Small Farmer Uprisings and Rural Neglect in Egypt and Tunisia

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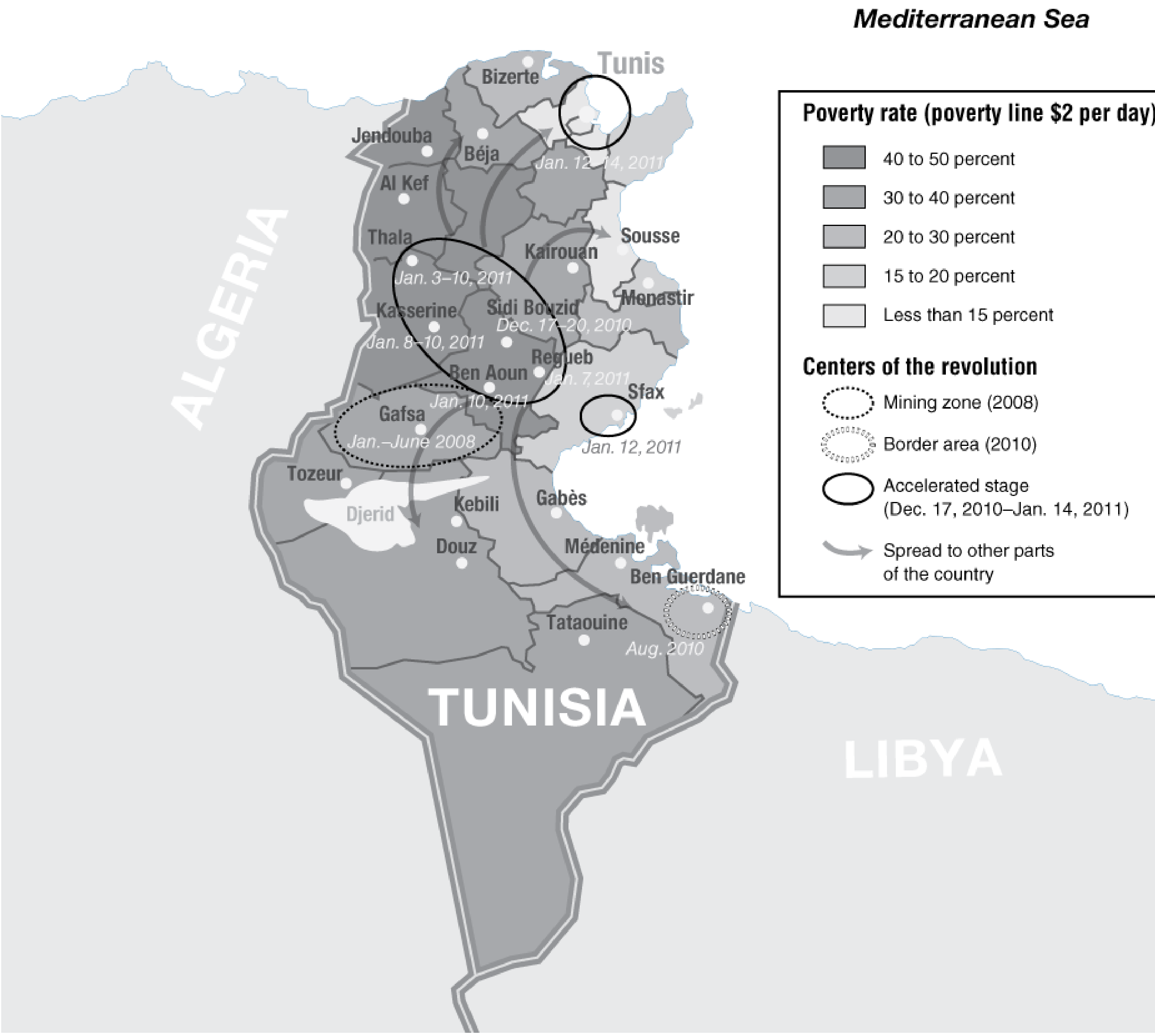
"We should make it up to the peasants," Muhsin al-Batran, erstwhile head of the economic affairs unit in Egypt's Ministry of Agriculture, told the official daily *al-Ahram* two months after the toppling of Husni Mubarak in 2011. "Make it up" -- why? And what is it that needs to be made up?

It is a truism that modern Arab states, following in the footsteps of colonial powers, have concentrated on the socio-economic development of cities, particularly the capital, and badly neglected the provinces. The rulers and the nationalist intelligentsia tend to see peasants as backward and mired in "tradition" that can only impede the progress toward modernity that the elites desire. In both Egypt and nearby Tunisia, where Mubarak's fellow dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was also overthrown in 2011, there is a complete mismatch between state agricultural policy and rural political consciousness, characterized by strong peasant populism and a strong analytical sense of what is behind rural development failures. Small farmers know what policies are needed to grow more food for the nation and improve their own standards of living. They vigorously defend what E. P. Thompson called the "moral economy" -- the notion that as small producers living close to subsistence they are owed some protection from the ravages of the market. But since the late 1980s, when economic liberalization began in the countryside in both places, small farmers have been effectively barred from the conversation about development.

To date the uprisings have not arrested this historical trend. Elites in Egypt and Tunisia continue to consider peasants to be part of the "surplus population," "human debris" or "waste life," rather than important actors in social transformation. [1] Small farmers are quite aware of their place in the pecking order, and they are fighting back, but the arena is severely constricted. As one tiller of the Nile Delta soil noted, "The revolution was good but the dream -- the dream of freedom, social justice and human dignity -- has not been fulfilled." In Tunisia after the ouster of Ben

Ali the persistent refrain of small farmers is likewise that “nothing has changed.”



Farming Without Farmers

In both Egypt and Tunisia, agricultural policy is based on the twin assumptions that local food production is inadequate to feed the population and that the difference should be imported.

Egypt is the world's largest importer of wheat, meeting 60 percent of its needs. More than 80 percent of Egyptians eat subsidized bread. The subsidies are necessary, since up to 50 percent of Egyptians live on $2 per person per day, a figure that probably rises closer to 80 percent for those in the countryside. But the program drains the exchequer -- the state spends as much as $4 billion annually, about 3 percent of gross domestic product, on the subsidies -- and renders Egypt's food security vulnerable to fluctuations in international prices. In 2008 wheat prices rose 180 percent, leading to 15 deaths in bread lines, and the cost of rice imports doubled.

The trade-based view of food security has driven Egypt and Tunisia to reserve vast tracts of land for production of high-value, low-nutrition foodstuffs for export with whatever revenue that is generated being used to import food staples. But demand for Egyptian and Tunisian agricultural exports is sluggish. Both countries have tried to pump up demand essentially by producing more material for export via mechanization and intensive growth.

An example is Toshka -- the mega-project launched under Mubarak that saw the Egyptian state dig a channel from the Nile Valley to irrigate part of the southwestern desert for agriculture. The declared intent was to induce farmers to move out of the "overpopulated" Delta. In reality, the state's aim at Toshka was to attract foreign investment in "entrepreneurial" farms that would grow high-value crops for export. It has failed. The environmental impact assessment was inadequate and the early investors from the Gulf are gone. The cost to Egyptians may be as high as $86.5 billion between 1997 and 2017, sucking in funds that might have been available for rural development in the old lands and might have boosted domestic nutrition.

The Toshka project is Egypt's agricultural policy in caricature. It captures the modernist preoccupation with large-scale schemes and private investment. [2] It also affirms the supposed shortcomings of small farmers in transcending the restrictions of traditional agriculture, scale and efficiency. The predominant state-driven narrative is that small farmers are doomed: Their non-mechanized agriculture cannot meet local, never mind national, needs. Land holdings, in any case, have become unsustainably fragmented because of family inheritance.

This attitude is the only way to understand the draconian Law 96 of 1992, which completely reordered the relationship between landlords and tenants in the Egyptian countryside. Previously, tenant farmers were mostly guaranteed protection from arbitrary rent increases and eviction. Between 1992 and October 1997, when the legislation was fully implemented, rents jumped by a factor of seven to 22. Rental contracts were broken, and farm families lost land rights in perpetuity. Over the next decade, rents rocketed upward again, from 500 Egyptian pounds per hectare in 1997 to 2,500 pounds in 2000 and over 4,500 in 2010. Informal contracts replaced written agreements and were now limited to one year or one crop season, reducing farmers' incentive to invest in the land. Female-headed households were often refused renewal of even temporary contracts. Families became destitute. Malnutrition increased, school attendance fell and children were again drafted as day laborers in the fields. [3] As many as 45 percent of tenants left the land with few bothering to ask where they went; the category of tenant farmer has largely been erased from land registries.

Here lies a paradox. Small farmers in Egypt and Tunisia are among the most productive and clever in the world. Egyptian fallahin produce more than 100 quintals of wheat (1 quintal = 100 kilogram) per hectare. In Tunisia's arid southeast, particularly in the Gabes region, farmers demonstrate immense skill and knowledge. Irrigation is 100 percent dependent upon groundwater, coming from springs in oases and wells in the steppe. Small farmers in this region eked out an existence until the early 1990s, when investors undermined them by drilling more wells for their large-scale irrigation schemes.

In Egypt and Tunisia, the state has tried to transform farming, but without consulting farmers.

Rising Inequality

The attack on small farmer livelihoods is no unintended consequence of development but the direct outcome of policies that reward big landowners and agribusiness.

Even in the heyday of Nasserist land reform, farmers were viewed as pawns in the drive for industrial growth. Without question Gamal Abdel Nasser improved rural conditions. His overall strategy, however, was to coopt and even absorb into the state the classes sympathetic to his transformative program -- chiefly, civil servants, industrial workers and small, landless farmers. This corporatism perpetuated an authoritarian bias that the Free Officers had sought, at least rhetorically, to tame. Nasser refused to mobilize political forces that might turn against him. The celebrated land reforms of 1952 and 1961 aimed to limit the size of landholdings but failed to reduce the power of landowners. The old class of landowners had strong representation on Nasser's Higher Committee for the Liquidation of Feudalism. Peasants were not trusted to help shape the new agricultural policy and as a result it was very easy for powerful rural elites to promote market liberalization before Nasser's death. This trend accelerated with Anwar al-Sadat's *infitah*, or open door policy, and culminated in Law 96 of 1992. It gained additional speed due to the close relationship between and the erstwhile deputy prime minister and agriculture minister, Yusuf Wali, and the US Agency for International Development, which has invested more than $1.25 billion since 1987 in free-market reform of Egyptian farming. [4]

The dictatorships of Sadat and Mubarak were also periods of enormous neglect of agriculture. Gross investment in Egyptian agriculture fell from 31 percent in 1980 to 23 percent in 1992 and per capita expenditure on agriculture declined at a rate about twice the average in the region.

A hallmark of neoliberal policy in the countryside is rising inequality. Between 1990 and 2000 the number of farms smaller than one feddan (an area slightly larger than an acre) increased from 36.7 percent of total holdings to 48.5 percent. Ninety-three percent of Egyptian farmers till patches of land smaller than five feddans while just 3 percent of landowners control almost 35 percent of the total agricultural land with an average holding larger than ten feddans.

Similar patterns of social differentiation obtain in Tunisia. Fifty-four percent of farmers have less than five hectares -- in all, these farmers share 11 percent of the total area. Yet those with holdings larger than 50 hectares -- a mere 3 percent of farmers -- exploit 34 percent of the land area.

As in Egypt, this differentiation was not natural but a product of neoliberal reform that turned more and more land, including state-owned farms, over to private investors from the coastal northeast, or Sahel. After the structural adjustment program adopted in 1982, this investment intensified competition between the Sahel and the rest of the country over farmland and water. The investors were mainly Tunisians who ran food processing and canning facilities for export of olive oil and vegetables. Structural adjustment also exacerbated resource conflict between the investors and small and medium-sized farmers. Agriculture -- most production is outside the Sahel -- represents about 12 percent of gross domestic product. The inhabitants of rural areas resented the increasing transfer of surplus produce to the Sahel for processing. Structural adjustment, finally, meant the erosion of state subsidies to small and medium-sized farmers, further exposing these families to market forces.

Sidi Bouzid, the southwestern town where Mohamed Bouazizi committed suicide on December 17, 2010, triggering the revolt against Ben Ali, is illustrative of rural dispossession and wealth transfer. The town sits in a semi-arid zone where the locals herd sheep and camels and grow olives, almonds and cereals. The region is highly productive but desperately poor, with 42.3 percent of the population living on less than $2 per day in 2011. This "green mirage" is the result of the exclusion of small farmers and expansion of water-intensive farming practices -- all in the name of food security. Tunisia's Fifth Five-Year Plan (1977-1981) confirmed the end of collectivism, which had lasted roughly from 1964 to 1970. This system had been imposed without consultation and had faced fierce resistance from small farmers who felt dispossessed. Large landowners also had feared loss of power and ability to influence decision making. The Fifth Five-Year Plan proclaimed a new era of export-led agriculture, to be enabled by the rapid development of irrigation funded by private investors. The irrigated sector now accounts for 50 percent of total production and up to 15 percent of vegetable production. The total area of irrigated farmland in the Sidi Bouzid governorate rose from 2,000 hectares in 1958 to more than 47,000 hectares in 2011. [5] Locals reintroduced the label *colons* to characterize the new capitalists bankrolling this transformation -- though, again, most of them are Tunisians.

Rural Resistance

There is more to the story of Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation than the struggles of a street vendor insulted and abused by the police. The young man's family had mortgaged their land and, unable to repay the debt, lost their livelihood. This story -- farmers who cannot feed the family from tiny plots of land and cannot find supplemental work nearby -- is common in both Tunisia and Egypt.

Common, too, is resistance to impoverishment and dispossession. Much of this opposition to state agricultural policy is informal, spontaneous and thus difficult to document. The press is preoccupied with urban disputes that are assumed to have immediate political and economic impact. But small farmer actions in Tunisia have been extensive.

On January 14, 2011, the day Ben Ali fled into exile, small farmers occupied lands belonging to the former dictator or his family, as well as state lands that Ben Ali had given to private investors. Ten days later, on January 24, agricultural workers occupied a large farm near the city of Beja, about 80 miles west of Tunis. The farm had been granted to Ben Ali's nephew and workers now demanded its return to the previous owners.

Workers occupied more than 100 large farms, many managed by the Society for Agricultural Development, a state entity, to demand that the land be returned to them -- the previous farmers. Occupations also took place to disrupt planting and harvesting to highlight poor rural working conditions and the need for greater and easier access to land. The Ministry of Agriculture noted that protesters took nearly 10,000 hectares of farmland out of production. The transitional government introduced symbolic measures to reduce tensions, but mass mobilizations continued.

There were also a range of disruptions driven by farmers who demanded access to irrigation water. The high cost of electricity to run irrigation pumps led to boycotts of payments to the Tunisian Company for Electricity and Gas. In May 2011, farmers staged a sit-in for improved access to water, closing Highway 11 at Joumine. In July there were further road closures in this area in protest of the “looting” of the company producing mineral water; in August, still more highways were blocked in Sidi Othman by residents calling for more standpipes for drinking water. In March 2012, the Ministry of Agriculture and the Tunisian Union of Agriculture and Fisheries (UTAP) agreed to waive 30 percent of farmers’ irrigation costs. [6]

Small farmer protests extended to the issues of costly inputs, low farm gate prices -- the net value of crops when they leave the farm -- and marketing and distribution of dairy products in Tunis, Beja and Sfax, among other places. Dairy farmers in some governorates dumped their milk in rivers, leading to shortfalls. The absence of effective tomato subsidies and low prices at canneries led to several sit-ins in Sidi Bouzid in September 2012 and June 2013. One tomato farmer complained, “It’s not the government that subsidizes the farmer. It’s the opposite.” He and his peers were hurting so badly that the area harvested fell from 24,000 hectares in 2012 to less than 10,000 in 2013. [7]

Protests against rural debt began prior to the toppling of Ben Ali. In June 2010, 20 indebted families whose assets had been liquidated mounted a sit-in on their land to oppose its confiscation. Subsequently, in July, farmers from Regueb and Sidi Bouzid demonstrated in front of the governorate building to protest lawsuits brought against them by the National Agricultural Bank that threatened to take their assets, as well. The demonstration was brutally dispersed by police. [8]

Farm workers also undertook several actions to call for improvements in wages and living conditions. In Zaghouan farm workers organized a strike with the support of the local branch of the Tunisian General Labor Union (better known by the French acronym, UGTT). They demanded higher wages and redistribution of sales revenues. Farmers in agricultural cooperatives took steps to obtain a share from the liquidation of units that had been secretly transferred. In August 2011, workers from a vineyard in Grombalia struck to demand a pay increase of 100 dinars per month and improvements in collective bargaining agreements. [9]

The farmer and farm worker opposition has surged largely without the backing of the UGTT, in contrast to other sectors of the economy, where UGTT support for workers, though uneven, has been greater. Many small farmers were affiliated with the UTAP, but this organization primarily served the interests of landowners and investors. In 2012, after months of conflict, activists frustrated with the UTAP’s continued ties to the ancien regime split to create the Farmers’ Union of Tunisia. This new organization brings together medium and large farmers, according to its president, Leith Ben Bishr, a farmer from Jendoub, to fill the union void in the agricultural sector. [10]

It is clear, however, that the Farmers’ Union has no program for defending the interests of small farmers. Ben Bishr expresses the need to evaluate grain, milk and meat production and also to examine issues linked to irrigation and tomato prices. He concedes that 80 percent of farmers are smallholders with fewer than ten head of cattle and that the prices of inputs like animal fodder, soy and corn have increased by 45 percent since 2011. Nevertheless, the Union's policy suggestions, relating to credit, export facilities and pricing for milk, meat and olive oil, as well as the composition of its board of directors, seem to replicate the UTAP's concern with investors and exporters.

As in Tunisia, coverage of labor unrest in Egypt has focused on the wave of trade union and wildcat strikes. Rural disputes are often hidden from public view, but they are also dramatic in their impact. As the twentieth century ended and the twenty-first began, the state refused to recognize petitions against Law 96, and rural protest for access to land and water intensified. From 1997 onward, there were several celebrated cases involving a new Peasant Solidarity Committee linking small farmers, mostly in the Delta, to urban intellectuals and human rights activists. In 2005, the Hisham Mubarak Law Center, the Adala Center for Political and Social Studies and other Cairo-based organizations defended small farmers who had resisted with violence their dispossession by the Nawwar family of landowners in Sarandu, near the Delta town of Damanhour.

According to figures from the Cairo-based Sons of the Soil Land Center, which are not verifiable, in 2009-2010 there were some 180 sit-ins, 132 demonstrations and six strikes in rural areas, resulting in the arrest of more than 3,000 farmers and their supporters, as well as more than 2,500 injuries and 400 deaths. [11] This group also estimated that there were 2,000 arrests, 220 deaths and 1,500 injuries in such protests in 2010 alone.

Rural struggles continued after Mubarak fell. In May 2011, farmers from across Egypt demonstrated outside the prime minister's office. Farmer protests have centered around resistance to dispossession and include attempts to occupy and retake land that was confiscated, whether with resort to law, subterfuge or violence. Small farmers also contested irrigation access and land boundaries.

Farmers established an independent syndicate to replace the state-run General Union of Peasants and Agricultural Cooperative Union. A long time in the making, and founded by veteran activist Shahinda Maqlad, the Independent Farmers Union established branches throughout Egypt. In May 2013, one member of the syndicate in the Delta expressed hope that the "revolution" might reduce the number of lawsuits filed by landowners to consolidate dispossessions. Another tenant farmer could not fathom why his land had been seized: "The worker is fed by me. I was feeding Husni Mubarak himself and all of his ministers. So it is shocking to see my two feddans taken away from me, just because they are more powerful than me. Are we supposed to die now?"

But disenchantment came quickly as well with the presidency of Muhammad Mursi, who was seen as unwilling or unable to take on the landlords. Peasants tended to distrust the Muslim Brothers, who had encouraged women to vote for Mursi with nighttime distribution of cooking oil, sugar and money. One informant said that, during the 2011-2012 parliamentary elections, a man displayed a carton of ghee he had just received from the Brothers. Such tales proved to many small farmers that the Brothers were "only greedy for power."

Back to the Future

Indeed, following the uprisings to unseat Mubarak and Ben Ali, there has been no attempt to recast agricultural policy in either Egypt or Tunisia. The neoliberal narrative continues to justify the dislocation and hardship in the countryside on the grounds that the best way to boost agricultural exports is to cater to the prerogatives of landowners and investors which, for too long, had been subordinated to the interests of tenants paying less than market rates for land use. Small farmer interests are shunted aside in the rush in both countries to secure the neoliberal status quo. In June 2014, Egypt's agriculture minister announced the possible reclamation of 1 million more feddans over five years in order to resettle 5 million Egyptians. The idea that land shortage is the chief problem, rather than the relations of ownership and control on the existing land, is another totem of the decades of agricultural decline.

As concern with rural conditions fades, there is renewed excitement among the elites about the power of outside investment -- this time, finance capital -- to enhance food security. The Egyptian firm Citadel Capital, Africa's biggest equity finance company, is grabbing land in Sudan, Uganda and Ethiopia. [12] A consequence of the global food-fuel-finance crisis since 2007 has been to affirm the power of finance capital to control all aspects of the food chain.

This relentless commercialization of agriculture has led to the abjection of small farmers. Food insecurity and rural underdevelopment will persist until small farmer voices are heard. As one Egyptian woman, head of her household, said, "I want my right. I want to live for my children to live. I have four children. I want my right that has been earned. My father paid for it with his own blood, health and sweat. How is it that they take it from us? We want justice."

Authors' Note: Thanks to the Council for British Research in the Levant, which helped to support the research upon which this article is based. The film *Fellahin* directed and produced by Ayeb and Bush will soon be available for viewing.

Endnotes

[1] These terms are taken, respectively, from Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1994); Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004); and M. P. Cowen and R. W. Shenton, *Doctrines of Development* (London, Routledge, 1996).
[2] Habib Ayeb, *Crise de la société rurale en Egypte: La fin du fellah?* (Paris: Karthala, 2010).
[3] See Reem Saad, "Egyptian Politics and the Tenancy Law," in Ray Bush, ed., *Counter Revolution in Egypt's Countryside* (London: Zed Books, 2002).
[4] Ray Bush, ed., *Counter Revolution in Egypt's Countryside* (London: Zed Books, 2002).
[5] CDCGE. Plan d'Action Régional de Lutte Contre la Désertification du gouvernorat de Sidi Bouzid.
[6] *Tunisienumérique*, March 23, 2012.
[7] *L'Economiste Maghrébin*, June 19, 2013.
[8] Alia Gana, "Agriculteurs et paysans: nouveaux acteurs de la société civile et de la transition démocratique en Tunisie?" in *La transition démocratique en Tunisie, Etat des lieux*, vol. 1 (L'Observatoire Tunisien de la Transition Démocratique, 2012).

[9] Ibid.

[10] *Le Temps*, February 9, 2012.

[11] Ray Bush, "Land, Politics and Agrarian Reform in Egypt," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 38/3 (December 2011).

[12] Marion Dixon, "The Land Grab, Finance Capital and Food Regime Restructuring: The Case of Egypt," *Review of African Political Economy* 41 (2014)