Arab Reform Initiative

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Freedom, justice, and dignity in movement: Mobility regimes in the Grand Tunis

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Hundreds of Tunisian taxi drivers block a tramway road to protest the new fuel price hikes in the capital city of Tunis, Tunisia on April 15, 2019. ©AA/Yassine Gaidi

Introduction

For Monia[1] , spending a third of her monthly salary on commuting from her home in the western suburbs of the city to her work in downtown Tunis with a taxi is now a usual process. She feels obliged to spend this amount because doing the same commute with public transport requires multiple changes and waits that can take up to two hours and cause her to constantly be late to work. Many Tunisians like her struggle on daily basis for their basic commutes and try to come up with different alternative solutions. Under these conditions movement becomes not so much an act of freedom as Article 24 of the Tunisian constitution stipulates, but a necessity requiring massive sacrifices. Mobility is one of the many areas in which Tunisians are still waiting to achieve their revolutionary demands for justice, freedom, and dignity.

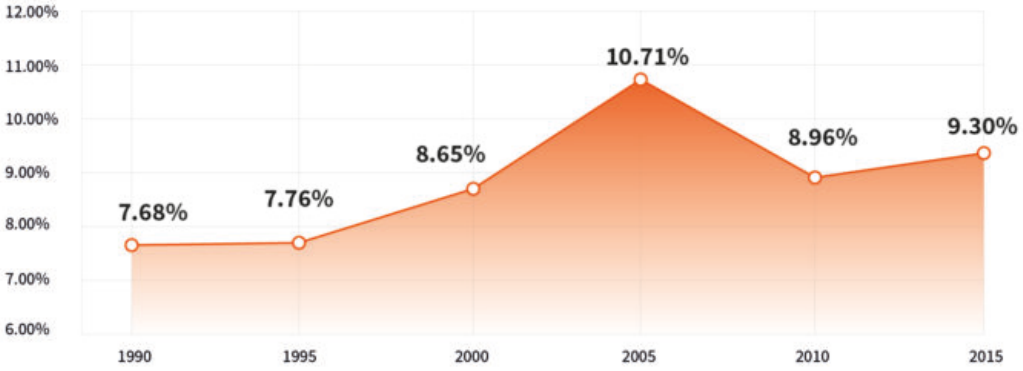
The justice angle has been used extensively in the recent literature to study how movement is possible or impossible for different segments of society. Through the term "mobility justice", Mimi Sheller offers a very comprehensive framework to study all sorts of mobility or immobility in an integrated manner. According to her, "Mobility regimes... govern who and what can move (or stay put), when, where, how, and under what conditions".[2] This means paying attention to not only how humans travel (or not) from one place to another but also to the movement (or lack thereof) of objects, ideas, discourses, and all ways of communication. In the public policy realm, transportation appears as a key area of practice where suggested policies can be deeply anchored in different philosophical approaches to justice.[3] For instance, while a Rawlsian understanding asks for reshaping unequal access to transport in a way that benefits the worst-off in the society, utilitarian scholars try to see justice in transport as a way of maximizing the total utility of the maximum number of citizens.[4]

So, how do the mobility regimes in Tunisia function today and how do they respond to the revolutionary demands for justice, freedom, and dignity? To answer this question, this paper focuses on the modes of transportation in the agglomerative area of the capital, the Greater Tunis (known as *Grand Tunis* or

Tounes al-Kobra). This region is comprised of four governorates: Tunis, Manouba, Ben Arous, and Ariana. It constitutes the largest agglomeration in the country with 48 delegations and a population of more than 2.8 million. As the administrative and commercial center of the country, its governorates are among the most developed in the country[5] , visible also in their better infrastructure and possibilities of mobility. Grand Tunis is home to the largest airport, 45% of the vehicle fleet[6] and the only tramway network in Tunisia. It is also one of the most connected urban centers with railways. Yet, inequalities persist within Grand Tunis. For instance, the peri-urban governorate of Manouba has a lower regional development rate of than the other governorates.[7] Inequalities are also visible in the large variance of the poverty rate across the delegations[8] . Although Grand Tunis appears as a privileged region in terms of development, this privilege very much relativizesd when internal discrepancies are considered. In other words, even an urban-scale analysis of the Grand Tunis can clearly show us the severity of injustices revolving around the mobility regimes.

Freedom of movement at what cost?

Figure 1: Transportation expenses as a share of total household expenditures (average, %)



Transportation constitutes a major concern for millions of Tunisians and its associated costs have grown significantly in the last decades. As of 2015, an average household spent 360 dinars per year on transport accounting for 9.3% of all household expenses, a rise from the 1990 level of 7.7% (55 dinars) (Figure 1). The rising cost of transport can be partially explained by the increasing reliance on individual transport. While in 1977, public transport used to account for 68% of transportation in the Greater Tunis, this number gradually fell to 28% in 2011 (Figure 2) with individual transport constituting approximately two thirds of all transportation in large urban areas (Tunis, Sfax, and Sousse)[10] . This shift seems to be the result of state policies that privileged private car ownership at the expense of public transportation for the last decades. In the 2010-16 period, 0.52% of the public budget (492.5 million TND) was spent in total on public transportation against 1.07% (1021.6 million TND) for the individual forms of transport (Figure 3). A symbol of state's support for individual car ownership is the Ben Ali era "voiture populaire" (folk car) tax deductions, still in place for the middle-class and working-class people wishing to purchase low-cost cars.

Figure 2: Share of public transport for passengers in Grand Tunis

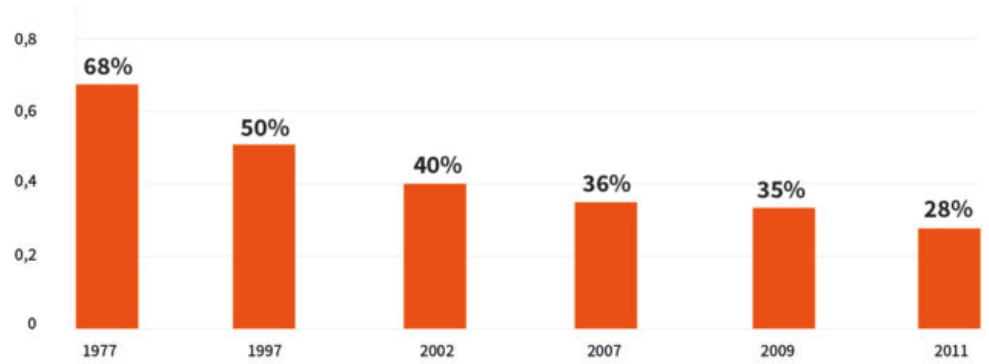
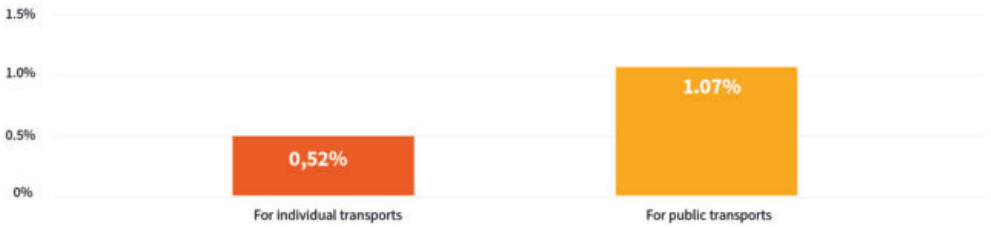


Figure 3: Transport allocations as a share of total government expenditures in the 2010-16 period

For individual transports	For public transports	For individual transports	For public transports
492.5 million TND*	1021.6 million TND*	1,07%	0,52%



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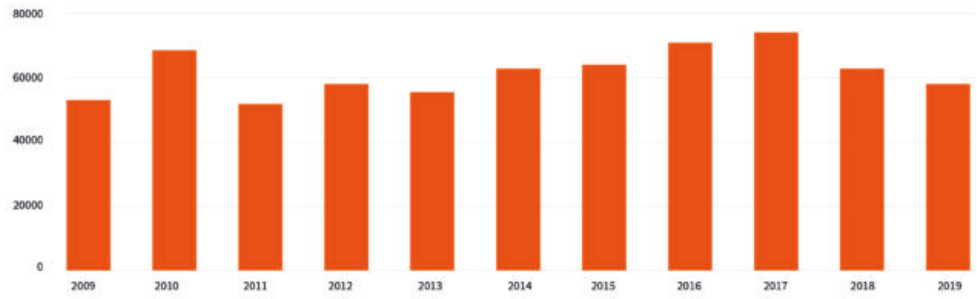
However, the overreliance on private vehicles comes with great costs and leads to the consolidation of unjust mobility regimes. With high inflation rates and devaluation of the dinar, car prices have risen by around 63% from 2003 to 2015 according to spokesperson of the Tunisian Union of Car Dealers.[13] Taxes represent a significant portion of the sales price for an automobile in Tunisia, around 40% according to the same source. Apart from the financial costs, government applies a quota system limiting the number of cars imported into the country, despite

continuous calls from large car importers to liberalize the market.[14] It is also important to the note that the boosts in car sales typically benefit a dozen of car concessionaires which controlled 90% of the market in 2019 (with the leading four concessionaires making up 46.6% of the market)[15] and most of these concessionaires are owned by family-based major economic groups[16] .

Environment and urban livelihoods constitute other domains where significant costs are incurred by the rise in private car utilization. Transport represents 12% of all CO2 emissions in Tunisia[17] and 32% of the final national energy consumption[18] . According to a study, 3% of all deaths are caused directly by the emissions from road traffic.[19] Furthermore, the increasing number of cars means more and more congested roads particularly around the urban centers like Tunis and more accidents as Tunisia ranks second in the North Africa with regards to number of mortal accidents per capita.[20] According to public authorities, the costs associated with traffic congestions, road accidents, and greenhouse gas emission or pollution make up 2%, 1.5%, and 2 to 10% of the GDP respectively.[21]

Despite their negative effects on multiple fronts, Tunisians continue to rely on cars. Figure 4 shows that despite a post-revolutionary fall, yearly first registration numbers fluctuated since the Revolution, possibly due to the increases[22] and decreases[23] in the import quotas. Yet, the total number of vehicles in circulation in Tunisia has risen significantly and is estimated to be around 2.3 million[24] today. What is more, the number of vehicles per 1000 inhabitants has increased by 36% in the 2010-2018 period, reaching 191 (Figure 5). A number still considerably higher than other Maghreb countries like Algeria[25] (153) or Morocco[26] (111). At the same time, only 27% of the households own a car in Tunisia, indicating that this mode of transportation remains available solely to the better-off.[27] In other words, car ownership represents an unjust mobility regime whereby the mobility of the relatively better off comes at high economic costs to the owners but also significant long-term costs to the future and life quality of all the population. As such, a policy that aims at boosting private car ownership is likely to benefit a dozen of car concessionaires and moderately expand the share of car owning households while incurring higher costs to the whole population.

Figure 4: Yearly number of first registrations for all vehicles in Tunisia



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Figure 5: Number of vehicles per 1000 inhabitants



The Quest for Justice and Dignity in Public Transportation

Arguably, a main reason behind the over-reliance on individual transport is the failures of the public transportation system around the country, including the Greater Tunis. There are several providers of public transportation in the Greater Tunis. The state-owned transportation company *Transtu* accounts for 80% of all the urban public transport.[30] It runs the six-line tramway system (referred to as *metro* by the locals), the northern suburban train line named the TGM, and 232 lines of city buses.[31] Furthermore, the Tunisian National Railways Company (SNCFT) runs a second suburban train line linking the southern suburbs to the Tunis city center. In addition to the Transtu buses, four private bus companies TUS, TUT, STC, and TCV are also smaller providers of public transportation in the Greater Tunis area.[32] Lastly, non-regulated forms of transportation have been growing exponentially as the number of registered "collective taxis"[33] and individual taxis rose from 65 and 10 814 in 2006 to 1026 and 16 307 in 2017, respectively (Figures 6.1 and 6.2).

Figure 6.1 Evolution of taxi numbers in Grand Tunis

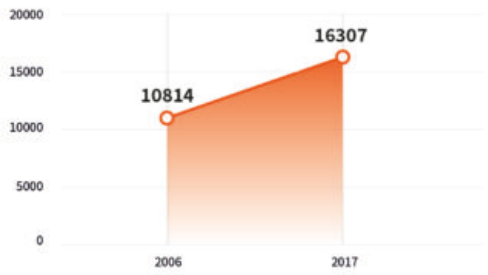
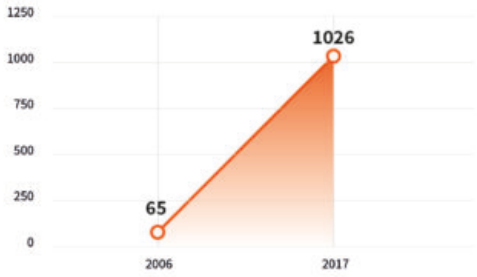


Figure 6.2 Evolution of taxi collectif numbers in Grand Tunis



The urban public transportation suffers from multiple issues affecting the mobility of thousands of Tunisians. The first set of problems is structural. Since its design and construction, the transport system allows for certain types of mobility for specific groups of people while blocking others. Operational since 1872, Tunis-Goulette-Marsa (TGM) suburban train line, Tunisia's first railroad, serves as a historical example revealing the purpose of the mobility regimes. Since its planning by the Beylik regime, obtaining the rights for its construction and exploitation caused a competition among European colonial interests in the country.[35] Furthermore, since its conception, the line did not link the historical residential neighborhoods of Tunisia with each other but the Beys' favourite retreat place, La Marsa and the European consulates along the line to the Goulette district, home to mostly non-Muslim European immigrants and a port connecting Tunis to Europe.

Tunis has grown rapidly over the last 50 years with new suburbs being built around the city. Yet, public transportation projects seem to have failed to keep up with this rapid growth. Until this day, the railroad networks in Tunis continue to link upper-class neighborhoods to the city center while very few of the lower-class neighborhoods benefit from this public service. Figure 7.1 shows the number of railway stations for any of the rail-based public transport services in the Grand Tunis (TGM, 6 Tramway lines, and the SNCFT suburban train) alongside the poverty rate for all the 48 delegations in Grand Tunis. The accumulation of the railway systems in the richer districts is remarkable. In the poorest tertile, there are only three railway stops in two delegations. While upper-middle-class and upper-class neighborhoods are marked by a high level of accessibility to the railway network. Some upper-middle-class residential areas like El Menzah, Ariana Ville, or Soukra are also also badly serviced by the railway networks. In these areas, residents often rely on private cars to commute, an option hardly available for most Tunisians. Hence, 70% of the public transport users in Grand Tunis rely on public buses for their daily movements[36] but access to and travel by bus is not always easy.

Figure 7.1: Railway stations and poverty rate by delegation

	Governorate	Delegation	Number of Railway Stations	Poverty Rate
Poorest Tertile	MANOUBA	TEBOURBA	**0**	15.2%
	MANOUBA	BATTANE	0	14.5%
	ARIANA	KALAAT EL ANDALOUS	0	12.5%
	ARIANA	ETTADHAMEN	2	12.4%
	MANOUBA	BORJ EL AMRI	0	12.1%
	MANOUBA	JEDAIDA	0	11.9%
	TUNIS	SEJOUMI	0	11.5%
	BEN AROUS	MORNAG	0	11.2%
	MANOUBA	DAOUAR HICHER	0	10.8%
	TUNIS	JEBEL JLOUD	1	9.5%
	TUNIS	SIDI HASSINE	0	9.4%
	ARIANA	SIDI THABET	0	9.1%
	ARIANA	MNIHLA	0	8.8%
	MANOUBA	OUED ELLIL	0	8.2%
	MANOUBA	MORNAGUIA	0	7.8%
	BEN AROUS	FOUCHANA	0	7.3%
Middle Tertile	BEN AROUS	MHAMDIA	0	7.1%
	ARIANA	RAOUED	0	6.9%
	TUNIS	LA MEDINA	0	6.6%
	BEN AROUS	HAMMAMLIF	3	6.4%
	TUNIS	EL OMRANE	6	6.3%
	TUNIS	EL HARAIRIA	0	6.1%
	TUNIS	KABBARIA	10	5.3%
	BEN AROUS	NOUVELLE MEDINA	0	5.2%
	BEN AROUS	BEN AROUS	2	5.0%
	BEN AROUS	HAMMAM ECHATT	4	5.0%
	ARIANA	SOUKRA	0	4.8%
	TUNIS	BAB SOUIKA	4	4.5%
	BEN AROUS	RADES	3	4.3%
	TUNIS	SIDI EL BECHIR	3	4.2%
	BEN AROUS	BOUMHEL BASSATINE	0	4.1%
	TUNIS	EZZOUHOUR	0	4.0%
Richest Tertile	TUNIS	EL OUERDIA	2	3.9%
	MANOUBA	MANOUBA	10	3.8%
	BEN AROUS	MEGRINE	2	3.6%
	TUNIS	EL OMRANE SUPERIEUR	6	3.5%
	BEN AROUS	EL MOUROUJ	6	3.2%
	TUNIS	EL KRAM	2	3.0%
	BEN AROUS	EZZAHRA	2	2.6%
	TUNIS	EL MARSA	2	2.2%
	TUNIS	ETTAHRIR	8	2.0%
	TUNIS	BARDO	1	1.8%
	TUNIS	CARTHAGE	8	1.6%
	TUNIS	BAB BHAR	9	1.6%
	TUNIS	CITE EL KHADRA	4	1.4%
	ARIANA	ARIANA VILLE	2	1.3%
	TUNIS	LA GOULETTE	5	1.1%
	TUNIS	EL MENZAH	1	0.2%

Figure 7.2: Railway statistics by poverty rate tertile

	Poverty Rate	Average Number of Railway Stations	Total Number of Railway Stations

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About the author



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Bedirhan has a Master's degree in political science from Sciences Po Paris specializing in comparative politics. He also holds a Bachelor's in political science from the same institution with a regional concentration on the MENA region. His research looks at the intersection of religion, politics, and democratization in the MENA with a particular focus on Tunisia. He occasionally writes opinion pieces for Turkish news outlets.

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- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
- We mobilize stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

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