how environmental problems become entangled with deeper structural inequalities, shaping who is exposed to risk, who has access to protection, and who ultimately bears the long-term consequences of environmental decisions. Understanding these uneven effects is essential to grasping both the human rights dimension of environmental degradation and the broader governance and accountability challenges Tunisia faces.

31 Gabès," https://www.wrmea.org/north-africa/carrying-the-toxic-burden-womens-invisible-environmental-labor-in-Gabés.html

32 Giorgia Scognamiglio, "Geographies of Environmental Injustice in Campania's Sacrifice Zones: A Mixed-Method Approach," PhD in Economic Geography thesis, Sapienza University of Rome, 2026, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/401540831_Geographies_of_environmental_injustice_in_Campania's_sacrifice_zones_a_mixed-method_approach.



5. Environmental Degradation as a Human Rights Concern

Environmental deterioration in Gabès is significantly more than an ecological issue. Decades of phosphate processing and chemical manufacture have made the region one of Tunisia's most ecologically impacted areas, with cumulative effects on air quality, marine ecosystems, water resources, and public health. While these environmental impacts are frequently discussed in technical or regulatory terms, they also raise fundamental questions about the realisation of human rights and the state's obligations towards affected populations. The Gabès environmental crisis demonstrates how ecological degradation can directly undermine the enjoyment of rights guaranteed by international human rights standards and the Tunisian constitutional framework, such as the rights to health, work, water, livelihood, participation, and a healthy environment.[33]

5.1 Air Pollution and Public Health

Air pollution is one of the most evident and persistent signs of environmental degradation in Gabès. For almost five decades, industrial operations associated with phosphate processing have generated significant air emissions, including sulfur dioxide (SO_2), fluoride compounds,

33 UNEP, "What Are Environmental Rights"; Constitution of the Republic of Tunisia (2022), art. 47; Lasoued, "The Gabès Chemical Complex."

and particulate matter discharged from the facilities of the Groupe Chimique Tunisien (GCT). These pollutants have exposed neighboring people to long-term environmental dangers, making air quality one of the most pressing environmental issues expressed by citizens, civil society organisations, and environmental activists.[34]

Environmental organisations, journalists and researchers have repeatedly documented a link between industrial pollution and declining public health conditions in Gabès. Environmental organisations, journalists, and human rights campaigners have consistently emphasised the frequency of respiratory infections, chronic respiratory disorders, and other health concerns among populations living near industrial zones.[35] Although proving clear causal linkages between specific pollutants and individual health outcomes is technically and legally difficult, accumulated data shows that long-term exposure to industrial emissions poses considerable dangers to public health. Fluoride chemicals related with phosphate processing have been linked in environmental health literature to dental fluorosis and other negative health effects, whereas sulfur dioxide and particulate matter are well known contributors to respiratory illness.[36]

The public health implications of pollution were highlighted during the environmental events of September and October 2025, when heavy industrial emissions apparently caused considerable respiratory discomfort among locals. More than 180 people, many of whom were children, required medical treatment, elevating long-standing environmental issues to the level of national concern and raising calls for responsibility and cleanup.[37] These occurrences reinforced local notions that environmental deterioration is more than just an ecological issue; it also poses a direct threat to human health and welfare.

Aziz Chebbi's account of that same period adds a detail worth flagging alongside the figures above: he identified schoolchildren in Chott Essalem and Ghannouch as the most severely affected group, and noted that even GCT's own workers, and their children, were among those directly affected by the emissions, an overlap that complicates any straightforward

34 Amara, "Once an Idyll, Tunisian Protest Hotspot Gabès"; TIMEP, "Gabès: A Victim of Industrial Pollution in Tunisia."

35 Lasoued, "The Gabès Chemical Complex"; Lac, "For the Gabès Chemical Group, a Population Is Sacrificed."

36 Junlin Yang et al., "Sulphur Dioxide and Fluoride Co-exposure Induce Incisor Hypomineralization and Amelogenin Upregulation via YAP/RUNX2 Signaling Pathway," Ecotoxicology and Environmental Safety, 245 (2022): 114106, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecoenv.2022.114106.

37 Jaballah, "Living, Breathing, Resisting."



framing of the crisis as a dispute between workers and residents.[38]

The interviews conducted for this study confirm how central these health concerns are to residents' experience of the crisis. Participants consistently recognised health problems as one of the most serious outcomes of industrial pollution. According to journalist Nabil Zitouni, respiratory ailments and cancer are regularly mentioned by Gabès locals while addressing the environmental condition, indicating that public health concerns have become important to local environmental mobilisation.[39]

Researcher in Sociology Khouloud Zaidi drew similar conclusions, emphasising the extent to which environmental factors impact daily living and household decision-making. Drawing on her field study, Zaidi observed that worries about respiratory infections and chronic health disorders commonly arise in conversations with people and are frequently reported as factors driving decisions to leave the region. Several examples indicated environmental quality and family health concerns as key motivators for relocation, demonstrating the larger societal repercussions of extended pollution exposure.[40]

38 Chebbi, interview by the author.
39 Nabil Zitouni, interview by the author, May 2026.
40 Khouloud Zaidi, interview by the author, May

The health consequences of air pollution in Gabès must thus be examined within a human rights context. International human rights standards are increasingly recognising the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment as critical to the accomplishment of other fundamental rights, such as life, health, and human dignity.[41] At the national level, Article 47 of the Tunisian Constitution of 2022 ensures the right to a healthy and balanced environment and requires the government to take the necessary steps to reduce pollution.[42] The continuance of severe air pollution in Gabès raises serious concerns about the effectiveness of environmental governance and the execution of constitutional safeguards designed to protect public health.

Air pollution in Gabès is thus more than just a technical environmental issue. It is a prolonged threat to the exercise of basic rights and highlights how environmental deterioration may have a direct impact on human well-being, social security, and quality of life. According to interviewees' experiences, pollution is not regarded as an abstract ecological concern, but as a daily reality that molds health outcomes, impacts mobility decisions, and affects people's and communities' ability to live in dignity and security.

5.2 Marine Pollution and Ecological Integrity

The deterioration of the Gulf of Gabès is one of the most severe and long-term environmental repercussions of Tunisian phosphate processing. For decades, industrial activity affiliated with the Groupe Chimique Tunisien produced significant amounts of phosphogypsum, a byproduct of phosphate processing that was dumped directly into the maritime environment. This practice has had a major impact on coastal ecosystems, turning sections of the Gulf of Gabès into one of the most contaminated marine regions in the Mediterranean basin.[43] The extent and length of phosphogypsum dumping have rendered marine contamination a distinguishing characteristic of Gabès' environmental catastrophe, as well as a major subject of contention among local residents, environmental activists, and state officials.

2026.

41 UNEP, "What Are Environmental Rights?"

42 Constitution of the Republic of Tunisia (2022), Art. 47.

43 Liberti, "Refugee from the Dying Oasis."



From an ecological standpoint, the environmental consequences of phosphogypsum[i] discharge go far beyond localised contamination. Scientific research and environmental evaluations have demonstrated the destruction of marine habitats, disturbance of benthic ecosystems, decreased biodiversity, and severe decreases in fish populations across impacted sections of the Gulf.[44] These changes represent a larger loss of ecological integrity, which is defined as ecosystems' ability to sustain their structure, functions, resilience, and biodiversity across time.[45] Rather than depicting isolated occurrences of environmental contamination, the deterioration of the Gulf of Gabès demonstrates a long-term process in which industrial activity has affected the functioning of an entire ecosystem.

Marine contamination has far-reaching repercussions beyond environmental degradation. The Gulf of Gabès has long sustained fishing communities, whose livelihoods are directly dependent on the health and production of marine resources. As

44 Lac, "For the Gabès Chemical Group, a Population Is Sacrificed." Nesrine Benhammadi, "Gabès: A Lost Earthly Paradise Between the Forefathers' Generation and Generation Z," Greenpeace Middle East and North Africa, January 26, 2026, https://www.greenpeace.org/mena/en/Gabés-a-lost-earthly-paradise-between-the-forefathers-generation-and-generation-z/.

45 Cade et al., "Environmental Justice in Indigenous Communities," 101348.

fish populations have depleted and coastal habitats have degraded, many fishermen have faced increased economic instability and fewer livelihood choices. Environmental degradation therefore has an impact not only on biological systems, but also on the social and economic rights of communities whose well-being is dependent on access to healthy natural resources. In this view, marine pollution involves a range of human rights problems, including the right to work and the right to an adequate standard of living (ICESCR, Arts. 6 and 11).[46]

Interviewees regularly regarded marine pollution as one of Gabès' most evident signs of environmental degradation. Journalist Nabil Zitouni identified the ongoing flow of phosphogypsum and industrial waste into coastal waterways as a major cause of ecological degradation, citing the consequences on marine biodiversity and local fishing output. According to Zitouni, the impacts of pollution are most noticeable in coastal areas like Chott Essalem, where observable changes to the coastline show the cumulative effects of decades of industrial activities. Such findings reflect the extent to which environmental deterioration has permeated the physical landscape and the daily lives of local populations.[47]

The deterioration of marine habitats has also led to a general sense of environmental loss. Historically renowned for its distinct natural qualities, the Gulf of Gabès sustained a wide range of commercial activity and cultural life inextricably linked to the sea.[48] According to interviewees, pollution has become increasingly identified with the region's identity, hurting not just livelihoods but also inhabitants' relationships with their environment. The transformation of the shoreline into a location for industrial waste dumping has had both tangible and symbolic repercussions, influencing how local populations see and comprehend their environment.

Viewed from an environmental justice perspective, the ongoing release of phosphogypsum raises serious concerns about the distribution of environmental costs and benefits. While phosphate processing helps to achieve national economic goals, the environmental costs connected with indus-

46 United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), "What Are Environmental Rights?"; Liberti, "Refugee from the Dying Oasis"
47 Nabil Zitouni, interview by the author, May 2026.
48 Junior Thanong Aiamkhophueng, "The Gulf of Gabès: A Nation Confronts Its Environmental Legacy," SEVENSEAS Media, February 2026, https://sevenseasmedia.org/gulf-of-Gabés-tunisia-environmental-crisis-restoration/.

trial production are concentrated in Gabès. Residents endure the costs of ecological deterioration, diminishing fisheries, and environmental health hazards, while many of the economic gains from phosphate exports extend outside the region. This unbalanced distribution of environmental burdens reflects traits common to environmental sacrifice zones, in which certain areas and populations bear excessive environmental costs in order to promote larger development goals.[49]

The pollution of the Gulf of Gabès thus represents more than a failure of environmental management. It poses a challenge to ecological integrity, a hazard to resource-dependent livelihoods, and a substantial environmental justice issue. The continuance of phosphogypsum discharge in the face of decades of confirmed environmental harm raises larger concerns about accountability, environmental governance, and the application of constitutional environmental protection obligations. As a result, marine contamination is critical to comprehending Gabès' environmental dilemma and its consequences for human rights and sustainable development.

5.3 Oasis Degradation, Water Stress, and Human Mobility

Beyond air and marine pollution, Gabès' environmental crisis has had a significant impact on freshwater resources and oasis habitats, both of which have historically supported local livelihoods and established the region's identity. Gabès was known for centuries as a unique oasis-sea ecology, with copious springs supporting agricultural output and allowing the development of one of the Mediterranean's most important coastal oases.[50] Today, however, this biological system is under tremendous pressure due to industrial water usage, groundwater depletion, salinisation, and broader environmental deterioration.[51]

The rise of phosphate processing activities has played an important role in this process. Phosphate mined in the Gafsa basin is transported to Gabès

49 Jaballah, "Living, Breathing, Resisting."; Noria Research, "Gabès: A Local Mobilization with National Consequence," December 4th, 2025, https://noria-research.com/mena/Gabes-a-local-mobilization-with-national-consequence/;
Lasoued, "The Gabès Chemical Complex.".
50 Aiamkhophueng, "The Gulf of Gabès."
51 TIMEP, "Gabès: A Victim of Industrial Pollution in Tunisia,"; Greenpeace Middle East and North Africa, "Gabès: A Lost Earthly Paradise Between the Forefathers' Generation and Generation Z," January 26, 2026, https://www.greenpeace.org/mena/en/Gabés-a-lost-earthly-paradise-between-the-forefathers-generation-and-generation-z/.

for chemical processing, which requires large volumes of water. Over time, extensive groundwater extraction has led to diminishing water levels and increased strain on aquifers that have historically supported oasis agriculture and local people.[52] As a result, environmental deterioration has affected not just the oasis's natural underpinnings, but also the social and economic structures that rely on them.

Interviewees regularly identified water shortage as one of the most visible signs of environmental degradation. Zakaria Hechmi said that the oasis of Chenini originally had multiple natural springs that provided enough of water for cultivation and domestic use. According to his narrative, these resources served as the foundation of local economic and social activity, and inhabitants had unfettered access to them. However, as groundwater resources have depleted over time, this reality has shifted significantly. Hechmi said that water, which was originally considered abundant, has become increasingly limited and expensive, causing people to dedicate greater financial resources to obtaining access to a resource that was once integrated in the local ecology.[53]

Ameni Bouaziz shared similar insights, emphasising the symbolic relevance of environmental loss for local populations. Bouaziz described Gabès as a historically significant location known for its oasis landscapes, freshwater springs, and agricultural wealth, stating that previous generations frequently referred to the region as a "paradise on earth." The degradation of these natural circumstances reflects not only an ecological shift, but also the loss of a cultural and historical landscape that has long influenced local identity and collective memory.[54]

The destruction of oasis ecosystems has serious consequences for livelihoods and economic security. Agriculture is still a significant source of income for many people, notably in the areas surrounding Chenini and adjacent oasis settlements. As water supplies become more scarce, agricultural output suffers, and farmers confront rising uncertainty about the viability of their operations. Interviewees regularly linked environmental deterioration to larger worries about employment, economic fragility, and the long-term viability of traditional livelihoods.

52 Liberti, "Refugee from the Dying Oasis"; Ben Mbarek, "The Gabès Chemical Complex."
53 Zakaria Hechmi, Interview by the author, Tunis, May 2026.
54 Ameni Bouaziz, Interview by the author, Tunis, May 2026.



Aya Lghrissi emphasised the effects of environmental deterioration on craftsmen and small-scale producers whose livelihoods rely on natural resources and traditional manufacturing methods. According to her perspective, pollution and ecological deterioration have limited the availability and quality of materials used in artisanal manufacturing, restricting economic options and disproportionately hurting women who work in traditional crafts.[55] These findings demonstrate how environmental deterioration affects larger economic and social rights, such as the right to work and the capacity to maintain sustainable livelihoods.

The oasis's environmental transition has also had an impact on shifting migration patterns. Environmental issues are increasingly being highlighted as affecting migration decisions from the region. According to the researcher in Sociology, Khouloud Zaidi, issues about pollution, environmental quality, and health commonly arise during conversations with Gabès residents who have migrated or are considering leaving. According to Zaidi, environmental deterioration frequently combines with economic instability, dwindling livelihood prospects, and worries about family well-being, resulting in a cascade of factors that promote migration.[56]

55 Aya Lghrissi, interview by the author, June 2026.
56 Khouloud Zaidi, Interview by the author, Tunis, May 2026.

These findings are consistent with wider investigations that relate environmental degradation in Gabès to new kinds of environmentally driven migration. As oasis ecosystems deteriorate and conventional economic activities become less feasible, inhabitants are under growing pressure to seek opportunities elsewhere. While a variety of variables impact migration decisions, environmental degradation has emerged as an essential component of the larger backdrop driving regional mobility patterns.[57]

Water stress and oasis degradation affect a number of linked human rights, including the rights to water, food and health, the right to work, and the right to an adequate standard of living. Environmental rights frameworks increasingly acknowledge that access to healthy ecosystems and sustainable natural resources is critical to the implementation of these rights.[58] The destruction of the oasis is thus not simply an environmental issue, but also a danger to the social and economic circumstances required for human well-being and dignity.

The case of Gabès demonstrates how environmental deterioration may have far-reaching consequences that affect livelihoods, social interactions, and population trends. The depletion of water supplies and oasis habitats jeopardises economic stability, increases social vulnerability, and impacts migration decisions, highlighting the interconnectedness of environmental and human rights issues. As such, oasis degradation must be viewed as a critical component of the region's greater environmental justice concerns.

5.4 Unequal Exposure and Environmental Justice

As discussed in Section 4.4, the environmental consequences of industrial pollution in Gabès are distributed unevenly across the population. The interview evidence collected for this report reinforces that analytical framework rather than altering it. Participants consistently described environmental harm as intersecting with existing social and economic inequalities, shaping both exposure to pollution and the capacity to cope with its consequences.[59]

57 Liberti, "Refugee from the Dying Oasis"; Zaidi, interview by the author.
58 United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), "What Are Environmental Rights?"; Constitution of the Republic of Tunisia (2022), Art. 47.
59 OECD, Environmental Justice.

Across the interviews, respondents identified several recurring patterns. Wealthier households were generally perceived as better able to reduce their exposure by relocating or accessing private healthcare, while farmers, fishermen, and craftspeople experienced disproportionate impacts because their livelihoods depend directly on local ecosystems. Interviewees also highlighted the gendered dimensions of environmental harm, noting that women often combine occupational exposure with responsibility for household care and resource management. Several participants further described environmental degradation as an increasingly important factor influencing migration decisions among younger residents, particularly when combined with declining economic opportunities.[60]

Aziz Chebbi framed these patterns in explicitly structural terms, arguing that those who bear the greatest environmental burdens are also those with the least influence over the decisions that produce them.[61] Read together, these findings reinforce the environmental justice analysis developed in Section 4.4 and provide an analytical bridge to the chapters that follow, which examine how these unequal patterns of exposure are reflected in civic mobilisation, state responses to protest, environmental governance, and judicial accountability.

5.5 Constitutional Rights Analysis

The Gabès environmental disaster raises fundamental questions about how environmental rights are implemented within Tunisia's constitutional framework. While environmental protection has been explicitly recognised in the constitution for over a decade, the continuance of severe pollution, ecological degradation, and public health issues indicates a large gap between constitutional protections and environmental realities on the ground. The Gabès case provides an essential prism through which to evaluate the extent to which environmental rights have been transformed from constitutional principles into effective protection for impacted populations.

The 2014 Constitution was a significant step forward in Tunisia's constitutionalisation of environmental rights. Article 45 acknowledged the right to a healthy and balanced environment and required the state to provide the

60 Aya Lghrissi, Khouloud Zaidi, Adel Azouni, and Aziz Chebbi, interviews by the author, May–July 2026.
61 Aziz Chebbi, interview by the author, July 2026.

tools to remove environmental contamination. Article 45 also linked environmental protection to climate protection, reflecting a growing international trend of acknowledging the interconnectedness between environmental sustainability and human rights.[62] Such provisions placed Tunisia among a small group of states whose constitutions expressly reference climate protection within their constitutional structure.

The adoption of the 2022 Constitution retained constitutional protection for environmental rights under Article 47. The provision protects the right to a healthy and balanced environment while also requiring the state to provide the necessary tools to reduce environmental contamination. While the wording of the environmental guarantee remained virtually the same, the larger constitutional situation shifted dramatically. The 2014 Constitution emerged from a post-revolutionary framework characterised by expanded democratic participation, decentralisation, and stronger institutional checks and balances. By contrast, the 2022 Constitution introduced a more centralised political structure, concentrating greater authority within the executive branch and modifying several institutional arrangements that had previously supported local participation and accountability.[63]

From an environmental rights standpoint, constitutional protection goes beyond pollution prevention alone. Today's understandings of environmental rights include both substantive and procedural elements. Substantive rights include the right to live in a healthy environment and to enjoy the circumstances required for human health and well-being. Procedural rights include access to environmental information, involvement in environmental decision-making, and adequate judicial remedies in the event of environmental harm.[64] These principles are increasingly acknowledged within international environmental governance and human rights frameworks, and they serve as key benchmarks for assessing state responses to environmental deterioration.

The scenario in Gabès reveals the practical significance of these procedural aspects. Environmental activists and civil society organisations have regularly highlighted the challenges in getting environmental information,

62 Constitution of the Republic of Tunisia (2014), Art. 45.
63 Constitution of the Republic of Tunisia (2022), Art. 47.
64 UNEP, "What Are Environmental Rights?"

achieving transparency on industrial emissions, and actively engaging in decisions impacting local environmental conditions. ARTICLE 19 has also emphasised the significance of safeguarding environmental defenders' rights and guaranteeing public access to environmental information in Tunisia, especially in situations when environmental complaints are related to larger demands for responsibility and participation. Environmental rights should be evaluated not just based on constitutional provisions, but also on accessible institutional means for implementing them.

The disparity between constitutional obligations and environmental reality is especially visible in Gabès. Despite the constitutional acknowledgment of environmental rights in both the 2014 and 2022 Constitutions, inhabitants continue to face chronic air pollution, marine contamination, groundwater depletion, and other public health issues. The continuance of these conditions raises serious concerns about the efficiency of environmental governance and the state's ability to meet its constitutional commitments. Reports from journalists, environmental organisations, and civil society actors frequently show that industrial operations continue despite decades of proven environmental damage and persistent local opposition.[65]

The interview results support this observation. Participants repeatedly noted a perceived mismatch between statutory acknowledgment of environmental rights and citizens' actual experiences with pollution. Several respondents stated that, while environmental protection is codified in law, enforcement measures are insufficient to prevent continued environmental harm or establish accountability for pollution. These assessments reflect broader concerns about the implementation, not the existence of environmental rights safeguards.[66]

One of the most fundamental difficulties is access to environmental justice. Environmental litigation frequently requires claimants to demonstrate direct causal links between specific sources of contamination and specific health or environmental consequences. In reality, demonstrating such causality may be exceedingly challenging, especially in cases involving long-term and cumulative environmental exposure. Environmental

65 ARTICLE 19, "Tunisia: Uphold the Right to Protest and Access to Environmental Information."
66 Interview with Ameni Bouaziz, May 2026; interview with Aya Lghrissi, June 2026; interview with Nabil Zitouni, May 2026; interview with Khouloud Zaidi, June 2026; interview with Zakaria Hechmi, June 2026; interview with Adel Azouni, June 2026; interview with Aziz Chebbi, July 2026.

law academics have emphasised evidentiary requirements, scientific uncertainty, and institutional limits as persistent impediments to successful environmental litigation, particularly in situations of industrial contamination.[67] These issues are especially important in Gabès, where residents and civil society groups have long sought acknowledgment of environmental harms that build over decades and affect entire towns rather than just isolated individuals.

As a result, constitutional recognition of environmental rights should be viewed as a necessary but insufficient condition for environmental protection. Constitutional guarantees enshrine important legal principles and serve as a normative framework for environmental claims; nevertheless, their success is ultimately determined by implementation, enforcement, access to information, public engagement, and justice. The Gabès case demonstrates the limitations of formal legal recognition when institutional systems fail to transform constitutional obligations into genuine environmental protection.

When seen via a human rights lens, Gabès' environmental issue demonstrates a recurring contradiction between constitutional promises and environmental reality. While Tunisia has built a rather progressive constitutional framework for environmental protection, the continuous exposure of local populations to pollution and ecological deterioration highlights the difficulties in ensuring that constitutional rights are properly implemented in practice. The case emphasises the significance of going beyond mere legal recognition to procedures that may ensure accountability, enforcement, and genuine protection of environmental rights.

These circumstances help explain the emergence and durability of environmental mobilisation in Gabès. As environmental deterioration impacted public health, livelihoods, and quality of life, local communities developed a variety of collective action strategies to ensure environmental preservation, accountability, and acknowledgment of their rights. The next chapter covers the evolution of environmental activism and civic involvement in Gabès, as well as the strategies adopted by affected communities to resist environmental injustice.

67 OECD, Environmental Justice.



6. Environmental Activism and Local Civic Engagement

Environmental mobilisation in Gabès has become more embedded in a system of securitised governance, with protest action typically presented via the prism of public order rather than as an expression of environmental rights concerns. This conceptualisation has helped to create a pattern in which environmental activism is governed not only through policing methods, but also through legal systems that regulate the limits of acceptable collective activity. In line with broader literature on environmental conflicts in authoritarian-leaning or hybrid political systems, Gabès' environmental contention demonstrates how ecological grievances can be shifted from political negotiation to security and legal arenas, where state institutions play a critical role in shaping the costs of activism.[68]

Several interviewees traced the roots of this dynamic to the movement's own organisational history. Aziz Chebbi, who became active in Gabès after first participating in the Close the Landfill movement against the Agareb landfill in neighbouring Sfax governorate, described a long process of coalition-building that preceded the events of 2025: recurring coordination meetings bringing together farmers, fishermen, residents affected by pollution, civil society organisations, political actors, and supporter groups associated with local football clubs, connected less by formal alliance

68 ARTICLE 19, "Tunisia: Uphold the Right to Protest and Access to Environmental Information."

than by shared exposure to the consequences of industrial pollution. According to Chebbi, this continuous, if informal, coordination allowed the movement in Gabès to mobilise quickly once a serious pollution incident occurred, without the lengthy preparation that earlier, more centrally organised campaigns had required. In Agareb itself, by contrast, this coordination structure largely dissolved once the landfill closed, particularly after several movement activists faced prosecution.[69]

Chebbi was explicit that this coordination was continuous rather than reactive: before any action on the ground, organisers met with the farmers, fishermen, and residents whose health had been affected by pollution from the chemical complex, alongside civil society organisations and, at times, people employed at the landfill itself, groups he stopped short of calling allies but described as part of the broader civic fabric of the governorate. On the visible, public-facing side of that organising, he described a repertoire that combined training sessions and awareness campaigns with demonstrations, marches, and sit-ins: protests in front of the governorate headquarters, marches from the governorate headquarters to the GCT's own headquarters, demonstrations outside the Ministry of Industry in Tunis, and, in the earlier Agareb phase of the movement, protests staged directly outside the landfill itself.

6.1 October 2025 Mobilisations

The October 2025 mobilisations in Gabès saw a dramatic increase in environmental protest activities, reflecting public dissatisfaction with continuous industrial pollution and perceived government inactivity. Large-scale demonstrations and coordinated strikes were reported throughout the region, with participants calling for immediate structural intervention in the phosphate industrial complex, which is responsible for long-term environmental damage.[70] These demonstrations were not single incidents, but rather part of a larger cycle of protest action that has periodically increased in response to severe pollution outbreaks and health problems.

Authorities responded to these rallies by implementing a variety of containment techniques, including enhanced police presence, crowd dispersion measures, and intensified monitoring of protest organisers. Report-

69 Chebbi, interview by the author.
70 Amara, "Once an Idyll, Tunisian Protest Hotspot Gabès."



ing on these incidents suggests that while protests were mostly nonviolent, they were considered as possible public order threats, confirming a securitised perception of environmental movement.[71] This strategy resulted in rising tensions between citizens and security officers, particularly in regions near industrial complexes.

Aziz Chebbi, interviewed for this report, offered a slightly different account of why this particular period mobilised so quickly and at such scale. He attributed the speed of the response less to any new organising than to the severity of the emissions themselves, which caused widespread respiratory distress, especially among schoolchildren, and affected GCT's own workers and their children alongside residents. Because coordination networks between farmers, fishermen, affected residents, and supporter groups had already been built over preceding years, he said there was no longer any need for lengthy preparation or formal coordination meetings once the incidents occurred; people mobilised, in his words, spontaneously.[72]

71 People's Dispatch, "From Gabès to Sfax: Industrial Pollution in Tunisia Between Deferred Decisions and Accumulated Crises," November 11, 2025, https://peoplesdispatch.org/2025/11/11/from-Gabés-to-sfax-industrial-pollution-in-tunisia-between-deferred-decisions-and-accumulated-crises/.
72 Aziz Chebbi, interview by the author, July 2026.

Chebbi drew an explicit parallel to an earlier wave of unrest in Agareb, in Sfax governorate, in 2021, which he described as having been triggered in a similar way by a small number of severe, concrete events rather than by political calculation including the death of Abdelrazek Lachheb after exposure to tear gas during protests against the Agareb landfill.

6.2 Policing and Criminalisation

Rather than facilitating assembly, policing actions during environmental demonstrations in Gabès have increasingly emphasised preventive confinement and dispersion tactics. During times of high mobilisation, protest surveillance, barricades, and quick intervention teams have been deployed, notably near GCT industrial zones.[73] While officially justified as ensuring public order and defending key infrastructure, these methods have limited the physical and temporal scope of environmental protest.

Environmental activism is criminalised under broadly defined public order and security regulations. Activists may face penalties for unlawful assembly or destruction of public infrastructure, even if their protest tactics are clearly undertaken in pursuit of environmental rights.[74] This legal framework contributes to what scholars describe as soft repression, whereby formally legal, administrative, and discursive mechanisms are used to regulate and constrain collective action without relying primarily on overt coercion or physical violence.[75]

Chebbi's own account of the authorities' response over these months is more granular than the general pattern described above, and adds a chronology worth setting out explicitly. Protests, in his telling, were for the most part peaceful, with confrontation concentrated in moments when Ultras supporter groups (organised football fan group) were present; on those occasions, tear gas was used and there was violence. During October 2025 specifically, he described the authorities as adopting a markedly more repressive posture, including official rhetoric portraying protesters as conspirators, and tear gas fired into residential neighbourhoods rather than only at demonstration sites. Several members of Ultras supporter groups were arrested during this period. By November, he said, the

73 Lac, "Pollution in Gabès: The Fight Against GCT."
74 Arab Reform Initiative, "Living, Breathing, Resisting."
75 Jan Jämte and Rune Ellefsen, "The Consequences of Soft Repression," Mobilization: An International Quarterly 25, no. 3 (2020): 385, https://doi.org/10.17813/1086-671X-25-3-383.



authorities began trying to contain public anger more gradually rather than through direct confrontation; by December, demonstrations had become less frequent and the movement had entered a period of relative calm, as both its own coordinating structures and political actors reassessed the situation. He was careful to add that repression did not stop during this de-escalation, only that its form changed, as the state appeared to conclude that continued confrontation would deepen public anger rather than contain it.[76]

6.3 Targeted Prosecutions

In addition to police measures, environmental activism in Gabès has occasionally resulted in targeted legal proceedings against recognisable organisers and vocal participants. These prosecutions often depend on evidentiary standards that prioritise police reports and administrative data, restricting defendants' capacity to effectively fight allegations.[77] Such tactics mirror greater structural inequalities in court proceedings involving collective action cases, where the burden of proof is typically molded by security-related material.

Targeted prosecutions have both a punitive and a deterrent purpose, in-

76 Chebbi, interview by the author, July 2026.
77 Lasoued, "The Gabès Chemical Complex."

dicating the possible legal implications of further involvement. Even when trials do not result in heavy penalties, the procedural burden of several court appearances, legal ambiguity, and reputational risk all contribute to what human rights organisations call "chilling effects" on civic activity.[78] In Gabès, interview data and reporting indicate that this dynamic has affected activists' strategic decisions, resulting in dispersed and episodic forms of mobilisation rather than durable organisational structures.

A case Aziz Chebbi raised as the clearest recent example concerns Khayreddine Debaya, an environmental activist and member of the Stop Pollution campaign. According to Chebbi, the GCT revived a legal case against Debaya dating back to 2020, following his participation in a peaceful sit-in demanding the dismantling of polluting industrial units and calling for the right to health, a clean environment, fair regional development, and employment. An initial in absentia judgment was issued on 8 March 2023, sentencing Debaya and other defendants to one year in prison. Those who had provided the tent used during the sit-in were also sentenced to eight months in prison on charges of obstructing freedom of work.

Following the defendants' objection to the initial ruling, the case was reopened, with the objection accepted on procedural grounds at a hearing on 18 March 2026. After several postponements, the court examined the case on 14 October 2026 and reserved its decision for deliberation. On 21 October 2026, the Gabès Court of First Instance sentenced Debaya and eleven other young activists to six months in prison, suspended.

Chebbi described the case, alongside smear campaigns on social media targeting individuals publicly associated with the movement and telephone and in-person summonses issued to activists by security services, as evidence of sustained efforts to intimidate participants in environmental mobilisation. He nevertheless stressed that he resisted framing individuals as "leaders" of what he considers a social rather than hierarchical political movement. He also expressed his belief that other instances of harassment had gone unreported because affected families feared the consequences, a claim this report has not independently verified but records as part of his testimony. The case illustrates how prolonged judicial

78 ARTICLE 19, "Tunisia: Uphold the Right to Protest."

proceedings and the threat of criminal penalties can impose significant costs on environmental activism, reinforcing the broader pattern of judicial harassment and administrative intimidation documented in this report.[79]

6.4 Judicial Harassment and Summons Practices

Aside from legal trials, environmental activists have documented patterns of judicial harassment, such as several summonses for interrogation, administrative inquiries, and informal warnings. These methods exist in a gray area between law enforcement and court procedure, frequently without transparency in terms of legal criteria or evidential justifications.[80] While their individual impact minimal, their cumulative effect leads to a legal climate of ambiguity for civil society participants.

Summons procedures are especially important since they serve as a low-intensity technique of control, requiring compliance without necessarily resulting in formal charges. This creates a system in which activists stay under constant legal observation, even during intervals between large protest actions.[81]

Such procedures are consistent with larger trends observed in environmental governance research, in which states use administrative and judicial ambiguity to manage dissent while adhering to constitutional protections for freedom of assembly.[82]

Taken together, these dynamics show that environmental activism in Gabès is influenced not just by ecological and socioeconomic complaints, but also by institutional reactions that frame the risks involved with collective action. Policing methods, targeted prosecutions, and judicial summons procedures all contribute to a multi-layered system of restriction that determines the shape and intensity of environmental mobilisation. In this sense, environmental conflict in Gabès is more than just an ecological fight; it is also a legal and political arena where rights claims are constantly contested under institutional pressure.

79 Chebbi, interview by the author, July 2026.
80 Nawaat, "Women Lead the Struggle Against Industrial Pollution in Gabès,".
81 Djerbi, "We Want to Breathe: Dispatch from Gabès, Tunisia."
82 United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Environmental Rule of Law: Tracking Progress and Charting Future Directions (Nairobi: UNEP, 2023), 123.



7. Security Repression and Judicial Proceedings Against Activists

Environmental mobilisation in Gabès has not only resulted in calls for environmental preservation and responsibility, but has also changed the dynamic between activists and state officials. Interviewees highlighted a pattern in which environmental protests are commonly controlled using security-based measures that portray demonstrations as concerns of public order rather than displays of civic involvement and environmental rights.[83] Such dynamics are consistent with larger trends documented in the research on contentious environmental politics, in which environmental activism in situations of structural economic relevance may be addressed via securitised governance frameworks rather than participatory environmental institutions.[84]

According to interview evidence, multiple environmental mobilisations in Gabès were met with arrests, limits on access to prisoners, and claims of excessive force. Representatives from human rights organisations were reportedly barred from visiting persons jailed in connection with environmental demonstrations. Following arrests, families routinely contacted activists and civil society actors to inquire on detained relatives and for legalaid.[85]

83 Interview with Ameni Bouaziz, May 2026; interview with Aya Lghrissi, June 2026; interview with Nabil Zitouni, May 2026; interview with Khouloud Zaidi, June 2026; interview with Zakaria Hechmi, June

84 UN Human Rights Council, Resolution 48/13: The Human Right to a Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment (2021), https://undocs.org/A/HRC/RES/48/13

85 Nawaat, "Women Lead the Struggle Against Industrial Pollution in Gabès."

Interviewees also reported claims of abuse during arrest and custody. These stories included allegations of verbal abuse, humiliation, and coercive treatment while dealing with security agents. While these testimonials are based on subjective experiences rather than objectively validated court conclusions, they demonstrate a common belief among activists that participating in environmental protests involves major personal and legalconsequences.[86]

Particular concern was voiced about the techniques employed to disperse protesters. Tear gas was allegedly used at various protests, particularly in or near residential neighborhoods. Participants reported that the effects spread beyond the protestors to the nearby residents, causing respiratory distress particularly among children and other vulnerable people.[87] From an environmental justice standpoint, such dynamics raise concerns about the spread of harm from protest sites to ordinary living surroundings.

Taken together, these reports indicate that environmental protest in Gabès is often approached through a security perspective that emphasises public order concerns above engagement with underlying environmental problems. This adds to a governance environment in which environmental activism interacts with policing, administrative control, and legal regulation, influencing the costs of civic involvement.

7.1 Securitisation of Environmental Protest

Gabès' environmental demonstrations increasingly demonstrate a securitisation process in which environmental concerns are portrayed as issues of public order and state stability rather than valid claims for environmental rights and public health. Instead of tackling pollution through participatory environmental governance processes, authorities have typically resorted to security-based actions to control protesters and maintain industrial continuity.

Interviewees regularly indicated heightened security reactions to environmental mobilisations, such as increased police presence, surveillance of activist engagement, and arrests of participants following protests. Despite its nonviolent nature, environmental mobilisation was increasingly framed as a danger to public order.[88]

86 Djerbi, "We Want to Breathe: Dispatch from Gabès, Tunisia."
87 Lac, "Pollution in Gabès: The Fight Against GCT."
88 Arab Reform Initiative, "Living, Breathing, Resisting: Gabès and the New Political Landscape in Tunisia."

This securitisation is especially crucial considering Gabès' strategic phosphate industry. Prioritising industrial continuity produces a governance structure in which environmental concerns may be seen as obstacles to larger development goals rather than as rights-based demands.

From an environmental rights standpoint, this raises issues about the implementation of procedural rights such as access to information, participation in decision-making, and access to justice. When environmental issues are predominantly addressed through enforcement rather than institutional involvement, the gap between nominal constitutional safeguards and their practical application widens.

7.2 Policing of Public Space and Demonstration Control

Gabès's public space has emerged as a focal point for environmental disputes. Environmental rallies have frequently been met with crowd control, mobility restrictions, and increased police presence, highlighting larger contradictions between environmental activism and official control of public order.

A particularly illustrative example can be found in the demonstrations following major pollution incidents in 2025. Protesters staged peaceful marches against the GCT's industrial facilities, calling for severely polluting operations to be decommissioned or restructured. Despite the peaceful character of the demonstrations, security personnel reportedly used tear gas before the marches reached the industrial sites.[89]

Interviewees underlined that the impacts of these actions went beyond protestors, affecting nearby residential areas and subjecting families, children, and the elderly to chemical irritants.[90] These secondary effects demonstrate how policing environmental protests might raise larger public health issues beyond the current protest setting.[91]

Journalistic evidence also shows limitations in environmental reporting. Access to industrial sites and information on pollution occurrences is usually limited, which restricts independent verification and public oversight

89 Amara, "Once an Idyll, Tunisian Protest Hotspot Gabès."
90Interview with Ameni Bouaziz, May 2026; interview with Aya Lghrissi, June 2026; interview with Nabil Zitouni, May 2026; interview with Khouloud Zaidi, June 2026; interview with Zakaria Hechmi, June
91 People's Dispatch, "From Gabès to Sfax: Industrial Pollution in Tunisia Between Deferred Decisions and Accumulated Crises."

of environmental conditions.[92] Such limits have a direct impact on the openness of environmental governance as well as impacted populations' access to essential information.

A December 2025 case documented by Intersection Association illustrates this dynamic concretely. An environmental activist who livestreamed a suffocation incident affecting schoolchildren near a Gabès secondary school, filming at the request of the students' families, was stopped by a security officer, prevented from contacting family members, and taken to a police station. He was released only after agreeing to delete the footage and sign a written pledge not to publish or film further material. The school director, who had filed a complaint against him for filming inside an educational institution, agreed to withdraw it on the same condition.[93] The case is consistent with the broader pattern described by interviewees in this section: documentation of pollution-related harm, even by bystanders rather than organised activists, is treated as a security matter, and its removal is negotiated as the price of release rather than pursued as a matter of due process.

7.3 Administrative Intimidation and the Summons System

Beyond apparent policing measures, activists noted a variety of administrative mechanisms that serve as deterrents. These include police summonses, repeated requests for interrogation, and informal administrative warnings for participating in environmental protests or public advocacy.

Although these methods may not always result in formal prosecution, they create legal ambiguity and enhance the perceived dangers associated with environmental action. This adds to an atmosphere in which civic engagement is influenced not only by overt repression, but also by anticipatory self-limitation owing to possible administrative exposure.[94]

Journalists also noted indirect administrative impediments, such as problems in obtaining permission to film or visit industrial locations. While such processes do not constitute legal censorship, they raise the admin-

92 Lasoued, "The Gabès Chemical Complex."

93 Intersection Association for Rights and Freedoms, "Islam Zerelli," Freedom Faces, December 10, 2025, https://intersection.uno/freedom-faces/إسلام-الزرلي/.

94 Djerbi, "We Want to Breathe: Dispatch from Gabès, Tunisia."

istrative cost associated with environmental reporting and may restrict investigative capacity.[95]

Access to environmental information is an additional challenge. Interviewees reported difficulty acquiring government statistics on pollution levels, respiratory ailments, and environmental monitoring findings. This lack of openness restricts civil society actors' capacity to support environmental claims and engage in evidence-based campaigning.[96]

From an environmental justice standpoint, these interactions lead to epistemic asymmetry, in which state institutions and industry actors have more access to environmental information than impacted communities, strengthening systemic inequalities in environmental governance.

7.4 Professional and Medical Intimidation

Administrative pressure in Gabès is not confined to activists and journalists. Interviewees described a further, distinct pattern affecting medical and public health professionals who encounter pollution-related illness in the course of their work. According to these accounts, doctors and health workers who speak publicly, or even discuss with researchers, suspected links between industrial emissions and patient health face the threat of professional sanction, including licence revocation, from the bodies that regulate their practice.

This dynamic was cited by interviewees as a central reason why this report was unable to obtain on-record medical testimony or verified health-sector data on pollution-related illness in Gabès, and why formal requests for comment were not put to health authorities in the course of this research.[97]

Aziz Chebbi was asked directly, in interview, about the difficulty of getting doctors, hospital department heads, pharmacists, and nurses in Gabès to speak on record for this report, almost all of whom declined, citing fear of losing their professional licences or facing other consequences. He said the problem was not specific to this project: in his account, other organisations, journalists, and researchers who have tried to interview health-

95 Nawaat, "Women Lead the Struggle Against Industrial Pollution in Gabès."
96 ARTICLE 19, "Tunisia: Uphold the Right to Protest and Access to Environmental Information."
97Interview with Ameni Bouaziz, May 2026; interview with Aya Lghrissi, June 2026; interview with Nabil Zitouni, May 2026; interview with Khouloud Zaidi, June 2026; interview with Zakaria Hechmi, June

care professionals about pollution in Gabès have run into the same wall of silence, and doctors at the regional hospital in particular, those who treat patients suffering from pollution-related illness most directly, are the least willing to speak publicly. He described this as reflecting a broader pattern rather than an isolated response to any one investigation.[98]

Taken on its own, this pattern would be difficult to verify beyond the level of interviewee testimony. Read alongside the patterns of policing, prosecution, and administrative summons documented elsewhere in this section, however, it points to a wider chilling effect that extends beyond civil society and journalism into professional and clinical spaces, constraining precisely the kind of evidence, independent medical documentation of pollution-related harm, that would otherwise strengthen both public accountability and affected residents' access to legal remedy. From an environmental justice perspective, this represents a significant additional barrier: it suppresses not only advocacy but the underlying evidentiary record that advocacy, litigation, and policymaking all depend on.

7.5 Legal Reclassification of Environmental Dissent

Environmental activism in Gabès is typically viewed through legal categories related to public order rather than environmental rights. Activists reported being charged with unlawful assembly, hindrance of work, and disruption of economic activity. These measures, while not particular to environmental protest, effectively recast environmental demands as issues of legality and security rather than ecological justice.[99]

This legal categorisation highlights contradictions between constitutional environmental safeguards and administrative practice. While Tunisian law formally recognises environmental rights, notably the right to a healthy environment (Art. 47 of the 2022 Constitution), enforcement methods remaininconsistent.[100]

Interviewees also highlighted asymmetries in legal responsiveness: environmental activism often triggers rapid administrative or judicial intervention, while efforts to hold industrial actors accountable for long-term

98 Aziz Chebbi, interview by the author, July 2026.
99 Arab Reform Initiative, "Living, Breathing, Resisting."
100 UNEP, Environmental Rule of Law: First Global Report.

pollution face procedural delays and evidentiary challenges. This imbalance reinforces perceptions of environmental impunity and unequal access to justice.

7.6 Analytical Synthesis: Environmental Dissent and Environmental Justice in Gabès

The findings demonstrate that environmental mobilisation in Gabès is embedded in a broader struggle over accountability, participation, and the realisation of environmental rights. Environmental protest is shaped not only by ecological harm but also by institutional responses that structure the costs of civic engagement. Three key dynamics emerge. First, environmental protest is increasingly subject to securitisation, with demonstrations managed through policing strategies rather than participatory governance. Second, administrative mechanisms such as summonses, questioning procedures, and information restrictions create forms of low-intensity pressure that shape civic behavior. Third, environmental dissent is frequently reframed through legal categories of public order, shifting attention away from environmental harm itself.

Even in the absence of overt mass violence or systematic imprisonment, these processes lead to what may be described as the de facto criminalisation of environmental protest. Environmental activism is still constitutionally protected, but its practical application is constrained by the combined impacts of security, administrative, and judicial systems.

Gabès exemplifies an environmental justice scenario in which populations disproportionately exposed to industrial pollution have limited opportunities for engagement and access to accountability mechanisms. Persistent environmental deterioration, combined with poor institutional responsiveness, has produced perceptions of environmental impunity and an uneven distribution of environmental damages and protection.

The situation increasingly resembles what the environmental justice literature terms a sacrifice zone, in which environmental costs are concentrated in a particular territory in service of a broader economic growth agenda.[101] In this context, the environmental conflict in Gabès is as much

101 Raouf Ben Hédi, «Soumoud : Gabès n'est plus une ville, c'est une zone de sacrifice,» Business News,

political and legal as it is ecological, involving competing conceptions of rights, development, and citizenship.

This pattern of securitised response to environmental and resource grievance is not confined to Gabès. Documentation by Tunisian civil society organisations shows comparable dynamics in other regions: a fatal use of tear gas against anti-landfill protesters in Agareb, Sfax governorate, in 2021, in which the official cause-of-death account was disputed by witnesses; judicial proceedings against a veterinary professional over public statements on a public health matter; and judicial harassment of water-rights activists and protesters in Jendouba and Kairouan governorates.[102] These cases differ from Gabès in industry, geography, and specific grievance, but they point to a pattern that extends beyond the phosphate sector: in Tunisia, environmental and resource-related dissent is broadly managed through security and judicial mechanisms rather than participatory environmental governance. Read alongside this wider pattern, the Gabès case is best understood as a particularly severe and long-running instance of a national dynamic, rather than as an isolated local anomaly.

Asked what he thought needed to change at the level of the state, Aziz Chebbi situated this pattern within a longer structural critique that goes beyond any single administration. While he identified broad agreement, within the movement, on the narrower demand that the state show genuine political will to dismantle the most polluting production units and remediate more than fifty years of accumulated pollution, his own view went further: he argued that Tunisia's economic and social model, one he described as built on marginalising certain regions to serve the interests of others, has persisted across successive governments since independence, and that the security apparatus's approach to managing protest has likewise remained largely unchanged despite personnel changes after 2011 and again after 2021. In his framing, the deeper problem lies in the political and economic system itself, reinforced by Tunisia's position with-

October 17, 2025, https://businessnews.com.tn/2025/10/17/soumoud-Gabés-nest-plus-une-ville-cest-une-zone-de-sacrifice/1367807/.

102 Intersection Association, "Abdelrazek Lachheb," Freedom Faces, November 13, 2021, https://intersection.uno/freedom-faces/عبد-الرزاق-لشهب/; Intersection Association, "Ahmed Rjab," Freedom Faces, February 23, 2024, https://intersection.uno/freedom-faces/ahmed-rjab-احمد-رجب/; Intersection Association, "Mansaf Houaidi," Freedom Faces, October 17, 2025, https://intersection.uno/freedom-faces/منصف-الهوايدي/; Intersection Association, "Khaled Tayahi," Freedom Faces, June 25, 2025, https://intersection.uno/freedom-faces/خالد-التياهي-khaled-tayahi/; Intersection Association, "Rania Mechergui," Freedom Faces, July 1, 2024, https://intersection.uno/freedom-faces/رانية-مشرقي/.

in the international economy, rather than in any individual office-holder.[103]

Ultimately, the pursuit of environmental justice in Gabès extends well beyond pollution management. It reflects a demand for recognition, democratic participation, and the effective implementation of constitutional and international environmental rights.

8. Environmental Governance, Decentralisation, and Institutional Accountability

Gabès' environmental governance is characterised by a continual contradiction between officially decentralised administrative systems and centralised decision-making over environmental policies. While local and regional governments have nominal environmental management competences, essential choices about industrial activity, pollution control, and remediation solutions are generally made by central state institutions and national industrial players. This institutional architecture leaves large gaps between local environmental requirements and the means available to address them in practice.

From an environmental justice standpoint, governance in Gabès demonstrates how institutional fragmentation can weaken accountability in contexts of long-term environmental degradation. Communities affected by industrial pollution frequently interact primarily with local authorities, while the most consequential regulatory and enforcement decisions are taken at higher administrative levels. This disconnect contributes to perceptions of institutional distance and limited responsibility.[104]

Tunisia's framework for local environmental governance is principally established by the 2018 Code of Local Authorities (Organic Law No. 2018-29), adopted to implement the decentralisation provisions of the 2014 Constitution[105]. The Code assigns municipalities a range of competences relating to environmental protection, including public hygiene, waste management, environmental sanitation, maintenance of public spaces, and other local environmental services. These provisions envisaged municipalities as important actors in environmental governance while preserving central government authority over national environmental policy and strategic industrial regulation.

103 Aziz Chebbi, interview by the author, July 2026.
104 United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Environmental Rule of Law.
105 Organic Law No. 2018-29 of 9 May 2018 (Code of Local Authorities / Code des collectivités locales)

The practical operation of this framework changed significantly following the dissolution of Tunisia's elected municipal councils in March 2023. Acting under presidential authority, the government replaced elected councils with appointed Special Delegations (or Special Councils), substantially reducing local democratic representation and reinforcing central executive control over municipal administration. Although municipalities formally retained many of their statutory competences, the institutional changes further constrained their ability to influence environmental governance in politically sensitive cases such as Gabès.

In Gabès, these institutional constraints are particularly evident. While municipalities possess formal competences in areas such as environmental sanitation and local public health, they have little authority over the strategic decisions that most directly affect environmental quality, including phosphate production, industrial licensing, hazardous waste management, and emissions regulation. These remain concentrated within central government ministries and national public enterprises, limiting municipal capacity to respond effectively to local environmental concerns.

8.1 Municipal Authority

Gabès' municipal authorities are formally responsible for urban planning, sanitation, waste management, and local environmental supervision. However, their ability to influence industrial pollution regulation remains constrained by weak fiscal autonomy and the absence of regulatory power over nationally strategic industrial sectors.[106]

This institutional constraint generates a governance gap in which local authorities handle the apparent impacts of pollution while lacking the legal authority or technological capacity to address the underlying industrial causes. As a result, local administration becomes reactive rather than preventative, perpetuating cycles of environmental deterioration and institutional reliance on central decision-making processes.[107]

8.2 Centralisation versus Local Governance

Gabès' environmental governance reflects a larger systemic mismatch

106 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Decentralized Governance of Natural Resources. New York: UNDP, 2015. https://www.undp.org/publications/decentralized-governance-natural-resources.
107 World Bank. "Strengthening Local Governments in Tunisia as a First Step toward Decentralization." 2014.
https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2014/07/24/strengthening-local-governments-in-tunisia-as-a-first-step-toward-decentralization

between centralised industrial policy and regional environmental management. Decision-making authority over phosphate production and industrial infrastructure is still concentrated in national institutions and state-owned firms, especially the Groupe Chimique Tunisien.[108]

This centralisation stresses macroeconomic goals and export-oriented industrial policies, frequently at the expense of local environmental protection. As shown in environmental governance literature, such designs tend to impair participatory mechanisms and limit the influence of impacted communities on environmental decision-making processes.[109]

In effect, this creates a structural inequality between those who suffer environmental consequences and those who influence industrial policy choices. Even when environmental implications are adequately documented at the local level, decision-making is confined to central administrative organisations.[110]

8.3 Judicial Enforcement and Access to Justice

Tunisian courts have an equivocal role in environmental regulation. While constitutional provisions guarantee the right to a healthy environment, practical implementation of these rights is inconsistent and subject to procedural and evidential limitations.[111]

Environmental claims frequently face challenges such as determining causality, relying on technical competence controlled by state-linked organisations, and procedural delays. This reduces local actors' ability to transform environmental complaints into enforceable court decisions.[112]

At the international level, access to justice is widely recognised as a fundamental component of environmental governance. Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development affirms that individuals should have appropriate access to judicial and administrative proceedings, including redress and remedy, in environmental matters.[113] Although

108 TIMEP, "Gabès: A Victim of Industrial Pollution in Tunisia."
109 UNDP, Decentralized Governance of Natural Resources.
110 Arab Reform Initiative, "Living, Breathing, Resisting."
111 Constitution of the Republic of Tunisia (2022), Art. 47.
112 Lasoued, "The Gabès Chemical Complex."
113 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, UN Doc. A/CONF.151/26 (Vol. I) (Rio de Janeiro: United Nations, August 12, 1992), Principle 10, https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_CONF.151_26_Vol.I_Declaration.pdf

Tunisia is not a party to the Aarhus Convention, the Convention's detailed provisions on access to justice have become an influential benchmark for environmental governance internationally. Against this normative framework, the disparity between constitutional provisions and judicial practice in Gabès demonstrates the limited implementation of these principles within the Tunisian legal system.[114]

8.4 Accountability Gaps

Gabès' environmental governance suffers from major accountability gaps due to the combination of centralised government, weak local autonomy, and restrictive judicial enforcement. These discrepancies are structural rather than accidental, indicating that Tunisia's phosphate-based economic strategy prioritises industrial output over environmental protection and the wellbeing of affected communities.[115]

One significant result is the diffusion of institutional responsibility: industrial actors, central ministries, and local authorities each hold partial mandates, but no single entity is fully accountable for long-term environmentaldamage.[116]

At the same time, harmed communities have few procedural options for demanding redress or policy reform. While constitutional environmental rights exist, their application is hampered by administrative hierarchies, insufficient enforcement capability, and limited access to environmental information.[117]

From an environmental justice standpoint, these governance deficiencies lead to an unequal distribution of environmental damages and safeguards, strengthening Gabès' status as a site of structural environmental marginalisation in national development plans.[118]

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114 United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention), adopted June 25, 1998, entered into force October 30, 2001, art. 9, https://unece.org/environment-policy/public-participation/aarhus-convention/text.

115 Mathieu Rousselin, "A Study in Dispossession: The Political Ecology of Phosphate in Tunisia," Journal of Political Ecology 25, no. 1 (2018), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323162268_A_study_in_dispossession_the_political_ecology_of_phosphate_in_Tunisia.

116 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Government at a Glance 2019 (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1787/8ccf5c38-en.

117 ARTICLE 19, "Tunisia: Uphold the Right to Protest and Access to Environmental Information."

118 OECD, Environmental Justice, 21–22; Liberti, "Refugee from the Dying Oasis."

Read alongside Aziz Chebbi's structural critique in Section 7.6, this diffusion of accountability is not, in his view, an incidental design flaw but a reasonably direct expression of which interests Tunisia's development model has consistently served since independence, regardless of which government has been in office.

Finally, Gabès' environmental governance reflects a fragmented institutional framework in which decentralisation is limited in reality, municipal power is restricted, and judicial processes offer only partial accountability. This design perpetuates long-term environmental harm while restricting local actors' ability to have a substantial impact on environmental outcomes.

The Gabès case demonstrates the distinction between formal legal competences and effective institutional authority. Although Tunisian legislation assigns municipalities important environmental responsibilities, the concentration of decision-making over industrial development, environmental regulation, and pollution control within central state institutions, combined with the weakening of elected local government after 2023, has significantly limited the capacity of municipal authorities to respond to environmental grievances or ensure accountability.

9. Environmental Litigation and Judicial Accountability

Environmental litigation in Gabès is essential yet fundamentally confined within the larger environmental governance framework. While constitutional and statutory frameworks formally recognise the right to a healthy environment and provide avenues for judicial redress, the practical operation of environmental adjudication is still shaped by procedural constraints, evidentiary thresholds, and institutional disparities between affected communities and industrial actors. As a result, litigation serves as a forum in which broader conflicts among economic policy, environmental protection, and civic mobilisation are played out, rather than an effective mechanism for environmental remediation.

Within this framework, environmental litigation has a dual character: on the one hand, a restricted space for strategic legal mobilisation by impacted groups; on the other, a system of judicial caution and procedural

filtration that frequently restricts the transformative potential of environmental claims.

9.1 Strategic Litigation

Strategic litigation[ii] in environmental disputes in Gabès has evolved as an attempt by civil society actors, legal practitioners, and impacted people to turn environmental concerns into judicially cognisable claims. These initiatives often seek not just compensation or restoration, but also broader recognition of environmental harm and the implementation of constitutional environmental rights.

However, institutional obstacles continue to hinder strategic litigation's efficacy. Environmental claims are typically forced to go through administrative pre-litigation procedures, and courts frequently favor procedural admissibility over substantive environmental review.[119]

Furthermore, strategic litigation is frequently reactive rather than proactive, arising in response to acute pollution episodes rather than serving as a continuous enforcement tool. This reduces its capacity to address long-term cumulative environmental damage.

9.2 Evidentiary Challenges

Claimants' evidence burden is a major barrier in environmental litigation. Courts often demand scientifically sound evidence of causality between industrial activities and certain environmental or health effects.[120]

Establishing direct causal chains is especially difficult when dealing with diffuse pollution, such as airborne emissions from phosphate processing, marine discharge into coastal habitats, and groundwater contamination. Environmental damage in such situations is cumulative, multi-sourced, and temporally protracted, making it extremely difficult to attribute harm to a single responsible actor or event.

This evidence framework promotes a "proof asymmetry": affected communities are required to meet high thresholds of technical certainty, while

119 Republic of Tunisia, Code of Civil and Commercial Procedure.
120 Lasoued, "The Gabès Chemical Complex."

industrial actors benefit from attribution ambiguity.[121]

Field testimony also reveals institutional limits regarding data access. Journalists and civil society activists report restricted access to government environmental and public health statistics, diminishing their capacity to back up accusations in court and increasing dependence on private expertopinions.[122]

9.3 February 2026 Court Decisions

The Gabès first-instance court's February 2026 judgment denying a request for an emergency halt of harmful industrial activities serves as an important example of the limitations of environmental litigation. The court determined that the applicant did not demonstrate sufficient, imminent and legally established damage to warrant prompt judicial action.[123]

This ruling underscores a structural characteristic of emergency environmental litigation: référé proceedings[iii] are intended to address immediate and plainly demonstrated injury, yet environmental degradation usually emerges as long-term, cumulative exposure patterns.[124]

As a result, courts frequently refer environmental conflicts to standard processes, which are slower and less capable of giving prompt preventative remedy. This results in a temporal mismatch between environmental harm and judicial responsiveness, in which continued exposure is legally acknowledged but not immediately addressed.

The decision demonstrates how procedural standards for emergency relief can effectively limit the extent of environmental protection in reality, especially in cases of ongoing environmental degradation.

Aziz Chebbi, speaking about this ruling in interview, said the Stop Pollution movement had never placed great hopes in the case from the outset,

121 UNEP, Environmental Rule of Law: First Global Report.
122 Nabil Zitouni, Interview by the author, May 2026.
123 Jeune Afrique, "Pollution à Gabès : une plainte en référé pour la suspension de la production du Groupe chimique tunisien rejetée," Jeune Afrique, February 27, 2026, https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1769549/politique/pollution-a-Gabés-une-plainte-en-refere-pour-la-suspension-de-la-production-du-groupe-chimique-tunisien-rejetee/.
124 OHCHR, Right to a Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment, https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/10/human-right-clean-healthy-and-sustainable-environment

given what he described as the nature of urgent judicial proceedings on a matter he sees as politically and economically strategic. He noted that the litigation had nonetheless served a secondary purpose regardless of its outcome: keeping people mobilised, encouraging attendance at hearings, and keeping the issue present in public debate. He said he had expected the ruling to provoke greater public outrage than it did, but that many people had already lost confidence in the judiciary and no longer believed justice could be achieved through the courts, which he described as, in itself, a deeply disappointing outcome.[125]

Chebbi argued that the court had other options available even from a strictly legal standpoint: it could have postponed the proceedings until the substantive case had been heard, as he said happens in many comparable cases, rather than issuing a ruling that no environmental harm had been established. In his reading, that choice amounted to an implicit exoneration of the GCT, and he described the ruling as carrying a political message as much as a legal one. This report has not independently assessed the legal merits of the ruling and presents Chebbi's characterisation as his own interpretation rather than as an established fact; his view is nonetheless consistent with the broader pattern of judicial caution documented in this section and in Section 9.4 below.

9.4 Limits of Judicial Remedies

Even when environmental claims are adjudicated, court remedies remain restricted. Courts are often wary about imposing measures that may interrupt industrial operations, especially in economically crucial areas like phosphate processing.

In contrast to structural interventions such as industrial closure or mandatory relocation, remedies are typically phrased in gradual or procedural terms, requests for additional expert evaluation, partial compliance measures, or administrative follow-up.[126]

This careful approach reflects a greater institutional balance between environmental preservation and economic stability. While judicial independence is nominally protected, environmental adjudication occurs within a policy framework that tacitly prioritises industrial stability.

125 Aziz Chebbi, interview by the author, July 2026.
126 TIMEP, "Gabès: A Victim of Industrial Pollution in Tunisia."

From an environmental justice standpoint, this results in a type of remedial limitation, in which harm is acknowledged but not fully remedied by enforceable corrective actions.[127]

Interviews support this viewpoint, with activists highlighting that repeated mobilisations and legal efforts have resulted in little discernible change in industry practices or pollution levels.[128]

9.5 Analytical Synthesis

Environmental litigation in Gabès illustrates a constrained form of legal accountability characterised by three interconnected dynamics:

First, procedural filtering occurs when environmental claims must satisfy administrative and admissibility hurdles, limiting access to substantive examination.

Second, evidentiary asymmetry arises when high causation requirements and limited data availability hinder plaintiffs' capacity to demonstrate injury.

Third, remedial caution reflects courts' reluctance to issue rulings that could severely disrupt industrial operations.

Together, these processes create a system in which environmental damage is formally justiciable but difficult to remediate. Litigation becomes a forum for partial recognition rather than effective enforcement.

In this situation, legal responsibility does not serve as an effective remedial tool for environmental deterioration. Instead, it serves as an organised forum for negotiating environmental rights claims and industrial policy goals, with minimal ability to change the fundamental causes of pollution.

127 Jaballah, "Living, Breathing, Resisting."
128 Nabil Zitouni interview by the author, May 2026.



10. Conclusion and Recommendations

10.1 Conclusion

The Gabès case exemplifies the complex interaction of environmental degradation, public health, governance, and human rights under a growth paradigm that has emphasised industrial output over environmental sustainability for decades. The concentration of phosphate processing operations and accompanying industrial infrastructure has resulted in major environmental impacts, including air pollution, marine contamination, deterioration of oasis ecosystems, and growing worries about public health implications. These consequences have not been borne fairly; rather, they have disproportionately affected populations living near industrial sites, raising fundamental questions of environmental justice and institutional accountability.

This analysis has shown that environmental deterioration in Gabès goes beyond ecological harm and poses a larger governance concern. Environmental degradation has harmed livelihoods, disrupted traditional economic activity, contributed to patterns of environmental displacement, and eroded public trust in governmental institutions. Despite constitutional acknowledgment of environmental rights and repeated public pledges to environmental reform, impacted communities face considerable barriers to achieving effective environmental protection and meaningful involvement in environmental decision-making.

The data also show that environmental activism has emerged as a key vehicle for communities seeking accountability and recognition. Environmental mobilisation in Gabès has resulted in wide alliances that cut across social, political, and economic lines, uniting residents, activists,

journalists, women's groups, and civil society organisations around common demands for environmental justice. However, these initiatives have frequently received securitised reactions, administrative pressures, and procedural impediments that constrain civic involvement and environmental advocacy.

The research on governance institutions reveals a constant disconnect between nominal decentralisation and real decision-making power. While municipal authorities are usually expected to manage the repercussions of environmental deterioration, important decisions about industrial operations are still concentrated in central state institutions and state-owned businesses. This concentration of authority reduces local capacity to respond effectively to environmental concerns and undermines democratic accountability.

The judicial dimension of environmental governance paints a similarly mixed picture. Courts are an essential forum for articulating environmental concerns, but environmental litigation is limited by procedural complexity, evidentiary hurdles, and cautious approaches to remedies involving strategically significant industrial sectors. As a result, environmental rights are legally recognised but sometimes difficult to enforce in practice.

Taken together, these findings suggest that issues raised by the Gabès crisis are not just environmental, but also institutional. The continuation of environmental deterioration implies larger concerns pertaining to environmental governance, access to information, public engagement, regulatory supervision, and accountability systems. Addressing these difficulties will need a holistic approach that incorporates environmental preservation, human rights, public health, and democratic engagement into future policy solutions.

10.2 Recommendations

10.2.1 To the Government of Tunisia

Implement the 2017 relocation decision

- Implement without further delay the 2017 government decision to dismantle and relocate the most polluting units of the Groupe Chimique Tunisien (GCT) away from densely populated areas of

Gabès. Publish a detailed implementation roadmap with clear milestones, budget allocations, responsible institutions, and regular public progress reports.

Strengthen the legal framework for environmental rights

- Adopt implementing legislation giving effect to Article 47 of the 2022 Constitution. The legislation should clearly define the State's obligations regarding pollution prevention, environmental remediation, public participation in environmental decision-making, access to environmental information, and mechanisms for environmental accountability. It should also establish effective judicial and administrative remedies for individuals and communities affected by environmental harm.

Review the March 2025 phosphogypsum decree

- Conduct an independent scientific and legal review of the March 2025 decree reclassifying phosphogypsum from hazardous waste to a reusable industrial co-product. The review should assess its compatibility with national environmental legislation, Tunisia's international human rights obligations, and internationally recognised environmental standards. Any future regulatory decisions should be based on transparent scientific evidence and meaningful public consultation.

Implement the July 2025 GCT environmental audit

- Ensure full implementation of the corrective measures identified during the July 2025 environmental audit of GCT facilities. The major non-conformities identified by the audit should be addressed through time-bound corrective action plans, regular public reporting, and independent verification by competent environmental authorities.

Fulfil the October 2025 commitments

- Publish a comprehensive implementation plan for the commitments announced following the October 2025 environmental crisis, including the work of the joint governmental commission and the es-

tablishment of the proposed regional cancer treatment facility. Progress reports should be publicly available and developed in consultation with affected communities and civil society organisations.

Strengthen independent environmental monitoring

- Environmental monitoring should be conducted and assessed regularly by independent monitoring bodies, including accredited laboratories and university research partnerships working alongside the National Agency for Environmental Protection (ANPE). Monitoring data should be published regularly, made accessible to the public, and remain open to independent scientific review.

Improve transparency and access to environmental information

Particular attention should be paid to ensuring the regular publication of:

- Air quality measurements; Water quality monitoring results; Industrial emission inventories; Environmental impact assessments; Environmental inspection findings.
- Public access to environmental information should be guaranteed through accessible online platforms and regular public reporting.

10.2.2 To the Groupe Chimique Tunisien (GCT)

Improve environmental compliance

- Implement all outstanding recommendations arising from the July 2025 environmental audit and establish measurable environmental performance targets.

Increase transparency

- Publish regular reports on atmospheric emissions, phosphogypsum management, wastewater discharges, environmental monitoring results, and compliance with environmental regulations.

Strengthen community engagement

- Establish an accessible grievance mechanism enabling affect-

ed communities to report environmental concerns and obtain timely responses. Consultation with local residents should be conducted regularly and in good faith before major operational decisions affecting environmental quality.

10.2.3 To the Judiciary and Relevant Public Authorities

Ensure access to environmental justice

- Guarantee timely, independent, and effective judicial review of environmental complaints and ensure that environmental litigation is handled without undue delay.

Protect environmental human rights defenders

- Ensure that environmental activists, journalists, researchers, lawyers, and community representatives can exercise their rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association without intimidation, arbitrary prosecution, or reprisals.

Strengthen accountability

- Investigate allegations of environmental harm promptly and impartially and ensure that violations of environmental legislation result in effective administrative, civil, or criminal sanctions where appropriate.

10.2.4 To International Partners and Donors

Support independent environmental monitoring

- Provide technical and financial assistance for independent air, water, and soil quality monitoring carried out by accredited laboratories, universities, and civil society organisations. Support the development of publicly accessible environmental databases and strengthen local scientific capacity.

Protect environmental human rights defenders

- Expand flexible funding for legal assistance, emergency protection, digital security, psychosocial support, and organisational resilience for environmental human rights defenders and community organisations working in Gabès.

Promote environmental accountability

- Encourage international financial institutions, bilateral donors, and development partners supporting industrial or infrastructure projects in Tunisia to integrate environmental compliance, transparency, meaningful public participation, and independent monitoring into financing agreements and project evaluation frameworks.

Support environmental remediation and public health

- Provide technical expertise and financial assistance for pollution remediation, hazardous waste management, environmental health surveillance, and healthcare initiatives addressing pollution-related illnesses in Gabès, while supporting long-term sustainable economic alternatives for affected communities.

Gabès' example demonstrates that achieving environmental justice involves more than pollution management alone. It requires institutions that can ensure accountability, meaningful involvement, transparency, and respect for environmental rights. The future of Gabès' environmental governance will be determined not only by technological approaches to pollution reduction, but also by public institutions' commitment to address long-standing disparities in the distribution of environmental impacts, decision-making authority, and access to justice.

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Endnotes

i Phosphogypsum is a solid waste byproduct formed when phosphate ore is processed to produce phosphoric acid, which is then utilized in fertilizer. Radium is present in both the phosphate ore and the resultant phosphogypsum, which decays to produce radon. Radium and radon are both radioactive and have cancer-causing properties.

ii Strategic litigation is the identification and pursuit of legal cases as part of a strategy to promote human rights. It focuses on an individual case in order to bring about broader social change. These cases set important legal precedents by publicly exposing injustices, raising awareness and bringing about changes in legislation, policy and practice. Strategic litigation can have a lasting impact on a large number of people at the national, regional or international level.

iii Référé proceedings are rapid, simplified judicial hearings designed to secure temporary measures in urgent situations or to preserve rights without waiting for a full trial. The resulting decision is provisional and enforceable, meant to halt immediate harm or secure undisputed obligations.

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