Arab Reform Initiative

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War in Ukraine and food insecurity in Tunisia: Where is reform most needed?

Khouloud Ayari



Farmers harvest barley and wheat in Beja western Tunis, Tunisia, 6 June, 2022. © AA /Yassine Gaidi

Since February 2022, food insecurity due to the war in Ukraine has become a key issue of public debate in Tunisia, shedding light on the country's food dependence, given that it imports more than half of its needs.

This alarming figure exacerbates people's concerns, and rightly so, because the annual crop yields do not enable the country to cope with a sudden interruption of food imports. The agricultural production model is not free of contradictions. For instance, it does not take into account demographic changes that occurred between 1984 and 2014 (GPHC 2014). Despite the growing needs of a population that increased from 7 to 11 million during this period, the surface area of lands allocated to cereal production since 1984 has not significantly changed.[1] The Tunisian government instead chose to increase cereal imports and gradually withdraw from harvesting in favor of private developers.[2]

The crisis caused by the war in Ukraine is a drawn-out event with long-term consequences. It cannot be isolated from the crises and shortages that have occurred in Tunisia in the past.[3] The country's current food insecurity stems from the agricultural, economic and social policies introduced by successive governments since independence and which are directly related to global food systems. They face two temporal contradictions: the urgency of meeting immediate daily needs, on the one hand, and, on the other, the importance of building a perennial and fair agricultural model that prevents potential environmental, social and political crises.

This paper will analyze the significant changes concerning agriculture and food in terms of dependency and sovereignty in the contemporary agricultural history of Tunisia.

Food Sovereignty, the Uprooting of Farmers and Access to Rights: Key Issues on the Activists' Agenda since 2011

The halting of trade in two major grain, mineral and hydrocarbon exporting countries has raised key issues underlying the problem of food insecurity: food sovereignty, farmer displacement, [4] agrarian reform, etc.

In Tunisia, the debate on food sovereignty has taken on a sense of urgency since February 2022, which is felt by both the public and mass media. This comes after years of documentation, studies and action research in Tunisia, positioning the country as part of the global struggle for food sovereignty, particularly at the level of the international farmers' movement La Via Campesina. Some of the most notable associations specialising in these issues include the Observatory of Food Sovereignty and the Environment (OSAE) (since 2017), the Working Group for Food Sovereignty (GTSA) (2019), the Tunisian Association of Permaculture (2013), *Terre et Humanisme*, etc. Research in rural social sciences is gradually being undertaken and brings together geographers, sociologists and historians for a multidisciplinary and systemic analysis of contemporary trends in Tunisia and the region (Arab region and the Global South generally). At the heart of this new space[5] of activist research in Tunisia is an agricultural vision that considers access to resources and the dignity of farmers as key factors for responsible agriculture. Farmers, who are the pillars of our food systems and our very survival, continue to be considered by bourgeois elites as obstacles to the modernity to which Tunisia aspires. Paradoxically, their mobilization is seen by the authorities as a disturbance of public order and a threat to national interests.

Despite the convergence of the struggles for rights and dignity since the Arab Spring, which brought together urban and rural areas in Tunisia, change has yet to materialize. However, despite these difficulties, new research spaces have been developing a new narrative that respects both history and current lived realities, filling the existing gap. This narrative existed on a small scale[6] before the revolution but has since expanded. Building on previous works, a bibliography[7] has been documented and published on the Tunisian association Observatory of Food Sovereignty and the Environment (Observatoire de la Souveraineté Alimentaire et de l'Environnement - OSAE) website. Documentaries, films, books, and study reports were produced, such as the documentaries "Thirsty Tunisians", "Couscous: the Seeds of Dignity", "Pousses de printemps" (Spring Sprouts), and field reports by the Working Group for Food Sovereignty (GTSA)[8] . The screening (at cinemas, universities and associations) of these works has allowed farmers' voices to reach urban areas and has redirected public attention towards the rural world.

In a State that resorts to more borrowing to repay its existing debts, the hope of

food sovereignty seems utopian for some, but realistic for others. However, if this hope was difficult in times of peace, will it become possible in times of war? Will Tunisian agriculture succeed in its transition towards a model that is more concerned with food security and less concerned with productivity and surplus production?

Food sovereignty, which is more urgent than ever before, is a potential response to the current food crisis. It is a solution to the food dependency and insecurity that come to light with each crisis.

The Emergence of Food Sovereignty as a Response, as opposed to Food Security

The first aspect of local actors' fight for food sovereignty is semantic. There are slight but important nuances in the meaning of each concept, which affect the conditions of agriculture and the food that is generated. This has been argued by La Via Campesina (the international farmers' movement) since 1996:



La Via Campesina, extract from the website

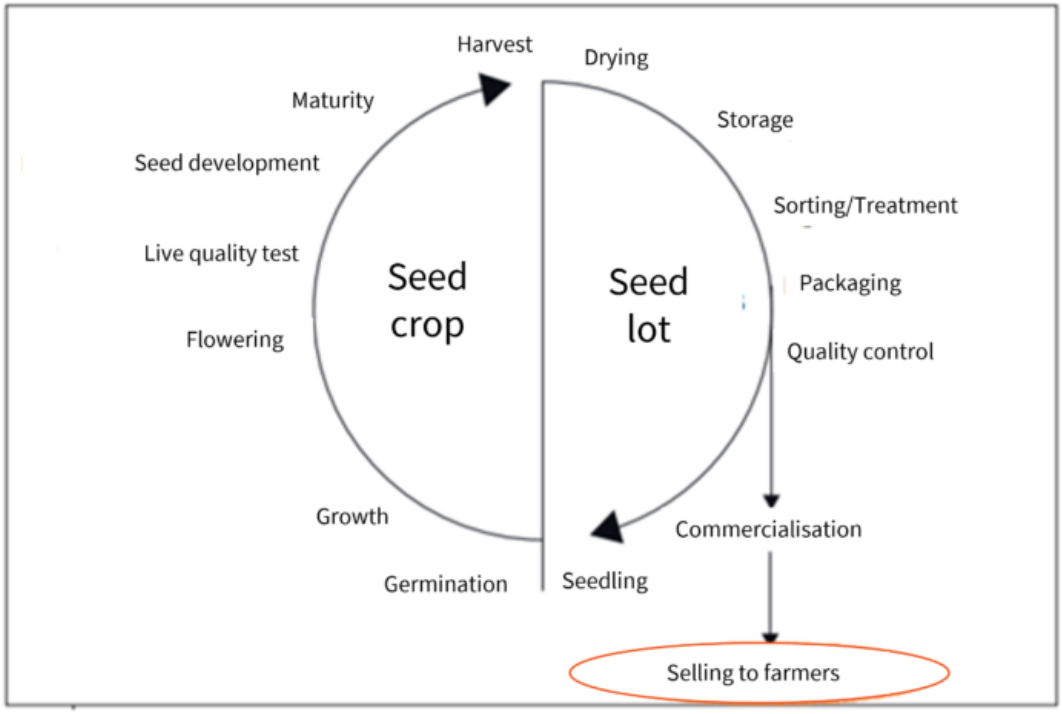
Following the energy, drought and hunger crisis of the 1970s,[9] food security has become an important topic of discussion at the World Food Summit. Agriculture is now based on productivity and crop intensification to feed the greatest number of

people in an attempt to fight global hunger. This coincided with the advent of the Green Revolution in developing countries: a production-centered approach to agriculture without farmers. At that time, hybrid[10] seeds were distributed for years free of charge by the government to Tunisian farmers, as evidenced by Jalel, a farmer who worked in a cooperative farm in Sidi Bourouis.[11] As a result, many farmers abandoned ancestral seeds. This was by no means a trivial development, as it represented another means of dispossession of farmers (an article published on Houloul platform highlights the introduction of these seeds in Tunisia).

Officials at the Ministry of Agriculture and Higher Education in Agronomy advocated for modernity, which brought the promise of development to the country. The modernity that Bourguiba referred to in his daily speeches led people to believe that everything related to traditions is archaic and must be replaced. To be fair, these shifts were already underway before independence. Inspired by the agricultural techniques used by the colonizers, Tunisian farmers were already tempted to use modern means through farm automation on their plots of land, which were remarkably smaller than the colonized[12] fields around Wadi Majardah.

Large farms and intensive agriculture replaced subsistence farming under the successive regimes that have ruled Tunisia since the Ottoman era to date. Subsistence farming, food crops and farmer-family agriculture are the antitheses of profit-based agriculture. Subsistence farming based on ancestral seeds harvesting represents a heritage of practices and know-how that the new seeds introduced cannot bring. A practice widely used by wheat and barley farmers was the *matmoura*: underground granaries where seeds were stored and used for consumption and adaptation to harsh seasons. Matmoura also existed in Morocco and Algeria but started to disappear in the 1980s. For the crop of the following year, breeders reserved the seeds of the best plants. This peasant engineering contributed, over the centuries, to the development of local species and varieties highly adapted to the land – that is, species that offer higher resistance to precipitation and temperature fluctuations and to diseases. The cultivation of ancestral seeds also requires less water, according to Zakaria Hechmi, a farmer from the oasis of Chenini Gabes, where agroecology is still being practiced. Zakaria is known for his adamant efforts to preserve peasant seeds and the respect of the peasantry.

With seed technology, farmers have been demoted to the bottom of the production cycle, becoming mere consumers:



Seed Production Cycle[13]

Since these major shifts, farmers have found themselves dependent on companies that provide them with the package to be planted: seeds, fertilisers and insecticides. In this regard, fruits have become ready-to-plant products, bereft of their natural essence. Currently, 50% of global seed production is controlled by three multinational companies: Syngenta, Monsanto and Dupont-Pioneer. Deprived of their autonomy and misled by promises of enrichment and development, farmers have lost control of their work and are being forced to adapt to market prices.

Moreover, farmers face problems related to agricultural land management and the dual legal system currently in place, resulting in land fragmentation. Given the restrictions related to their land rights, farmers have resorted to annual leasing for the cultivation of cereals and sometimes even for cattle breeding. These leases only offer smallholdings, with an area of no more than a few hectares, with limited

possibility of expansion. Based on the testimony of Amine, a 25-year-old young man from El Krib, more and more farmers favor cattle breeding or monoculture of olives over cereals. Cattle breeding earns him 2,000 dinars per month on average, depending on the price of fodder (alfa) and sales.



Jours	Quantités de Lait			Quantité d'aliment
	Matin	Soir	Total	Qté
1	56	33	89	
2	[illegible]	39	95	
3	64	38	102	
4	[illegible]	40	100	
5	[illegible]	[illegible]	[illegible]	
6	60	26	86	
7	60	40	100	
8	66	34	100	
9	60	46	106	
10	70	36	106	
11	55	42	97	
12	60	40	100	
13	64	37	101	
14	60	36	96	
15	59	28	87	
Total Lait →				

Quantity of Milk Produced Daily

(*Logbook of daily quantities sold by a cattle breeder)*

Back to Basics

The current crisis reminds us of our collective priority. As Edgar Morin says, “By sacrificing the essential for the urgent, one ends up forgetting the urgency of the essential.” We have disregarded what is essential at the cost of short-term solutions that have only eased the food crisis since its emergence. Indeed, the adoption of an agricultural model based on food security, at the expense of

nutrition-centered agriculture, has led to a complex situation: the loss of local seeds, increased food dependence and the irreversible uprooting of the peasants. Fifty years after the World Food Summit, there are still famines and food insecurity around the world, in addition to the loss of a substantial genetic heritage (75% of seed varieties have disappeared over the past century according to the Food and Agriculture Organization, FAO). The outcome is clear: food security has impoverished our diet. It prevents consumers from choosing their foods and reduces the genetic wealth inherited from millions of years of evolution and thousands of years of agriculture.

This is the basis for the struggle for food sovereignty across the world, by restoring seeds, reviewing seed legislation, rehabilitating soils, learning once again how to farm and changing production methods, especially with the imminent threat of climate change. Countries, farmers, researchers and social actors around the world should make concerted efforts in this regard.

What Has Changed?

Beyond our nostalgia for a romanticized era that remains under-documented in Tunisia, when sovereign *fellahin*[14] were masters of their seeds, their land and their (more abundant) water, the return to responsible agriculture is still possible today.

Different associations are now calling for more access to land, water, peasant seeds and food sovereignty. Rural social movements are emerging and joining forces with movements in the neighborhoods of Tunis, Sfax and the agglomeration born of the rural exodus of the last century.

The very origin of the Arab Spring in Tunisia can be traced back to the dispossession of farmers: the injustice felt by Bouazizi is primarily linked to the dispossession of his land and his indebtedness to the National Bank for Agriculture (BNA).[15] The struggle for food sovereignty adopts some of the same slogans that dominated public discourse after 2011: dignity, rights, justice... Protesters in Tunis carry slogans in support of farmers, such as the **#WrongGeneration** movement in solidarity with the **#OuledJeballah** movement, as seen in the photos below. *Ouled Jebalah* also protested against the rising prices of fodder and the shortage of

fertilizers, which strongly affected the harvest season in 2021.





Mobilizing Support for #Wrong Generation in #Ouled Jebalah

Despite the presence of unions like SYNAGRI and UTAP,[16] farmers suffer from a lack of union representation, as they do not represent the interests of small farmers. In the absence of an agricultural inventory (data and agricultural map), there is a lack of knowledge regarding farming trades. As a result, it is more difficult for social actors to diagnose the situation, as Wassim Laabidi from the Working Group for Food Sovereignty explains.

Indeed, given the scarcity of literature, surveys and field research are often retrospective and very basic in their initial stages. In light of the few documentary resources available, social actors form on-site research groups with the farmers to better understand the current situation. This qualitative analysis of Tunisia's diverse agricultural lands is adding more meaningful insight to the purely

technical diagnosis of agriculture to which we are accustomed. Within these new frameworks of analysis and documentation, a new narrative (which integrates international solidarity and class consciousness) is beginning to take shape: multidisciplinarity, the revival of the role of social sciences and access to political rights are all elements that contribute to these efforts.

These researchers and activists believe that experts and technicians tend to limit the analysis of the vulnerability of our agriculture to environmental factors or the inescapable impacts of globalization to conceal political liability. Terms such as "water stress" and "climate change" become an abuse of language, since water scarcity (and environmental problems more generally) is primarily due to the obsolete management of resources by the State.

The choice of crops, irrigation in the heart of the desert, and the overexploitation of groundwater for export crops are examples of poor resource management or even a lack of sovereignty over these resources. Current agricultural policies are indeed a significant colonial legacy, which modified the customs regime in favor of exportation. In 1904, the Customs Union exempted wheat exports and fruits that ripened before their time from taxes, at a time when France was in dire need of wheat. Hence, an orientation towards an agriculture that produced the highest yield was required.

Degrowth as an Alternative

Degrowth is a concept that refers to a collective effort to reconsider our consumption patterns, primarily in industrialized countries. It is a favorable framework that can unite efforts for the restoration of a better and fairer lifestyle.

Countries that have witnessed major political and food crises as well as economic embargoes have shifted towards an agricultural policy that best suits their lands and their population needs. This was the case of Iran and Cuba. In Cuba, for example, the malnutrition rate fell from 21.9% to 5% during the 1990s.

The Republic of Cuba is the most prominent example of food sovereignty relevant to Tunisia (we all remember when Cuban doctors came to support Italy during the spike in mortality rates in 2020). Land management ensures that farmers cultivate

their land without resale and without capital accumulation. However, even by shifting toward **agroecology** (or ecological agriculture), Cuba has not managed to completely break free from industrialization, as the State still keeps fields of monoculture. It should be noted, however, that agroecology, which is practiced in 25% of agricultural lands, produces 65% of the country's food.[17] These concrete indicators show that food sovereignty, which is an integral part of the degrowth model, is not unattainable, but is rather the most pragmatic alternative for the current model that has proven its shortcomings. However, we still have a long ways to go in terms of seed production: Despite the fact that the Tunisian Association of Permaculture organizes an annual seed festival with farmers, this practice remains illegal. In the week of April 7, 2022, Hafedh Karbaa from Monastir was forced to stop distributing his peasant seeds for free and to dispose of the seeds he had. After first appearing on the 8 pm news bulletin of El Watania channel, he stated on Shems radio that he was prohibited from pursuing his project. **Seed laws**,[18] which are adopted in all countries, are legal instruments used by multinational companies empowered to classify living organisms as being "illegal." Law No. 99-42 of 10 May 1999 is the legal text which governs the use of seeds and intellectual property in Tunisia. Article 44 of Chapter IV (Crimes and Sanctions) stipulates that fines can reach 50,000 dinars: "In the event of recidivism [of the crime], the penalties provided for in Articles 43 and 44 [...] shall be doubled."

Social and solidarity economy, permaculture, agroecology, agroforestry and other similar concepts are all agricultural approaches that take into account the sustainability of practices and ecosystems. These are still practiced in isolation, but they promise a much more efficient usage of resources, not to mention that they would allow farmers to become more independent, especially with regard to water and land restrictions. Although solutions do exist, researchers and activists believe that the structural problems of access to land should first be addressed. Farmers' right to land is undeniable, yet the distribution of State land does not prioritize landless farmers. Agrarian reform is necessary in Tunisia, as it is on the basis of such a reform that the situation of thousands of farmers could be changed for the better and the experience of a perennial agricultural production meeting local needs could be achieved.

Endnotes

1. Based on NIS data in 2016, published in the Analysis of the Cereals Sector in Tunisia and Identification of Key Areas of Dysfunction Leading to Losses, Raoudha Khaldi.

2. Law No. 2005-60 of July 18, 2005 Amending and Supplementing Law No. 91-64 of July 29, 1991 on Competition and Prices.

3. These events include the bread riot of 1984 or the previous series of droughts and plagues that led to the deterioration of the agricultural sector from 1815, *Food Insecurity and Revolution in the Middle East and North Africa,* Habib Ayeb and Ray Bush.

4. Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Towards Mankind*.

5. The collective framework is recent (from 2017 with the OSAE), but its members have individual backgrounds preceding the debate on sovereignty in research, book publishing or trade union activism.

6. Academics recognized each other, clearly positioning their research politically in light of the pre-revolution context, in which the humanities and social sciences were marginalized and alienated.

7. Max Ajl, *A Bibliography of Agriculture, Planning, and Rural Development in Tunisia*.

8. Working Group for Food Sovereignty.

9. "In 1972, global cereal production fell by a total of 41 million tons, half in developed countries and half in developing countries. In 1974, it fell again by 30 million tons." Food and Agriculture Organization.

10. Laboratory-developed seeds cross different species that cannot produce new generations of plants. However, these hybrid varieties and the need for biodiversity in agriculture are subjects of debate. The problem is not the hybrid plants *per se*, but rather the control over the means of production.

11. Heir to a land fragmented by inheritance and colonization, Jalel faces difficulties in accessing the lands in which he has invested his savings but which are not yet his. Joint possession and inadequate land ownership laws are a glass ceiling for small farmers who wish to expand and landless farmers.

12. Discussed during the food sovereignty workshops in Nafta in October 2021. See the archives and documentation of French colonization in Tunisia. Jean Poncet, *European Colonization and Agriculture in Tunisia since 1881: A Study of Historical and Economic Geography. Landscapes and Rural Problems in Tunisia.*

13. Seeds, Michael Turner.

14. *Fellah* can be translated as: peasant, farmer, agriculturist, cultivator, etc.

15. Bouazizi: A life, an investigation, Lydia Chabert Dalix.

16. Farmers Union and Tunisian Union of Agriculture and Fisheries.

17. Cuba: A laboratory of food sovereignty? Jose Fuca, Anne Gauthier, Luc Pepin.

18. Seed laws that criminalise farmers: resistance and fightback.

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About the author



Khouloud Ayari
Khouloud Ayari has a degree in Environmental Studies from the Higher Institute of Applied Biological Sciences in Tunis and is a member of the 3roug collective. She is interested in the growing ecology of Tunisian politics.

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The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality and social justice.

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arab-reform.net

contact@arab-reform.net

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