

# **“What lasted for 3000 years has been destroyed in 30”: the struggle for food sovereignty in Tunisia**

Saturday 27 October 2018, by [AJL Max](#) (Date first published: 16 October 2018).

**Today is the International Day of Action for Peoples’ Food Sovereignty, organised by La Via Campesina. In this article, Max Ajl reports from Tunisia on the struggles for food sovereignty there, and on what it means for the Global South.**

Gabès, the Tunisian South’s garden-city, is otherworldly. It is the world’s only maritime oasis, and very different from the Saharan or desert groves which the term tends to call up in the mind’s eye. Natural sweet springs have nourished horticulture and arboriculture there for millennia, back to Carthaginian times, forming the basis of a technical system that has outlasted empires and Beys.

One cannot help but be enchanted by the emerald multi-storied gardens of Chenini, a section of Gabès. Palms stand sentinel on the perimeter, a windbreak which shatters the desert sirocco. The Mediterranean cools the summers and heats the winters, while the oasis effect seals in moisture. Below palms sit grapes on trestles and the telltale pale green of olives. Lower still are shrubs with bursts of the ruddy red and pale yellow of pomegranates. Below them on the ground story sit peppers, canary melons, and depending on the time of year, nitrogen-fixing alfalfa.

We were there on the third day of the [Food Sovereignty Days](#), the brain-child of Tunisian geographer-cinematographer Habib Ayeb and his organization, the Tunisian Observatory for Food Sovereignty and the Environment (OSAE). The tour had descended down Tunisia’s littoral, from the National Gene Bank in Tunis to the Zaghouan bread-basket, sitting south of the capital, to the Sahelian town of M’Saken.

Day three was devoted to Gabès. The farm we visited, that of Amm Salah, is one of the few that still keeps livestock helping to ensure a closed metabolic cycle. Indeed, until the 1970s most farmers also used night-soil to [seal yet more tightly](#) the nitrogen cycle. These days, the majority of those farmers, amidst haphazard sprawl, do not reserve space for animals and instead resort to fertilizers. This is not because they yield better. In fact, it has been known since the 1970s that the techniques deployed in the oasis, a year-round polyculture fed by a delicate and socially-managed system for allotting spring-water, were already what agronomists typologize as intensive.

In the same wooden structure housing the animals were dozens of differently-size receptacles holding landrace seeds, stored with tobacco leaves, a natural prophylactic against pests. Such seeds are the genetic treasure of Tunisia. Amm Salah keeps and sells them, seeking to break the dependent relationship which colonialism and even more, post-colonial agricultural modernization instituted in Tunisia: reliance on foreign seeds, often poorly adapted to the local biomes, and turned into commodities by Euro-American agribusiness.

There is precious little left of the oasis, and even less of it is devoted to agro-ecological farming. As

Ayeb noted, what “lasted for 3000 years has been destroyed in 30.” The installation of the Gabès industrial pole, part-and-parcel of the developmental mirage began in Tunisia in the 1960s and 1970s, set in motion a rapid process of mostly unplanned urbanization. This metropolitan boom pulled in people from the poorer surrounding steppes, who had been neglected and marginalized in state development planning. Oasis land values increased, pushing people to sell their land or build on it, rapidly overtaking the farms of the oasis. In this time, there has been increased pressure to turn to commodity cultivation, forging cross-country- or cross-Mediterranean supply chains through which value leeches out from the oasis. Fresh yellow dates which sell for one Dinar a kilogram in Gabès might sell for five in Tunis.

[Price compression](#) for tropical crops also leads to value hemorrhages. Keeping northern supermarkets stocked does not come without its costs.

Later in the day we visited Shott al-Salem. Located next to Gabès’s phosphate processing plant, Shott al-Salem is the other side of the developmental coin in Tunisia. It is popularly known as the shore of death. It deserves the moniker. The seawater is dyed brown with effluent, the shoreline’s sand is pocked here and there with animal cadavers. Slightly in-land, the earth is covered with desiccated and poisoned vegetation. The air is thick with fumes from the processing, which is sent skyward and seaward untreated. We could not breathe properly. My stomach turned and knotted in reaction to the contamination carried on the currents of the wind. Our group suffered steady attrition as people peeled off, unable to tolerate the stink or the steadily mounting irritation in the mouth and eyes.

The plant visibly harms the oasis flora. We could see fronds with their edges pointing towards the plant scarred by chemical burns. Anatomical surveys of reptiles and, the birds of Rachel Carson’s cautions, show they are riddled with heavy metals, while the mats of *Posidonia oceanica* sea grass have collapsed and died amidst phosphogypsum toxification. Epidemiological studies were not permitted on the people during the US-backed Zineddine Ben Ali dictatorship, and the people of the oasis still await a serious study. But what hits the fauna hits the people, survey or no. Cancer rates in the neighborhoods adjoining the plant are around one in every ten people for liver and kidney cancers.

The phosphate plant is the emblem and distillation of the global and local regimes that control the Global South: toxic, entropic, carcinogenic, a technology which has concentrated wealth into very few hands, and is articulated into international monopoly production chains, while doling out liberally and locally the externalities of environmentally unequal exchange.

Our trip to that moonscape shore abutting the factory was about two contrasting developmental models. The dominant one is industrial-*dedevelopmentalist*, which dumps the costs of production on the poor of the oasis – those who cannot afford to leave and have nowhere to go. Then there are the evaporating, although embryonic, possibilities latent in Chenini and elsewhere – the seeds, literal and figurative, of a very different model for the future: food sovereignty.

Like socialism, food sovereignty is a political and conceptual battleground. Definitions bloom along with the movements fighting for their varying visions of the world. It is perhaps best-known as the program of the peasant international, [La Via Campesina](#).

Defining these movements are calls for the right of peoples to healthy food, produced sustainably, using agro-ecology, as well as the right to define their own food and agriculture systems. In Tunisia, explains Nada Trigui, a member of OSAE, it is a question of reducing “dependency of peasants, consumers, communities, as well as on the state level,” on foreign food and inputs, “in the wake of the Green Revolution and agricultural modernization.” Regionally – unavoidably – imperialism and

war are [part of the food sovereignty](#) program, since foreign violence precludes the political capacity to mold national agricultures.

The next day we went to the Matmata Mountains, which till the sky in the Tunisian steppe. There were no artesian wells to irrigate the arid lands here. Instead, a dazzling water-harvesting system called the *jissr* dominates. *Jessour* are small check-dams, wherein water concentrates from the rocky hills, cascading onto flat earth plots held up by a retaining wall. The soil and wall are safehouses for storing scarce water. A lower plane of dirt sits below that mini-plateau, and sometimes another, then another, with water percolating from one to the next. During these lands' intermittent inundations, water flows freely over them.

The fecund soil and greenery in the steppic landscape seems surreal until one sees that it is everywhere. A patch-work of light and dark greens, the milk chocolate of moist soil, the silver shimmer of sun-licked water on earth after the last week's deluges, amidst more monochrome tan escarpments, blankets one small valley after another in life.

Even without much extension work from the state agronomic research institutions, which have devoted huge amounts of funding to white elephant mega-dams compared to studies of the *jessour*, such small-scale infinitely renewable systems allow enough water for date and olive trees, and, in exceptional years, vegetables. Farmers also plant hard wheat and barley. Indeed, the National Gene Bank, where another of the OSAE team, Amine Slim works, carried out some of its first landrace gathering expeditions in the Matmata, where farmers had preserved such seeds *in situ* – a technique the BNG is deliberately replicating in the North.

Of course, poverty and plenty walk hand-in-hand. The poverty of the Tunisian South has, in making cheap labor, often been the maker of wealth whether for Tunisian corporations or further afield through labor export. Food sovereignty is also about arresting that poverty, and thus, the OSAE has its enemies, and not merely amongst transnational seed companies or northern cereal exporters who are used to the markets the US government made for them in Tunisia through its Trojan Horse PL-480 aid programs. These enemies are also within Tunisia itself, where government agencies, importers, contractors, and those intoxicated by the ambrosia of a very particular, parochial, and shortsighted version of modernity, do not want food sovereignty on the agenda.

Some of what OSAE is doing, explained Emna Mornagui, an engineer who works with the organization, is "connecting people in the city with the countryside." *Sensibiliser*, which has no easy Anglophone analogue but is close to consciousness-raising, peppered conversations with the OSAEers as they discussed the food sovereignty tour. It is a means of combating the alienation which is part-and-parcel of the metabolic rift which occurs at the physical level in periphery and core countries alike. Such a distance can easily take the form of a chauvinism which forgets the centrality of food-getting to civilization. As people forget how food is made, we may often accidentally authorize a politics which undercuts the small-scale systems of production which still produce at least half of the world's food.

However, what is lost may not be so easily found once it is well and truly gone. Food production is based, above all, on the expertise of peasants, Trigui adds. The tour's participants mentioned that foreign seed vaults are often necessary for restoring and restocking Tunisia with its ancestral genetic varieties, including, quite often, cultivars resistant to the droughts which will hammer Tunisia ever-more-frequently in a warming world. But if seedstock can be stored *ex situ* – and not without [problems](#), not least the [climactic](#) or war-related destruction of seed banks – knowledge cannot. Making and maintaining *jessour*, tending to the water-turns which allocate oasis water, knowing which rotations are appropriate for which soils and which micro-climates, or erecting and protecting the myriad other technics which are inseparable from the social systems with which they

gestated, are also being lost amidst the destruction of the last patches of oasis polycultures or human out-migration to slums.

Whether technologies that have outlasted Rome will outlast industrial capitalism remains to be seen. It does not depend only on whether work-groups like OSAE are able to permeate the membrane separating production and consumption in the South. It is also a question of whether we in the North can help secure southern countries the space to protect their own farming systems, not from biological blights but socio-political ones, like [NAFTA](#), or the ALECA trade agreement under discussion with the EU.

This is not a matter of charity but of survival, for such trade agreements have ripped apart not merely [southern](#) farming systems but also northern ones. The message of food sovereignty is not merely for countries like Tunisia but also [larger and richer ones](#) which have long neglected our own agricultures and their capacity to help solve [social and climate crises](#) alike. As fossil capitalism nears [its nova-stage](#), there is much of interest, I think, beyond nostalgia or antiquarianism, in farming systems whose lifespan can be dated in terms of millennia. Not merely of interest, but to learn from and [protect](#). And not at any cost, but precisely because the cost of losing a sustainable agriculture is far more than we can afford to pay, whether we now know it or not.

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