Shattered Trust

Aspirations for Emigration among Young Tunisians

David Kreuer & Jörg Gertel

> Yassine: 'I took part in the Tunisian revolution, and I was impressed and touched by what we experienced then. But later I became frustrated because of the economic situation and the political corruption. I no longer believe in political work because my efforts were in vain. Now I'm indifferent to how things develop, almost selfish. I only care about my personal affairs.
>
> We are no longer able to buy meat because of its high price, nor vegetables and vegetable oil, the price of which has risen sharply. All food has become more expensive, and this is made worse by the low purchasing power of Tunisians. My income and that of my family are not high enough to cover the food costs. Sometimes I go hungry, I cannot cover my food needs. I eat anything just to survive. We don't have a clear strategy; we try to adapt to the situation. Sometimes we stretch our food that was meant to be for one day over three days. When I experience such situations of inequality, I feel hatred and the desire to leave the country'.
>
> Yassine, Summer 2022

Yassine, a 26-year-old doctoral student from the coastal city of Sfax, is not alone in wanting to leave his country. Given the enduring mood of crisis and the lack of legal options for migration, many young people currently see clandestine migration across the Mediterranean as the only way out of their economic and personal predicament. In fact, Tunisia has witnessed a 'soaring rise in *harga* numbers' (Mnasri 2023: 1038) in recent years. *Harga*, the colloquial Arabic term for clandestine migration, denotes the 'burning' of papers and, metaphorically, borders. What is more, even those young adults who remain in place often dream about a better life elsewhere. Why do so many young people want to leave Tunisia? What kind of experiences and frustrations fuel this aspiration? There are no simple answers, as we must take the complexity of livelihoods into account.

In this chapter, we explore migration aspirations of young people in Tunisia. Asked about his experiences of inequality, Yassine guides us through the chapter and shares his thoughts and reflections as of late summer 2022. He emphasises the role of the Tunisian

state, the situation of the middle-class, and his personal expectations of life. We will situate his experiences in the context of quantitative interviews that were conducted in the country. Special emphasis will be placed on socio-economic capabilities, but also on the political grievances of aspiring young migrants and on the crucial role of regional inequalities within the country (cf. Gertel/Grüneisl, this volume).

The chapter is structured as follows: first, we give a brief introduction into mobility dynamics and summarise the interview methodology employed. Then, we present survey findings, combined with further interview quotes, concerning the young generation's economic situation, their loss of trust in the state and its institutions, regional patterns of inequality, and how all this affects their aspirations to international mobility. Capabilities and aspirations of young people in Tunisia have changed in a very short time; in the final sections, we discuss these findings and their implications.

Background

People, things, and information are constantly on the move. When people are mobile, this can take the form of spatial displacement between locations (for example as commuters or migrants), but also of social mobility as movement within groups (including social ascent and descent); even identity narratives of individuals should be considered mobile (captured, for example, as on-going narration of a coherent self) (Gertel/Breuer 2011; cf. Zuntz et al., this volume). Spatial movements of people, which are the focus here, are often related to social formation processes and identity dynamics. They take place in a polycentric world that exerts specific temporal and spatial powers. The European Union and its member states north of the Mediterranean interact – for example through different trade and security agreements – not only with North African countries like Tunisia, but also with transnational corporations and globally active tech companies, each in their own way. These interactions unfold through different layers including national, but also local and individual levels in Maghreb countries. Simultaneously, these relations are subject to permanent change and different temporalities: intergenerational socialisation processes, for instance in Tunis or Sidi Bouzid, shape individual values in the long term, such as group-specific attitudes towards mobility; multi-year legislative processes, linked to electoral cycles, define desirable and undesirable individuals for national spaces (e.g. specific groups of migrants such as Sub-Saharan Africans; cf. Parikh, this volume); and the algorithm-generated pricing processes for wheat, the most important staple food in North Africa, take place in the nanosecond range and are increasingly responsible for food insecurity and hunger, which in turn induce migration and flight (Gertel 2023).

Which different groups are we talking about when migration is understood as a process? On the one hand, this refers to the spectrum of potential migrants – those who express the desire or the aspiration to migrate, and those who are making concrete preparations but are still in the country of origin (cf. Saib Musette/Maamar 2024). On the other hand, there are actual migrants, i.e. all those who have travelled to a new country, irregularly or legally. In the case of legal migrants holding a visa, this often includes highly qualified workers (who by leaving contribute to a 'brain drain' of their country). Then, there

are those who arrived at their intended destination irregularly but were subsequently recognised, as well as those who arrived irregularly and remain so. Finally, one should not forget those who tried to migrate but did not make it. They might have been arrested after an attempted departure, drowned during crossing the Mediterranean, or been deported or 'voluntarily returned' (cf. Garnaoui, this volume). We thus have to be precise when we speak about migration. This chapter focuses on the first group: potential migrants who have not left Tunisia.

Unfortunately, there is no comprehensive data that provides comparable figures for all categories of Tunisian migrants. However, we know that, depending on the sources, between 30 and 92 percent of Tunisians are estimated to be potential migrants (i.e. those who intend to emigrate). But only three per cent of all North Africans have concrete and active migration plans or visa applications (i.e. are actually preparing to leave the country), according to Gallup and Afro-Barometer data (Saib Musette/Maamar 2024: 257). This reflects the large gap between migration aspirations and the actual planning of migration. The achievement of such plans is further complicated as the proportion of rejected North African visa applications was on average between 25 and 40 percent in 2019, depending on the country. In 2020 and 2021, a total of 35,040 irregular migrants tried to leave Tunisia – two thirds of them Tunisians – but were intercepted by Tunisian security and defence forces. On the other side of the Mediterranean, the Italian authorities registered 34,124 immigrants coming from Tunisia in the same period – again overwhelmingly Tunisians (Herbert 2022: 5–8). The number of irregular migrants evading both the Tunisian and Italian security forces is not known, but is likely to be considerable.

The spatial significance of Tunisia as a migration corridor has been growing recently (cf. Matri/Zuntz, this volume). Frontex states that in 2022, the largest increase in irregular migrants arriving by sea to Europe from North Africa came from the Libyan-Tunisian area (Frontex 2023: 15). However, as we know, not everybody survives the crossing: around 3,000 migrants drowned on average per year in the Mediterranean between 2014 and 2021 (ibid. 15). Even a successful sea crossing may not be sufficient for completing the migration journey: in 2021, the rejection rate for asylum applications in Europe from people with a Maghrebi background was 54 percent, with the highest proportion for people coming from Tunisia (Saib Musette/Maamar 2024: 257). Successful migration projects to Europe have not become any easier after the Covid-19 pandemic.

From a political perspective, two objectives define the European Union's cooperation with partners in the southern Mediterranean, namely promoting democracy, and liberalising trade. So-called Mobility Partnerships have been considered a key instrument of the 'North' for shaping mutual relations after the Arab Spring. They were implemented as a new agenda for the Mediterranean region in Morocco, Jordan and Tunisia in order to curb irregular migration and forced displacement, and to put a stop to smugglers and traffickers. However, when evaluating the data of the last decade on migration, programmes of financial support and visa issuance, Panebianco/Cannata (2024) remark: 'Despite the political rhetoric concerning democracy promotion and assistance in the Mediterranean, for several years the EU had been *de facto* cooperating with powerful authoritarian leaders to achieve political stability and avoid insecurity' (ibid. 75). Accordingly, they consider Mobility Partnerships a disappointment, criticise the lack of credible incentives, and suggest it would be more appropriate to talk about immobility instead.

Disconnected from local needs, the Partnerships 'were at times more advantageous for the EU than for its partners' (ibid. 85). This context is important to keep in mind for the following discussion.

Methodology

In this chapter, we will juxtapose Yassine's personal narrative with the quantitative information of two cohorts of young people, aged 16 to 30 years. They were interviewed in Tunisia in 2016 and 2021, respectively, in the context of larger youth studies in the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa) that were commissioned by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), a German political foundation, and conceptually guided by Leipzig University (Gertel/Hexel 2018; Gertel et al. 2024a). Specifically, the data stem from a standardised, quantitative survey of about 150 closed questions on security, economy, politics, personal values, consumption, mobility, and related topics. During each of the two surveys (FES 2016 and FES 2021), about 1,000 young Tunisians were interviewed by a local polling organisation in face-to-face encounters through the means of computer-assisted personal interviews of about one hour each. The sampling points were spread out across all Tunisian regions, and steps were taken to randomise the selection of respondents as much as possible. After fieldwork, the data were checked for errors and inconsistencies, and subsequently weighted by gender, age group, and region to be representative of the country's total population distribution regarding these criteria. Moreover, the quotes given throughout this text are based on twenty qualitative, semi-structured interviews with young men and women as part of the same survey, carried out in summer 2022 by academic partners from Tunisia (cf. Melliti 2023).

Relying chiefly on the 2021/22 data set, but drawing comparisons to 2016 where appropriate to highlight dynamics over time, we start with a description of socio-economic characteristics of the young people in the sample to establish who speaks here, and adopt a resources/capabilities perspective. We then move on to the political disappointment and resulting attitudes they profess, take a more specific look at regional patterns of economic inequality, and finally present the young peoples' assessment of their own mobility aspirations with a focus on international migration – including, but not limited to, clandestine *harga* – and the related aspects of identity and imagination.

Capabilities in Crisis

Young people do not live in isolation; they are members of a family. In other words, they are part of a dynamic and ever-changing reproductive unit, usually a household, in which resources and risks are redistributed to a certain extent, for example between people who are able to work and children or elderly people who are not yet or no longer able to do so. The 2021 survey suggests that the vast majority of young Tunisians in the 16-to-30 age bracket – more than three quarters (85%) – live with their parents; they are cared for by them and have hardly any economic responsibility of their own. In contrast, only a small proportion of respondents, just eight percent, have already started their own indepen-

dent households or families. This group is primarily made up of women (76%), as in the MENA region women tend to marry earlier than men.

When asked about their perception of their families' economic situation, two thirds of young people say it is 'quite good', which may be surprising at first glance, but can partially be explained by the 'borrowed security' experienced by all those still living with their parents (Gertel 2018b, 161). Moreover, when a stranger (such as the interviewer) asks about personal issues, the socially expected response is often simply *al-hamdu li-llah* (Praise be to God), which while it can be interpreted as 'quite good', is first and foremost a polite answer. Conversely, those who say their situation is quite bad (23%) or very bad (8%) can be assumed to be in financial trouble. A clear overall economic decline is visible in comparison with the 2016 study. Back then, no less than 80 percent had assessed their families' economic situation as quite good, with only twelve percent declaring it as quite bad and two percent as very bad. The proportion of young adults who feel that their families experience economic difficulties has thus more than doubled, expanding from 14 to 31 percent within five years.

A complementary insight is provided by young peoples' perception of class affiliation. The majority see themselves as part of the middle-classes, with one in four respondents (27%) placing their family in the upper middle-class and more than half (59%) in the lower middle-class in 2021. One in eight youngsters (13%) consider their families to be poor or destitute. Compared to the 2016 survey, the self-perceived upper middle-class has shrunk considerably (by 17 percentage points), with more families having dropped down into lower classes (Gertel/Ouaissa 2018: 163). In a complementary approach, we calculated a MENA-wide strata index based on criteria such as the father's education level, home ownership, and the presence of certain items that could indicate wealth (air conditioning, internet access, or a vehicle) in a family (Gertel et al. 2024a: 412). The five strata are distributed as follows in the Tunisian sample: 6 percent fall into the highest stratum, 19 percent are in the upper middle stratum, 28 percent belong to the middle stratum, 26 percent are in the lower middle stratum, and 21 percent in the lowest stratum. This latter group has increased by nine percentage points since 2016, mostly at the expense of the middle stratum (minus six); the others remain stable. That is, some resources, such as home ownership and the educational background of the parents' generation, have evidently not deteriorated at the same speed as income loss and perceived class attachment. Yassine, who is determined to leave the country, emphasises:

> The middle-class has eroded, it has become a poor class. Even teachers who belonged to the middle-class have become poor. The middle-class has shrunk a lot. To belong to the middle-class in Tunisia, you need a monthly salary of more than three thousand Dinars. That is a rarity in Tunisia. Ministers in Tunisia have become members of the middle-class. I myself belong to the class of the poor because sometimes I can't meet all my daily needs for food, clothing and entertainment.

Slim, 30 and single, a factory worker from Tunis, adds more examples:

> The middle-class no longer exists in Tunisia! The Tunisian middle-class consisted of public sector employees and bank employees, but now this group of society is no longer

> able to fulfil all the daily needs of their families. For example, a teacher now works in the private sector in addition to their job in the public sector. This is because their income from working in the public sector is no longer enough to cover their daily expenses as it was in earlier years. I myself belong to a class that has no name. I don't consider myself poor, I belong to a class that is even below the class of slaves. It's as if you have no existence, I can compare my situation to worn-out shoes that people use and then throw away.

Salma, 25, a single university student in Tunis, describes polarisation dynamics:

> I don't see a middle-class in Tunisia, I see a wealthy class and another at the lower end of the scale, especially given the high cost of living. Wages are limited by laws that change every day; life is getting more and more expensive. I don't see a middle-class! As long as I live in a family where only my father works and my mother is a housewife, while my father can barely provide for us, he can't even buy my siblings most of their school supplies… It is clear that his salary is less than his labour. That is exploitation. He works between eight and twelve hours and can't feed his family!

In terms of the young generation's personal and social orientations in life, the data reveal a surprisingly big shift in the five-year period from 2016 to 2021. When asked to pick the one thing that was most important for their personal future among four options, most chose a good job. In contrast, having a fulfilled family life and, for young women, the ambition of a good marriage, have clearly become less important (Figure 1). However, gender inequalities start in school and do not stop at labour relations, within family constellations, or in politics. Salma continues:

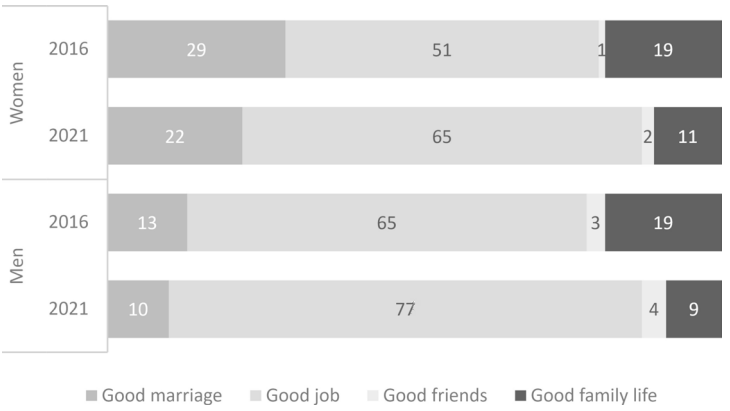
> We're in an Arab Tunisian society, gender inequalities are clearly visible, even though girls and women are more successful in their studies. They work and prove themselves as able to provide for everyday life and support their families honourably, while the boys huddle together in the cafés. They refuse to work at anything. Girls are more successful in class. In a class of 29 students there are four boys, the boys only think about *harga*. The graduates today are girls, normally they should be better qualified and better paid, and yet in our society the mentality is different.

Yassine complements:

> We live in a patriarchal society. Most inequalities in Tunisia are based on gender. A transgender or homosexual person cannot become a minister or president of the republic in Tunisia, as is the case in Western countries. Society does not accept this. Gender inequality is also reflected in the salaries that men and women receive in Tunisia. Women receive less pay than men. For example, in agriculture, men's wages are still higher than women's wages. It is a prevailing mentality that sees women always settling for less. This is related to a male mentality that always despises women, even if they hold prestigious positions. And religion feeds this mentality by saying, 'Men are the caretakers of women'.[1]

1 This is a quote from the Qur'an (4:34).

Figure 1: Most Important Aspect for Personal Future



Source: FES 2016 & 2021. Note: All numbers are given in percentage points (n = 1,000).

Economic concerns and gender inequalities are related, but distinct from expressions of dwindling trust in the political field. The latter, however, also crucially contributes to mobility ambitions and will be examined in the next section.

Loss of Trust

A local scholar has interpreted the FES Youth Study data as an indication that 'the interlude that started with the revolution is now definitively over' and underlines the extent of political disillusionment this has produced (Melliti 2023: 29). Indeed, a dramatic loss of confidence in the state and its various institutions has taken place in the span of five years among young people in Tunisia (Figure 2). It had not been high in 2016 to begin with, but the percentage of those who still trust their government, parliament, the legal system, or the police has almost halved. Even the relatively respected military has suffered from this trend, falling from almost three quarters to just over half of the respondents expressing trust. What is more, confidence in one's own family – by far the most highly trusted institution on the list – has equally gone down, from an impressive 92% in 2016 to only 78% in 2021. Speaking of shattered trust, therefore, is not an exaggeration, and it concerns all institutions of society. Yassine is definitive in his judgement:

> After independence, the nation state tried to reduce inequalities, but currently there is no attempt whatsoever. The state instead increases economic inequalities and widens the gap between rich and poor. Inequality is reflected in the fact that university and professional degrees are no longer a guarantee of employment in the Tunisian labour market. Inequality also exists on a spatial level, between regions in Tunisia and even between neighbourhoods in a city. Several laws in Tunisia ensure equality but are not sufficiently implemented, while other laws are regulations that perpetuate inequality, as the Tunisia's inheritance law does.

He further explains the prevalent mistrust:

> I don't like political life and membership of political parties because most people involved in political activity in Tunisia are individuals pursuing personal interests, often they try to escape from justice. The political field in Tunisia is a corrupt field.

Other young adults similarly quote persistent 'corruption and fraud' (Slim, a 30-year-old factory worker from Nabeul) as fundamental reasons they have 'no confidence in politicians' (Nourhene, 26, a housewife from Kasserine). However, loss of trust not only relates to the executive branch (parliament and political parties), the judiciary and police also have low scores and have lost a great deal of support over the last five years.

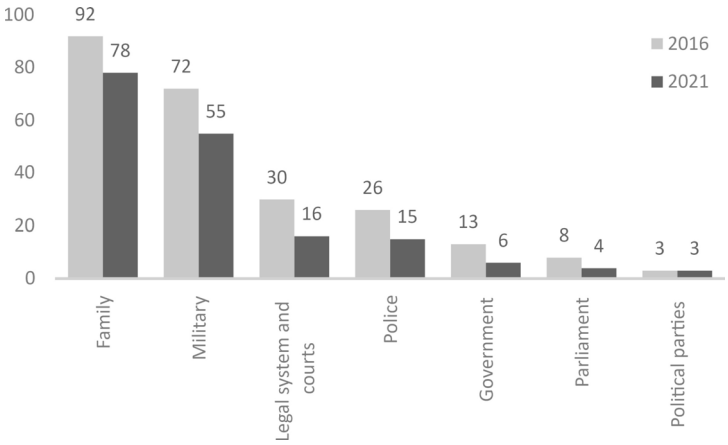
For a long time, moreover, many young adults considered falling out with their family almost unthinkable. On the economic level alone, there are often no other institutions that could cushion uncertainties, something that has become all the more serious due to almost non-existent government support during the last few decades. Trust in the family as a social and economic security system, correspondingly, used to be very high (Gertel 2018a). Yet, even families as key social institutions in Tunisia have lost trust, accompanied by 'a process of individualisation that has been underway for decades and continues apace' (Melliti 2023: 29). Insecurities in the labour market, livelihood deterioration, the limited financial buffer capacities of their parents, and the continuation of dispossession processes that undermine equal opportunities, have left many young Tunisians frustrated. Mobility options thus become more attractive – particularly for young males.

One additional finding testifies to the extent of desperation and resignation among young Tunisians: the importance young people give to values in general has clearly gone down over the past few years. Their 'openness to change', one of four basic value dimensions we have identified elsewhere (Kreuer/Gertel 2024), seems at a low point, but so does its counterpart, the orientation towards 'conformity' (in the sense of preserving the existing order). On the other hand, values related to 'self-enhancement' are ranked higher than in neighbouring countries, whereas 'community orientation' is very low (ibid. 275). In this view, there is little energy left for community engagement, and many young people are focused on their own interest or even survival. Yassine explains his position:

> Honestly, I don't care and I don't believe in social participation, I work on my personal development in my free time. I don't believe in political and social engagement, I believe in myself, that's enough for me. I don't care about this society; my goal is to leave Tunisia.

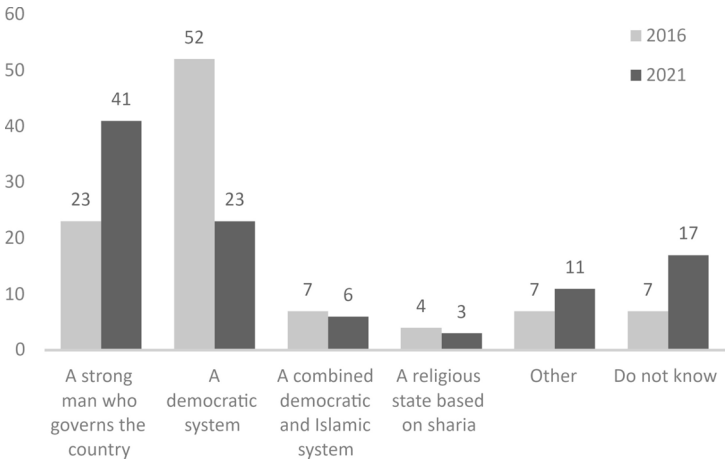
This sentiment is widespread, as the 'institutionalised political sphere [has become] devoid of any interest to the young people' and other forms of engagement and collective action 'appear completely useless to them'; instead, young Tunisians seem committed to 'a resolute quest for personal salvation' (Melliti 2023: 29).

Figure 2: Trust in Institutions



Source: FES 2016 & 2021. Note: All numbers are given in percent (n = 1,000).

Figure 3: Preferred Political System



Source: FES 2016 & 2021. Note: All numbers are given in percent (n = 1,000).

A further significant change has taken place in the young people's preference for a political system (Figure 3). The predilection for democracy, which was shared by the majority just five years earlier, has plummeted to less than one quarter of respondents. In terms of alternatives, an authoritarian form of government appears most attractive (and indeed matches the development of Saied's presidency), but the share of young adults who no longer know what political system to aim for has equally grown. This group, one in six respondents, is at a loss at best, and has completely stopped caring at worst.

In what may seem like a paradox, young people overwhelmingly express a wish that the state play a larger role in their daily lives. While this sentiment has fallen from 90 percent in 2016 to 78 percent in the 2021 survey, this is still a vast majority and comparable to other countries in the MENA region. This should not be understood as a way of approving of the government's performance, however. Quite to the contrary, the glaring absence of a functioning state is contrasted to an imagined ideal situation where the administration would actually provide and safeguard public service, infrastructure and education, healthcare and freedom of expression, safety and security. Amine from Souss, 26 and married, comments:

> There is no equality in the legal system or the police. There are increasing inequalities in all public areas. I think the situation is getting worse in the interior compared to the coastal areas. Relations with the Tunisian administration depend on your relationship capital, if you have relationships within the department, you will get your service easily and quickly. I was the owner of an industrial equipment maintenance company and it took me a month and a half to prepare a work permit, there were many bureaucratic procedures. In the end, I wouldn't have been granted it if I hadn't had the sympathy of one of the employees who finally helped me.

In sum, the dominant perception of young Tunisians is that the state does not serve them the way it should. These grievances are often compounded by regional inequalities, as Amine alludes to, which we will now explore. We assume that they, too, affect mobility aspirations.

Inequality between Regions

The issue of regional inequalities is pronounced in Tunisia, its relatively small geographical size notwithstanding. Broadly speaking, the coastal regions in the east are where industry and tourism have been concentrated, which has long made them more attractive for (domestic and foreign) investment; they are also better connected through seaports and airports. On the other hand, the backcountry in the western part of Tunisia lacks infrastructure and opportunities on many levels (cf. Kahloun/Frische, this volume). This situation has a long history and is 'rooted in the government's political and economic choices since independence' (Abidi 2021: 1). Looking below the national level could help elucidate the spatially differentiated manifestations of shattered trust and aspirations for mobility.

Table 1: Strata Distribution by Region in Tunisia (2021)

	Lowest	Lower middle	Middle	Upper middle	Highest
East	16	26	28	22	8
West	32	27	28	12	1

Note: All numbers are given in percent. The strata index (see Gertel et al. 2024: 412) is calculated based on four aspects: father's education, family's financial situation, home ownership, and prosperity indicators. Based on these four indicators, each respondent can reach a total score of 3 to 14 points; they are then divided into five groups of similar size.

Table 2: Civic Engagement by Region in Tunisia

Region	No engagement	Occasional engagement	Frequent engagement
North East	40	7	53
North West	81	6	12
Centre East	41	30	29
Centre West	54	24	22
South East	15	9	76
South West	61	14	25
Total	45	16	40

Note: All numbers are given in percent (n = 1,000).

Our subsequent analysis is based on the six regions used by the National Institute of Statistics (Institut National de la Statistique 2012: 9), which we aggregate into East and West here. The East (near the coast, where 71% of respondents live) and West (hinterland, 29%) display a number of stark differences. For instance, almost three out of four young people in the East assess their families' economic situation as very good or quite good (73% combined), while only 58 percent in the West do so. Further, the distribution of strata according to the FES Youth Study strata index (which is based on a combination of different criteria, see above) shows a clear East-West split in the two highest strata as well as the lowest stratum (Table 1), although the lower middle and middle groups are similarly distributed. This skewed distribution paints a picture of a certain polarisation in wealth: well-off Tunisians tend to live near the coast, while some of the most disadvantaged groups are found in the more remote, rural areas of the west.

This tendency closely corresponds to patterns of civic engagement across the six regions, which show massive discrepancies between the coastal regions and the hinterland (Table 2). Young respondents were asked whether they regularly or occasionally engaged in a range of societal issues. The difference is especially pronounced when comparing the North West (the region with the lowest engagement levels, where four out of five respon-

dents never engage in any civic issues) and the South East (which has the highest engagement levels with three out of four respondents frequently engaging in some form). This finding corroborates observations of low engagement in marginalised regions (Rennick 2023) and is reflected in the testimony of Melek, 30 years old and married, who works as a public service agent in Nabeul (North East) but previously lived in a provincial setting:

> I notice a great inequality between the regions in Tunisia. I lived in the south of Tunisia, in the city of Gafsa [South West], for two and a half years. There is no investment there and therefore no job opportunities. The only employer is the phosphate company, everyone wants to work there. Compared to the north, there are no entertainment options in Gafsa either, which has an impact on your psyche. The young people who live in the southern regions always want to migrate to the northern regions.

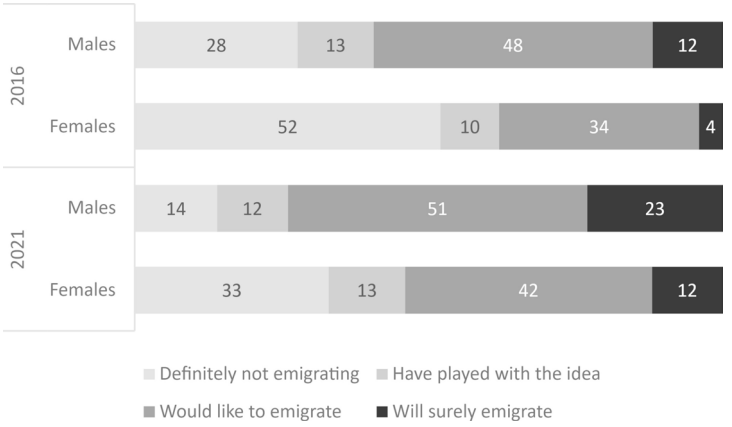
Such stories indicate that internal mobility from the peripheries to the capital region can be a first step in a personal mobility career; international migration may follow later if conditions do not improve. This escalation of scale reflects similarly engrained structures of inequality between regions on the one hand, and countries on the other.

Migration Aspirations

When asked about their own migration aspirations, the respondents were asked to choose among four possible responses the one that came closest to their current feelings. Once more, the shifts that have occurred within just five years are remarkable (Figure 4). Only one in five young Tunisians can currently rule out migration as an option for themselves, while more than half of this generation appears willing to leave. Compared to the 2016 survey, only half as many are still sure they will stay, but twice as many young Tunisians are sure they will leave. Their preferred destination region in 2021 remains Europe by a wide margin, which is not surprising given the geographical proximity as well as the long history of close, if unequal relationships across the Mediterranean – including migration episodes within many young people's own families.

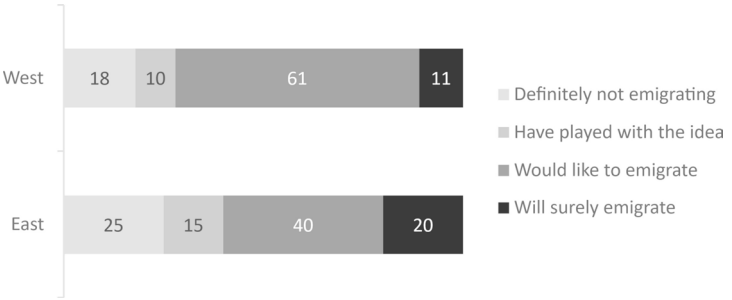
A gender gap is evident: young men are more prone to considering emigration as an exit strategy. However, young women are catching up and, just as we showed above for the importance given to marriage versus employment, have now reached the levels their male peers had five years earlier.

Figure 4: Own View Regarding Emigration



Source: FES 2016 & 2021. Note: All numbers are given in percent. For 2021, the 'No reply' answers (12% of the total) were excluded from the percentages in order to compare the findings with those from 2016 when this response option did not exist.

Figure 5: Migration Aspirations by Region



Source: FES 2021. Note: All numbers are given in percent. 'No reply' answers (12% of the total) were excluded from the percentages.

Ines, 28, a teacher from Ben Arous in the Tunis metropolitan area, belongs to the largest group who is inclined towards migration but has not taken any concrete steps. She muses:

> Years ago, I was against *harga*, but today I tend to agree with young people who choose to leave. When I think about my own situation, I tell myself that if I had the opportunity to leave, legally or illegally, I wouldn't hesitate to do so!

In contrast, Ahlem, 26, a saleswoman in a bakery in Matmata in the southeast, summarises a more critical view of migration:

> There's a difference: today's young people aren't trying to study, to work hard, or to find a job. They're only looking for *harga*, whereas previous generations were looking for work.

Adam, a 20-year-old farmer from Cap Bon (North East), who struggles with his livelihood and aspirations, has experienced migration in his immediate surroundings:

> Life was better for the generations before us. The wage I receive as a labourer does not guarantee me a decent life, as all my income is wasted in the face of rising expenses. Many young people from our neighbourhood have preferred to migrate clandestinely to Italy, as the economic and social conditions for young people in Tunisia have deteriorated.

To obtain a more comprehensive picture about young people's preparedness to accept life changes, we calculated a Flexibility Index, merging three challenges of social mobility: family, work, and marriage (Gertel/Wagner 2018: 200). It appears that young people's overall flexibility ('High') increased dramatically within five years between 2016 and 2021 (cf. Table 3).

Such thoughts are in fact somewhat more prevalent in the coastal East of the country (Figure 5), where young people are more likely to be determined either to stay or to leave. An absolute majority of those in the interior regions, however, state that they 'would like' to emigrate. This relationship between place and aspiration is never simple and straightforward, but deserves more detailed study.

Spatial movement of people, particularly their migration career, is often related to social formation and identity dynamics. Questions about the self, dealing with new networks and dependencies, and emerging new uncertainties during the migration journey change aspirations and imaginations, as they affect one's relation to the world. Mobilities are complex constellations.

Table 3: Flexibility Index

	2016	2021
High	25	40
Quite high	28	27
Quite low	31	16
Low	15	11
Missing	2	6

Note: All numbers are given in percent (n = 1,000).

Discussion

A decade after the revolution, Tunisia seems stuck in permanent crisis mode. The national economy is frail, worsened by the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath. At the same time, the political system has become increasingly authoritarian, more so as 'Saied's administration has failed to reverse political turmoil or economic decline' (Ben Jelili 2023: 1). Young people are disproportionately affected and constitute a 'sacrificed generation' (Rennick 2023: 15) without adequate opportunities to find employment, develop a career, start a family, have a say in politics, or live a fulfilled life. Their opportunities have thus been curtailed, and many of their aspirations have turned into desperation so deep that a perilous migration attempt seems the only remaining viable option for some. An enormous chasm appears between aspirations and actual possibilities – between 'what is' and 'what could have been'. We have analysed this as a situation of dispossession (Gertel et al. 2024a).

Yassine's statements indicate great disappointment with the revolution and its outcomes. In the years after 2011, there was a genuine belief among young Tunisians that the economic problems could be solved politically, with new actors and new rules of the game; that belief has completely eroded. Even the last bit of trust in state institutions and democratic processes is now gone. By contrast, the economy is on everyone's mind – much more so than family, marriage, or friends – with a clear perception of decline and injustice. The perceived economic situation and class affiliation of young Tunisians worsened dramatically between 2016 and 2021. Their relatively declining desire for a larger role played by the state also indicates disappointment and resignation. At the same time, young people are still comparatively optimistic: in a recent study based on the Arab Barometer surveys, Tunisian youth 'exhibited the highest level of support for democracy' in comparison to other age groups (Ben Jelili 2023: 15). However, democratic government systems are no longer fashionable in the region overall: our data reveal a dramatic decline even in Tunisia, which had become the democratic hope for North Africa and beyond after the 2011 revolution.

The self-centring of young people that we found in the data, as well as the low prevalence of 'community orientation' values and civic engagement, also tie in to the meritocratic if misleading neoliberal mantra that everybody is responsible for their own suc-

cesses and failures in life (Pettit/Ruijtenberg 2019). On another level, the current penchant of young Tunisians for populism and authoritarianism has parallels in many parts of the world. Intensifying crises often give a boost to populism, especially when it is 'embodied by a political outsider' such as Kais Saied used to be (Fulco/Giampaolo 2023: 29). Part of the explanation why the young generation seems largely acquiescent to autocratic tendencies could be that the Ben Ali regime, which was ousted in 2011, may already be too far in the past for these young people who barely remember experiencing it (Rennick 2023).

By such mechanisms, dwindling and shattered trust has contributed to a new migration wave of young adults from Tunisia. The country's role as a migration nexus, which was for some years dominated by foreign nationals who used Tunisia and Libya as hubs for transit migration, is again changing towards a source of local emigration with a nationwide catchment area. Importantly, (existential) mobility is not laden with negative emotions only: it is linked to hope. Even attempting a risky *harga* seems for some groups better than doing nothing, because at least they experience agency. For many young Tunisians, the rest is up to God anyway. Immobility, on the other hand, is connected to depression and dejection (*ikti'ab*) (Pettit/Ruijtenberg 2019).

While 'imagined futures are important for why and how people move' (Wyss et al. 2023: 574), this does not mean that migration hopefuls are naïve about their prospects. Migrants typically experience 'a continuous oscillation between a sense of existential mobility and immobility, between the hope that they [are] moving towards a better future and the depressing sense of being stuck in life, with moments of fear, doubt, joy and distraction emerging in between' (Pettit/Ruijtenberg 2019: 739). In the current situation, however, even if a migrant ends up in precarity or in illegal activities (e.g. as drug trafficker) in Europe, there may be less social pressure and scrutiny than there would be back home, as long as they manage to send back some money occasionally. Even this prospect may seem more attractive than the complete lack of opportunities experienced in Tunisia these days. Imagining alternative futures has become almost impossible, especially for the younger generation.

At the government level, one persistent problem is that the country has become trapped 'in cyclic phases of decision-making stalemate [that fail to] address the rampant social inequality and regional disparities' (Fulco/Giampaolo 2023: 36). One macroeconomic goal should be to break loose from dependency on the International Monetary Fund, although it is not easy to find funding alternatives (Ben Rouine 2023). Taken together, it appears that 'the problem of *harga* can only be handled efficiently by devising an economic strategy based on a reconsideration of the country's growth model' and tackling all forms of corruption (Mnasri 2023: 1042). Yassine from Sfax, whose statements we have quoted throughout this chapter, shares this diagnosis and sums up the bleak current state of affairs:

> The government is incapable of changing the deteriorating situation, and corrupt politicians have impoverished and robbed the Tunisian people. I don't see any more solutions, so I want to leave the country.

Our investigation of the links between trust, inequality, and mobility aspirations of young Tunisians suggests that an entire generation feels excluded, frustrated and hopeless. A reduction of economic inequality, including between regions, and an increase in real choices and opportunities seems to be the only way to rebuild a minimum level of trust in the state and its institutions. In turn, this could affect the young people's (mobility-related) aspirations and turn them into more diverse and hopeful directions instead of being fixated on leaving the country at all costs. This, however, is a colossal task.