



Tunisian children arrive at Mount Sammama.



Tunisian musicians perform on Mount Sammama, during a gathering as part of a project by the Jabal Theatre, to use traditional culture and drama to combat the appeal of jihadist ideology. — AFP photos



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A Tunisian theatre actor performs on Mount Sammama.



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Upstaging jihad in Tunisia's impoverished mountains

A rustic theatre where performers wear masks carved from cactus aims to win over young Tunisians in a long neglected mountain district that has become a cradle of jihadism. Welcome to the "Jabal (mountain) Theatre" of music and dance on an open-air stage flattened from bare earth on Mount Sammama, in a range of hills that is a favored hideout of loyalists of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group. Since its 2011 revolution, Tunisia, birthplace of the Arab Spring, has faced jihadist attacks that have killed more than 100 security force personnel as well as 59 foreign tourists and 20 Tunisian civilians.

The Kasserine region in which Mount Sammama lies is one of Tunisia's remotest and most neglected, and its poverty has fanned extremism. Adnen Felali, a 42-year-old teacher, is determined to use traditional culture and drama to combat the appeal of jihadist ideology. "Our project, the Jabal Theatre, targets primarily children, the future of our country," he said. "We want to teach them that the mountains are a place of creativity, of poetry, of beauty, and in no way a place to breed the culture of death." The concept of his rural theatre was born two years ago and has had to overcome skepticism from all sides, especially in the absence of any support from the state. But despite its humble setting and facilities, Felali is aiming high, with the ambition of "eradicating extremism through culture and human understanding". The extremists may be lurking just "200 meters (yards) away with their bombs and guns, but we reject their catastrophic presence alongside us because for us the mountain is where we live", he said. With a winter chill setting in, hundreds of schoolchildren attended a four-hour festival of Bedouin music and dance, a break with the harshness of everyday reality.

'Best weapon'

Music teacher Ellafi Khachnaoui, 70, was among the crowd along with his oud, the pear-shaped stringed instrument beloved of the Arab world. "We want this generation to learn of the culture of life. We want them to be protected from the risk of being recruited by terrorists," said Khachnaoui. In January 2016, Kasserine was the scene of the



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worst social unrest in Tunisia since the revolution after a young man was killed during a demonstration against unemployment. In the absence of economic prospects, Kasserine remains vulnerable. "We have mines, we have fear... we have death," sighed Felali. There have been several deaths over the past year from land mines planted by the jihadists. Maalia, 32, her face masked by large black glasses, was seriously wounded in a land mine explosion last May as she and two friends were out collecting wild rosemary. Her cousin and a friend were killed on the spot. As for Maalia, she woke up in hospital with her eyes bandaged. Following several operations, one of her eyes was saved, but not the other. "Culture is the best weapon against backwardness, darkness and terrorism," said Maalia, who was among the audience at the Jabal Theatre.

Her voice choking with emotion, Maalia vowed never to leave her native mountain. "This is where I was born and I am not scared despite everything that's happened to me... I will carry on the war with words, not with guns," she said. — AFP