

Trend Assessment

Fine-Grained
Exploring the link between
food security and migration in
Tunisia

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Executive summary

This trend assessment is part of an ongoing series launched by ICMPD's Policy, Research and Strategy Directorate. These assessments analyse emerging trends related to the field of migration based on expert opinions and ICMPD's knowledge and insight on the subject in the context of changing geopolitical situations and external shocks that may influence existing trends of migration. In this vein, this study examines the **relationship between food security in Tunisia, compounded by the recent war in Ukraine, and migration in the region**. The ripple effects of the war in Ukraine have impacted food security¹, jobs, and energy prices in Europe and beyond. Tunisia imports a substantive amount of its soft wheat from Ukraine, imports that have been discontinued for months before slowly resuming in September of this year.² Additionally, the country witnessed unprecedented food shortages in the last months, with experts likening the situation to a Lebanese scenario, as a result of various economic policies.³ Moreover, the country's current economic and political situation has also reportedly added to the country's vulnerability to external shocks.

In a climate of political uncertainty and economic hardships, **migration is clearly a mitigation strategy**. In July 2022, Tunisian nationals were the second largest group arriving to Europe through the Central Mediterranean route, second only to Egyptians by a marginal fraction. Although Tunisia has been a country of origin and transit for (irregular) migration flows to Europe over the past decades, migration aspirations and migrant profiles have changed over the years, reflective of varying economic, social and political factors influencing migratory decisions over the years.

Within this broader context, this trend assessment investigates the ways in which food insecurity indicators feed into migration decision-making in Tunisia. More specifically, the trend assessment looks at

- (1) the ways in which **some migrant groups are disproportionately affected by food insecurity** and food shortages, and how this additional vulnerability **impacts their perceptions of Tunisia** as a country of transit and destination; and

¹ Food security was defined by UN Conference for Sustainable Development during the World Food Summit of 1996 as existing 'when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences or an active and healthy life'. In contrast, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation defined food insecurity as 'when people do not have adequate physical, social or economic access to food'. These definitions refer not only to food supply and availability, but also to its quality and to the capacity of individuals to access it.

See: UNCSD (2011). Food Security and Sustainable Agriculture. UNCSD; FAO (2003). Chapter 2. Food security: concepts and measurement in Trade reforms and food security: Conceptualizing the Linkages. FAO: Rome; Kalantaryan, S. and McMahon, S., (2022) The Granary in Flames, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

² Hamzawy, A., Sadjadpour, K., Miller, A. D., Wehrey, F., Hassan, Z., Farouk, Y., Khaddour, K., Yerkes, S., Coskun, A., Yahya, M. and Muasher, M. (2022, March 24). *What the Russian War in Ukraine Means for the Middle East*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

³ Since August 2022, many supermarkets around the country started rationing the sale of basic and essential foodstuffs such as coffee, milk, sugar, rice, and butter, a shortage that is reflective of a severe and ongoing food insecurity affecting increasingly more Tunisians and migrants in the country. More in: Blaise, L. (2022, September 17). *Tunisia struggles with recurrent food shortages*. Le Monde. These shortages are the result of a change in supplies, as well as the country's lack of solvency and its ability to pay for imports in foreign currency.

- (2) how food shortages and food insecurity **impact migration decision-making processes**, and migration profiles of prospective Tunisian migrants.

Broadly, the trend assessment finds that **sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia are disproportionately affected** by food shortages and the worsening economic situation in the country. Given their existing vulnerabilities and often limited resources, many reported that the increase in fuel prices limited their mobility in cities and their pursuit of short-term professional opportunities. Many sub-Saharan migrants also reported their continued desire to migrate towards Europe, despite the inflation and potential increase in energy prices, because of their perception of access to existing welfare systems in Europe, which lack in countries like Tunisia. This is further evidence of the comparative advantage of some countries of destination over others, and the perceived benefits migrants can receive such as higher salaries and social benefits, even if these countries come with higher costs of living.

Reflecting on prospective Tunisian migrants' aspirations, many stakeholders highlighted the changing profiles of migrants, a trend that was previously identified through the Households International Migration Surveys (HIMS)⁴. In addition to irregular flows, many **Tunisian families are choosing to emigrate to offer better opportunities for their children**. Notably, many Tunisian **high skilled workers, engineers and medical professionals are capitalising on opportunities abroad** to pursue their futures elsewhere. Expert interviews showed that in these instances, food insecurity was only a catalyst to decisions that mostly accounted for a lack of political stability and a worsening economy.

From a stakeholder perspective, particularly looking at international organisations assisting both Tunisians in need and migrants, **the war in Ukraine has impacted the mandate and scope of their operations in the country**. Many organisations that are already underfunded are facing more budgetary constraints, with resources being redirected to the humanitarian effort in Ukraine. From a food security perspective, organisations working on agriculture and food policy, as well as funding bodies, agreed that Tunisia's vulnerability to external shocks and food price volatility requires important and potentially unpopular food, agriculture and energy policy reforms that would affect existing subsidies. The government's monopoly on some food imports, the need to provide incentives to local farmers, and restructuring of food and fuel subsidies, were cited as important and urgent aspects to address.

Looking at migration and food security trends before and shortly after the war in Ukraine in Tunisia, the trend assessment provides an understanding of the link between food security and migration decisions in the short- and medium-term, and important implications and reflections for stakeholders engaged in this area.

⁴ This survey, implemented by ICMPD, comes as part of the Household International Migration Surveys in the Mediterranean Countries (MED-HIMS) and represents the first survey on international migration undertaken in Tunisia, providing an inventory of migration from the perspective of different Tunisian governorates between July 2020 and March 2021. More information available in ICMPD (2022) *National Survey on International Migration*. ICMPD.

1 Introduction

As part of the series of Emerging Trend Assessments carried out by ICMPD, this report explores the effect food insecurity as a result of the war in Ukraine, on migration trends in Tunisia. The study also looks into the potential of new and shifting trends of irregular migration, specifically towards Europe, as a result of the implications caused by the unstable political, economic and social climate in Tunisia, as well as conflict and severe food insecurity in other parts of the continent.

This trend has been identified following the beginning of the war in Ukraine and the early signs of food and fuel shortages witnessed in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and other countries, as well as the lack of empirical data linking migration and food security in North Africa. In light of the increasing numbers of Tunisian migrants arriving to Europe,⁵ it is highly relevant to further examine how different factors affecting migratory decisions interact with each other and to which extent food security is central in broader migration trends.

Taking stock of these different dynamics, the analysis takes into consideration primary and secondary data from the recent waves of the HIMS and Arab barometer surveys (the latter includes data collected in 2022), looking at nationally representative household opinions on government and economic performance, future outlook and migration. It is also based on fieldwork conducted in Tunis and online between July and August 2022. For this assessment, ICMPD's Research Unit conducted one focus group discussion with 9 migrants from sub-Saharan Africa and 8 in-depth interviews with experts from government organisations (1), international organisations working on food security (1), agriculture (1), and migration (2), EU institutions (1), donor organisations (1) and academia (1).⁶

In the next sections, this assessment first outlines migration-related profiles and trends from Tunisia prior to 2022, in order to establish the understanding of the potential impacts of recent economic and political factors on recent migration trends. Next, it outlines food security challenges in the country, highlighting in particular the compounding impact of the Ukraine war on these challenges. In the subsequent section, the assessment then links these food security and migration trends, drawing initial conclusions based on the research findings of this trend assessment. Finally, the report concludes by outlining the potential implications of these trends for stakeholders engaged in Tunisia in relevant sectors.

2 Recent Migration Trends from Tunisia

Tunisian migrants

According to the 2020 official estimates of the National Institute of Statistics and the National Observatory for Migration (ONM), the estimated number of Tunisians residing abroad is around 566,000 people⁷, with around 75 percent concentrated in France, Italy and Germany, and almost half are under the age of 29. The main driver of migration that was cited was employment and improving

⁵ Based on data from UNHCR over the the summer months in 2022, in UNHCR (2022). *Italy Sea Arrivals Dashboard*. UNHCR.

⁶ It is worth noting that part of the interviews took place the week preceding a national referendum on amending the constitution, a period that was characterised by high political pressure and uncertainty, and new government appointments.

⁷ ICMPD (2021). *Enquête Nationale sur la Migration Internationale HIMS*. Tunis: ICMPD.

working conditions. Official estimates also point to the fact that Tunisian migrants have a significantly higher level of education than the national average. Experts highlighted that this trend of highly skilled and qualified Tunisians migrating has been on the rise since 2015, with 39,000 engineers and 3,300 medical doctors leaving the country over 2015-2020 period. According to one migration academic interviewed, the unstable political climate has accelerated disenchantment and decisions to migrate: As people reportedly had high hopes after government changes and more recently the one in 2021⁸, this was followed by an equally high level of disappointment, which feeds into decisions to migrate. Particularly following the Arab Spring and the subsequent government changes, elections and promises of reform, many young Tunisians expressed their discontent towards the challenging and unstable socio-economic and political conditions. They decry widespread corruption, the lack of job opportunities, nepotism and their systematic exclusion from politics.⁹

Given the magnitude of challenges the country has faced over the last decade, it is estimated that nearly half (45 percent) of Tunisians are seeking to leave their homeland, double the rate observed in 2011 (22 percent).¹⁰ This is predominantly relevant for youth aged 16 to 29 where 65 percent reported having considered migrating abroad. Men (52 percent) and university graduates (56 percent) are also reported more likely to want to migrate. In terms of countries of destination, those surveyed mentioned France as their main country of destination (at 41.7 percent) followed by Saudi Arabia (10.7 percent), Italy (10.3 percent) and Germany (9.5 percent).¹¹

Interestingly, the reasons cited for non-migration is “feeling at ease” in one’s home country with 41.4 percent of respondents, followed by spouse’s preferences for staying (14.7 percent) and caring duties towards one’s parents (10.3 percent).¹²

However, aspirations to migrate do not necessarily lead to decisions to migrate. Although many Tunisians expressed their aspirations to migrate, their abilities to do so vary. Among potential migrants, less than half (41 percent) expressed their willingness to leave the country even if they lacked the necessary documents.¹³ In these instances, men are by far more likely to do so than women (53 percent versus 26 percent), as well as those with a secondary degree or less (47 percent versus 25 percent for university graduates). These estimates on migration aspirations have not changed in recent

⁸ In July 2021, Tunisian President Saïed issued an emergency declaration, temporarily freezing the Parliament and dismissing the then-prime minister from his functions. This change initially received wide popular support, signalling the potential for important reforms and a new political and economic chapter, particularly amongst youth who expressed optimism to this change in course. A year later, this enthusiasm was replaced with scepticism and uncertainty. More in Yerkes, S., & Alhomoud, M. (2022). *One Year Later, Tunisia’s President Has Reversed Nearly a Decade of Democratic Gains*. Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

⁹ A recent study has highlighted that the unemployment rate for those between 15 and 24 increased to double the national average, and that personal and professional connections (and not education and skills) are the means to getting jobs. More on the study in Tung, N. (2020, September 6). *Tunisia’s Youth Still Struggle A Decade After The Uprising*. NPR

¹⁰ This is based on the last Arab Barometer wave in Arab Barometer. (2022). *Arab Barometer VII Tunisia Report 2022*. Princeton University. Princeton, NJ

¹¹ These findings can be explained by the existence of Tunisian communities, close ties and relatives in said countries who can act as a support system. To a lesser extent, North America is considered to be an attractive destination for 8.8 percent of migrants. Findings from ICMPD (2021). *Enquête Nationale sur la Migration Internationale HIMS*. Tunis: ICMPD.

¹² ICMPD (2021). *Enquête Nationale sur la Migration Internationale HIMS*. Tunis: ICMPD.

¹³ Arab Barometer. (2022). *Arab Barometer VII Tunisia Report 2022*. University of Princeton. Princeton, NJ

years, despite the rise of irregular migration from Tunisia that was registered at the external EU borders.

In terms of these irregular migration trends, following the COVID-19 pandemic, the share of Tunisians departing from Tunisia's coast to reach Europe has increased against other nationalities, including West Africans.¹⁴ This population was described by many experts interviewed as becoming increasingly more feminine, with more Tunisian women, families and unaccompanied minors undertaking the journey through the Central Mediterranean Route.

Another interesting trend reported was the increase of migrants crossing the sea without any support from smugglers. Experts reported that prospective migrants self-organise by collectively contributing to a boat, an engine and a GPS navigating system, bypassing the smuggling networks in the country¹⁵. This modus operandi seems primarily motivated by migrants' desire to cut costs, to ensure their journey is successful and to avoid falling prey to misleading or exploitative intermediaries (whether smugglers or traffickers).

The resurgence of the Western Balkan Route for Tunisian nationals has also been recently highlighted as gaining in popularity. So far, 5,000 Tunisians were intercepted making use of this route, against 800 the previous year¹⁶. Over the summer months, many Tunisians seeking to reach Europe travelled to Belgrade via Istanbul. Tunisian nationals benefit from visa-free arrangements for both Türkiye and Serbia¹⁷, and many families and prospective migrants see this air route as offering a safer and more certain journey than the sea route.

Migrants residing in Tunisia

In 2020, there were around 59,000 migrants currently residing in Tunisia both with and without residence permits, with 4 out of 5 migrants from the Maghreb region or sub-Saharan Africa. The number of sub-Saharan African migrants has increased exponentially over the last few years and has tripled since 2014, with 60 percent declaring planning to stay in Tunisia longer term. Among the sub-Saharan Africans living in Tunisia, about a third come from Côte d'Ivoire, followed by the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Guinea and Mali. The average age of the sub-Saharan communities is 26 years old. Among the drivers of migration cited by migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, economic factors were cited as the main drivers for 50.1 percent of respondents followed by better education at 27.3 percent.¹⁸ Nationalities of asylum seekers in Tunisia vary from the overall sub-Saharan population in

¹⁴ Herbert, M. (2022). *Losing Hope: Why Tunisians are leading the surge in irregular migration to Europe*. Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime.

¹⁵ Herbert, M. (2022). *Losing Hope: Why Tunisians are leading the surge in irregular migration to Europe*. Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime.

¹⁶ Chibani, A. (2022). *Tunisians Find New Road to Europe in the Balkans*. Meshkal.

¹⁷ Tunisia and Serbia signed a visa-free agreement that has entered into effect in 1965. This agreement is available on the website of Republic of Serbia-Ministry of Foreign Affairs at <https://www.mfa.gov.rs/en/foreign-policy/bilateral-cooperation/tunisia>. In October 2022, with the surge of migration to the EU through Serbia of nationals benefitting from the visa-free regime, Serbia revised its visa policy and announced the re-introduction of visas for a number of nationalities, including Tunisians. More on the visa regime changes in Schwikowski, M. (2022, November 3). *Serbia ends visa waiver for Burundians*. Deutsche Welle.

¹⁸ ICMPD (2021). *Enquête Nationale sur la Migration Internationale HIMS*. Tunis: ICMPD.

the country, with Sudanese being the main country of origin, followed by Eritrea then Somalia. The vast majority are men, with a small proportion intending to move onward (4 percent) while the majority (94 percent) intend to seek asylum in Tunisia.¹⁹

For those arriving through crossing points in the Sahara, entrance is usually by land from Algeria or Libya, as well as by sea for those intercepted while attempting to cross the Mediterranean sea from Libya.²⁰ However, over the last years, as perceptions of Tunisia and the situation in Libya changed, as well as the reported emergence of new smuggling routes, asylum seekers arriving to Tunisia have crossed into the country by different means: In 2019, asylum seekers arrived predominantly by land (56 percent), sea (33 percent), then air (11 percent).²¹ In 2020, more migrants started arriving by sea (41 percent) than by land (37 percent), potentially due to the border closures and other restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. This shift of entry points is even more stark in 2021, with most arriving by sea (69 percent), signalling a shift in routes from Libya to Tunisia and potential implications for transit movements via Tunisia to Europe.

With regard to migration intentions, those engaging in this field highlight that from many origin states' perspectives, sub-Saharan migrants often reach Tunisia to transit through to other countries (likely Europe). However, many migrants intending to transit reach the country and find themselves staying for longer periods, sometimes for years given the lack of legal opportunities to migrate onward, or return to their countries of origin, in the meantime having amassed large fines for overstaying, in addition to their pre-existing socio-economic vulnerabilities. Another factor is the possibility of return in a challenging economic climate. One expert mentioned that although sub-Saharan migrants face economic hardships in Tunisia and are more vulnerable to food insecurity and shortages, this did not reduce their mobility or aspirations to migrate. For those who have been in Tunisia for over a year, the choice between staying or going home is the former, because of the financial costs already incurred. The expert mentioned that for some, the costs of going to Europe irregularly would be cheaper than returning to one's country of origin, especially for visa overstayers who would have to pay a hefty penalty depending on the duration of their overstay.

One expert also highlighted that many migrants from Côte d'Ivoire tend to have higher salaries in their country of origin compared to the salaries they receive in Tunisia. In this case, their migration decisions thus seem to be less economically driven as for other migrants, and their longer term objectives are simply to migrate.

¹⁹ UNHCR. (2022). Overview of Mixed Movement Profiling: Arrivals by land/air and rescue at sea July 2022. Tunis: UNHCR Tunisia.

²⁰ Bassalah, S. (2021). Enquête qualitative: Tunisia HIMS. ICMPD.

²¹ Those arriving by air are usually from countries with whom Tunisia has a visa-free agreement and where nationals can come to the country as tourists for up to 3 months. More on trends in UNHCR. (2022). *Overview of Mixed Movement Profiling: Arrivals by land/air and rescue at sea July 2022*. UNHCR.

3 Food security trends in Tunisia and the impact of the war in Ukraine

In general, the agricultural sector represents 12 percent of the country's GDP, and is an important sector for the trade balance, with the country importing wheat and vegetable oil and exporting olive oil, dates, and fishery and other agricultural products. However, with successive crises and the increase in commodity prices, Tunisia has been struggling to competitively access the market and has been experiencing a widening trade deficit over the years, which has worsened in 2022.²² One agriculture and food security specialist mentioned that previous challenges facing the agricultural sector include seasonal shortages in labour but remained limited compared to the wider impacts of the shortages experienced following the war in Ukraine. With disruptions to wheat exports from Ukraine and Russia as a result of the war, sanctions imposed on Russian exports and the earlier closure of the Black sea ports, prices of wheat have soared.²³ Tunisia's dependence on wheat from Ukraine, as well as vegetable oil and fertilizers, seriously affect food security and agricultural production. The lack of fertilizers not only impacts agricultural production, as one agriculture specialist highlighted, but also can contribute to further demotivate farmers in the sector. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, many farmers have left the agricultural field to more profitable sectors, including some who were previously working in the grain sector, which is not lucrative.

Climate change has also been identified by experts as one of the salient challenges facing the agricultural sector in Tunisia. Water scarcity and the country's vulnerability to drought have exposed the agricultural sector and production to more vulnerability.²⁴ Additionally, one agriculture specialist mentioned that the sector lacks political and social organising, which reduces farmers' bargaining power when dealing with suppliers and sellers. This lack of organising and unionising has to do with the low incentives for doing so: land ownership is poorly defined in some contexts, the sector and unions are fragmented, and there is a lack of support for farmers who have unionised. These factors all act as disincentives to farmers to pursue agricultural activity and higher levels of productivity.

Overall, the sector was described as not profitable for farmers. Traditionally run by families, many of today's youth have no interest in taking over their parents' farms and engage in the sector, another factor that threatens the viability of the sector. According to one academic expert, the food security situation in Tunisia presents a serious challenge that may remain manageable in the short term. However, at the same time, one agricultural expert warned of the inability of countries producing wheat to quickly fill the production gap caused by the Ukraine war. In light of these disrupted shortages and the increase in wheat and other food prices, Tunisia is unable to import many food items as it did in the past. Part of this limitation has to do with the country's access to funds to pay for food imports,

²² According the National Observatory of Agriculture, the deficit of the trade balance for agri-food products increased by 61 percent compared to the same period in 2021. More details in Reuters Staff (2022, September 12). *Tunisia's trade deficit jumps to \$5.3 bln in first eight months of 2022*. Reuters.

²³ Prior to the outbreak of hostilities between Ukraine and Russia, Tunisia imported around 80 percent of its wheat supply from Ukraine. More on the impact of the war in various African countries in Bilger, V., & Ben Brahim, N. (2022). *Could disruptions to Eastern European Wheat Spur Displacement in Africa?* Vienna: ICMPD.

²⁴ The World Bank (2022). *Project Appraisal Document on a proposed loan for a Tunisia Emergency Food Security Response Project*. The World Bank, Middle East and North Africa Region.

with many cargos arriving to the country's harbours, only to leave again with the same supplies. The World Bank and other donors have provided the country with dedicated funds to support its wheat imports and inform a better strategy to limit such shortages and dependency on foreign imports.²⁵

One funding body mentioned that the challenges to ensuring food security are essentially structural. The state is the sole importer of many essential food items and sets non-competitive prices for local production, one of many disincentives for local farmers. Many experts interviewed pointed to another phenomenon, which is the informal market, whereby subsidised items such as wheat-based products, milk, sugar and fuel are sold informally across the borders. Another important challenge, which calls for a difficult reform, are the universal bread subsidies, which cost the state a significant proportion of its budget.²⁶ In addition to these direct impacts on food security, Tunisia is expected to face a larger energy crisis, with fuel shortages already witnessed as a result of global dynamics²⁷, which in turn further impacts people's livelihoods and food prices.

All of these factors outlined contribute to the fragility of the agricultural sector and by extension food security. The impact of the war in Ukraine has directly and immediately created disruptions that are still visible despite the partial resumption of cargo shipping to Tunisia. It is also worth noting that Libya imports most of its food from Tunisia, with food insecurity in the latter having important repercussions, at the least in the short term, on the neighbouring country's own food security.²⁸

4 Linking food security and migration in the Tunisian context

According to many stakeholders interviewed, it is too early to accurately estimate the full impact of the war in Ukraine and subsequent food shortages in Tunisia on migration. However, 2022 witnessed an increase in outward migration, which was declining following the uncertainty post-COVID and the changing political landscape the previous year. In recent years, frequent political changes have meant an unpredictable political situation and, in addition to economic and social challenges, represent an important element in migration decision-making from the country. Just this year, abrupt changes in the government and pauses in Parliament's work are indicative of some of the uncertainty experienced in the country. With elections upcoming in December 2022, the situation and its impact in the longer-term on migration decisions is still unclear. One former government representative mentioned that the number of highly skilled Tunisians who chose to leave the country has further increased in 2022.

²⁵ The World Bank. (2022). *Project Appraisal Document on a proposed loan for a Tunisia Emergency Food Security Response Project*. The World Bank, Middle East and North Africa Region.

²⁶ Bread subsidies apply indiscriminately to all Tunisians and residents regardless of their socio-economic status, with bread selling at a very low price, equivalent to 0.06 EUR, and reportedly creating a significant amount of food waste of around 900,000 baguettes thrown away everyday. More in Blaise, L. (2022, May 15). *Tunisia struggles to reform its unbalanced food subsidies*. Le Monde.

²⁷ In October 2022, many petrol stations started running out of fuel, as a result of decreased supplies, both nationally and internationally. Reuters. (2022, October 11). *Long Petrol Queues in Tunisia Stir Anger After Promise of Fuel Deliveries*. Reuters.

²⁸ Zaptia, S. (2022, April 14). *Tunisia imposes fruit and vegetables export ban to all countries – including its largest importer Libya*. The Libya Herald.

The drivers mentioned include better salaries abroad, as well as the increasing inflation rate in Tunisia, which reached 8.6 percent in 2022.²⁹

As of July 2022, Tunisian nationals represented the second largest group of migrants arriving to Europe through the Central Mediterranean route, after Egyptians.³⁰ This marks an overall increase of 44 percent compared to the same period last year and the highest number of arrivals ever witnessed for Egyptian nationals.³¹ This trend has been observed earlier in the year, with the number of Tunisians arriving to Italy in May increasing by 57 percent compared to the previous month. Important to highlight is the increasing proportion of minors, amounting to over a third of all Tunisians who arrived in the same month.³²

The deteriorating quality of life and many prospective migrants' inability to project themselves in a future that meets their expectations, particularly for those with children, increases their willingness to migrate. As one expert highlighted, in the current context, decisions to migrate, particularly for those with families, becomes more challenging. Leaving a comfortable setting and heading for an unknown environment can be daunting and even deter some from migrating. However, many Tunisians can no longer afford the comfortable lifestyle they used to enjoy. With food prices and costs of services increasing, while salaries stagnate, maintaining the same level of expenditure is no longer sustainable. Experts interviewed highlighted that there is an increase of entire families migrating, both regularly and irregularly, a new pattern that was more limited in the past years. Additionally, another expert and government representative mentioned that increasingly more women are migrating to pursue studies or work opportunities, compared to previous years.

Irregular migration flows are also symptomatic of the ongoing crisis in the country and other parts of the African continent, as well as the impact of the war in Ukraine and subsequent food shortages and soaring fuel prices. With the devaluing of its currency and high dependence on Russian and Ukrainian wheat imports, Egypt is home to the highest number of migrants arriving irregularly through the Central Mediterranean Route to Europe. Similar trends were witnessed in other parts of the continent, including in Sudan, where conflict adds to the severity of food shortages. Given the ongoing drought and severe food shortages and ongoing conflicts in the Horn of Africa, experts warn of increased numbers of migrants from the region migrating through the Central Mediterranean route to escape famine.

When asked about the impact of the political climate on migration decisions, experts differed in the extent to which this is a contributing factor. One government representative mentioned that the average Tunisian does not care or account for politics when taking migratory decisions. Political

²⁹ There are methodological discussions around the way the inflation rate is calculated in Tunisia, and to which extent it is reflective of the felt inflation for average Tunisians (underestimating the effect on prices). More in <http://www.ins.tn/methode/methodologie-de-lindice-des-prix-la-consommation-familiale-base-100-en-2015>

³⁰ According to the UNHCR Italy Sea Arrivals dashboard, since the beginning of the year, 8,257 Tunisians arrived to Italy, second to Egyptians, whose number is estimated at 8,430. Based on data in UNHCR (2022). *Italy Sea Arrivals Dashboard*. UNHCR.

³¹ Frontex. (2022, August 12). *EU's external borders in July: Increased number of crossings on the Central Mediterranean*. Warsaw: Frontex.

³² MMC North Africa. (2022). *Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: North Africa*. Tunis: MMC.

stability was described as more important for upper class Tunisians. At the same time, the impact of the political climate on the economic conditions is a contributing factor for all Tunisians.

With regard to sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia, political factors in countries of transit or destination are less relevant to the migration decision-making process of sub-Saharan migrants for a number of reasons, according to a government stakeholder interviewed. As explained, factors in countries of origin carry much more weight when taking migratory decisions, and unstable political, security or economic conditions are enough of a driving factor when leaving their country. Second, the objectives these migrants are aiming to achieve, including economic prosperity, or reaching other countries of destination, are less impacted by the political rivalry or instability in countries like Tunisia.

Overall, migration plans of sub-Saharan migrants were described by interviewees as less impacted by these external factors and more sensitive to increases in border restrictions and surveillance. Additionally, given the ongoing global crisis and food shortages affecting a number of African countries, one academic highlighted that since similar food security dynamics are witnessed in both Tunisia and many sub-Saharan African countries that are much more dependent on food imports, migrants affected by food shortages in Tunisia are less likely to consider return in light of these broader shortages elsewhere. This implies that these shortages may be more relevant for Tunisian migrants than for sub-Saharan migrants, including in the context of potential return.

One factor worth highlighting in connection to the war in Ukraine is the perception of Europe as a place of asylum against the backdrop of millions of Ukrainians fleeing the war. Among the sub-Saharan migrants who took part in the focus group discussion in Tunisia, there is an increased awareness of the double standards by which African asylum seekers are treated compared to those fleeing the war in Ukraine. One expert described these narratives as creating feelings of injustice, discrimination and racism among sub-Saharan refugees. However, the extent to which this narrative impacts decisions to migrate remains minimal. One expert estimated that for most, these hostile narratives would not deter migrants from seeking to reach Europe. For both educated migrants and those with less educational attainment arriving irregularly, migratory journeys will continue regardless of the hostile narratives. Similarly, migrants who took part in the focus group discussion highlighted that hostile narratives towards them are not a deterrent from them seeking to reach Europe. Marginally, those who migrated irregularly and who have good conditions in their home countries, living above the poverty line, with the ability to secure jobs and access to financial resources, would reconsider their migratory projects in light of the new global dynamics and crisis.

Regarding the changing situation in Libya and the interdependencies with Tunisia in terms of food imports, the impact of the war in Ukraine on further displacement is predicted to be less visible. Libyans' migration to Tunisia is usually circular, despite the conditions in Libya deteriorating over the years. One academic mentioned that Libya is much less dependent on wheat imports compared to Tunisia and Egypt, and that with the looming global energy crisis, Libya may benefit from the high demand for gas and oil and could use the revenues to ensure its food security.

In the medium run, food insecurity has impacted other parts of the continent and could lead to further displacement and migration movements. One representative from a migration organisation

highlighted the potential of future flows from the Horn of Africa through the central Mediterranean route as a result of droughts, famine and disruptions in food supplies. According to the same representative, reports of migrants actively making arrangements such as selling land and property to undertake their journeys were reported. This effect is compounded with ongoing conflicts in the region, notably in Sudan, the DRC and Ethiopia, where more nationals are expected to leave as a result of ongoing violence.

Interestingly, both the experts interviewed and migrants who took part in the focus group discussion highlighted that challenges in Europe, such as threat of war or economic crisis, were not deterrents from seeing Europe as a favourable continent of destination. Many asylum seekers and migrants in Tunisia even expressed their willingness to be relocated to Europe even in case of a “nuclear war”.

5 Potential Implications

The link between food security and migration is complex and context-dependent. In environments with pre-existing migratory dynamics, political and economic challenges, food insecurity can become a contributing factor to migratory decisions. Although it primarily affects the more vulnerable segments of the population including migrants in irregular situations, movements of these populations remains limited and localised, compared to those who have the means to migrate, through regular or irregular channels. Nonetheless, food security remains an important factor and source of stability in fragile contexts and longer-term disruptions could have some far-reaching repercussions.

Broadly, the trend assessment finds that sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia are disproportionately affected by food shortages and the worsening economic situation in the country. Given their existing vulnerabilities and often limited resources the increase in fuel prices limited their mobility in cities and their pursuit of short-term professional opportunities. Many sub-Saharan migrants also reported their continued desire to migrate towards Europe, despite the inflation and potential increase in energy prices, because of their perception of access to existing welfare systems in Europe, which lack in countries like Tunisia.

Reflecting on prospective Tunisian migrants’ aspirations, many stakeholders highlighted the changing profiles of migrants, a trend that was previously identified through the Households International Migration Surveys (HIMS). In addition to irregular flows, many families are choosing to emigrate to offer better opportunities for their children. Notably, many Tunisian high skilled workers, engineers and medical professionals are capitalising on opportunities abroad to pursue their futures elsewhere. Expert interviews showed that in these instances, food insecurity was only a catalyst to decisions that mostly accounted for a lack of political stability and a worsening economy.

What does this mean for stakeholders?

Many UN or intergovernmental stakeholders working on food security mentioned that, as a result of food shortages following the war in Ukraine and the deteriorating economic situation, there have been important changes in their priorities and activities carried out. For the first time, in-kind donations that are usually reserved for specific contexts are being implemented as a result of the food shortages and

other hardships experienced by some families and communities. In the short run, such interventions provide important support but cannot substitute longer term durable solutions.

For **UN and other international actors** working on food security and agriculture, there is the potential to support the government in difficult but important reforms that could improve agricultural production in the long run. Actions in the areas of incentives to farmers, including better unions, access to innovative techniques, financial incentives for production, and increased competitiveness within the local market and for exports were highlighted by experts as potentially alleviating the situation in the medium-term.

For **national and international migration actors** in Tunisia, the projected limitations of funding to specific agencies and international organisations given the shifting prioritisation of Ukraine will be highly relevant to their work. Limitations in funding could mean fewer resources to respond to potentially higher numbers of potential migrants, those with protection concerns (e.g. from the Horn of Africa) and those with potential vulnerabilities (e.g. children). Existing cash transfers supporting asylum seekers and refugees already provide essential support, but may not be sufficient given the changing global prices and the country's inflation. Sub-Saharan migrants are particularly vulnerable to these economic and food shortages, given their limited access to social support. Thus organisations providing support to these groups may need to consider filling these potential gaps and/or additional resources needed.

For **Tunisian government stakeholders**, the findings suggest a need to rethink agricultural strategies in terms of self-sufficiency, providing small farmers with incentives, and offering more competitive pricing, thinking of alternative suppliers. Legislative and financial reforms that allow young people to start their own small businesses and to expand the private sector, as well as be more easily connected to clients and suppliers abroad, could go far to retain talent in the country.

At the **regional level**, given the current situation, Tunisian stakeholders can find much common ground with countries of origin and capitalise on South-South cooperation to ensure better migration policies for sub-Saharan communities in the country and increased awareness in countries of origin. Regional agreements between Tunisia and its neighbours will be crucial in this area for a number of reasons: adaptation to climate change requires better water management and more coordination across borders to ensure water sources are sustainably used. As recent months have proved, imports from neighbouring countries such as Algeria can prove crucial to prevent severe food shortages³³. More generally, diversifying suppliers allows to create less dependence on very few and allows for a more competitive approach.

³³ In September 2022, Tunisia faced important food shortages, including sugar which led to the temporary closure of many factories producing processed food and beverages. In order to cope with this shortage, Tunisia was able to import around 20,000 tons of sugar from neighbouring Algeria. More details in ANSA (2022, September 9). *Tunisia runs out of sugar, to import from Algeria and India*. ANSA MED News Service.

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