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Rural Dynamics and Forest Conservation in Northern Tunisia

Amor Mokhtar Gammar

Introduction

- 1 Northern Tunisia inherited from the protectorate period (1881-1956) a conflict over forest lands that sets forest conservation against population pressure in the forests and mountainous regions. The persistence of this conflict after the country's independence makes it necessary to examine rural and forest dynamics and to review the processes and changes that affect the relationship between forest lands and rural environments. This paper will first examine all links between forest and agriculture state reform policies, in particular the orientations and processes at the origin of the downgrading of the traditional small-scale peasant agriculture, whose persistent crisis explains the continuing pressure on forest lands. Then, it will focus on the original dynamics by which the peasants used to meet this crisis, and consequently resulted in changing their relationships with the forests. It is mainly about reshaping rural population density, income diversification in rural areas, and development of agriculture sectors that bring the peasants into harmony with forest conservation.

Forest and agriculture policy reforms

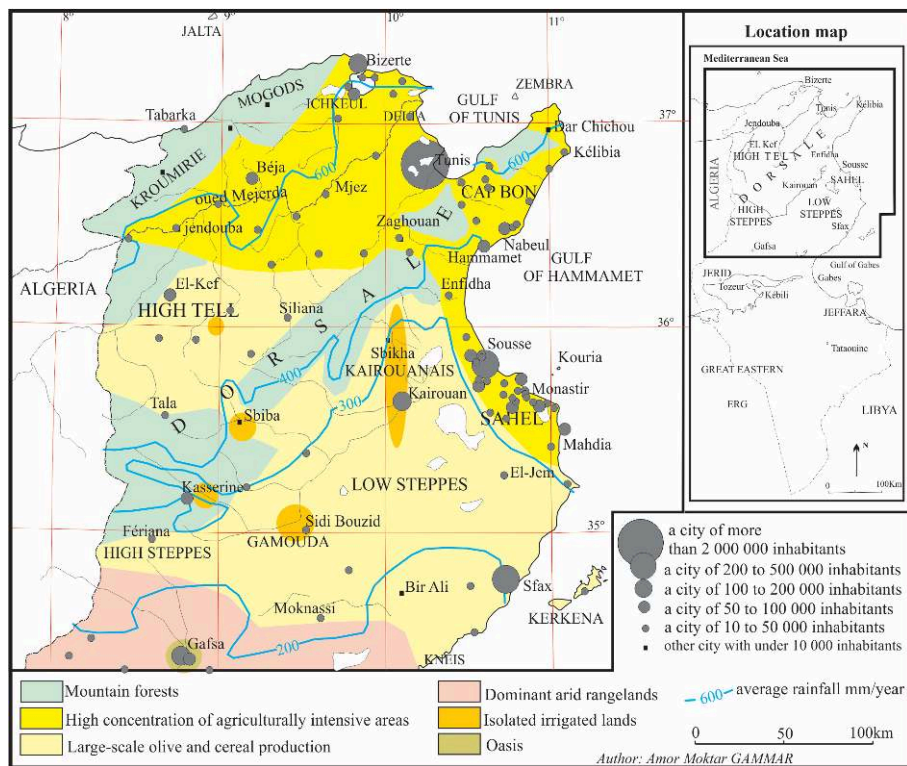
- 2 Protectorate Regime focused primarily on the development of speculative cereal farming, viticulture, and olive-growing, which are intended for export. The national regime has maintained this dynamic of speculative agriculture through its amplification and orientation towards different sectors so that to meet increasing national demands. Expansion in irrigated areas has allowed the growth of horticulture crops that have close relationships with the agri-food industry with cases of specialization in farming on a national scale. A similar development is noted in the

livestock sector, with the establishment of large barns in large farms (Kassab 1983) and enclosed breeding units for meat and egg production.

Expansion and influence of modern and intensive agriculture

- 3 The functioning of this so-called modern agriculture is based on the establishment of a powerful urban, state and capitalistic framework that guarantees capital, machinery, seeds and selected plants, chemical inputs, new techniques, insurance, and that especially deals with the collection, storage, processing and marketing of products.
- 4 Monopolies and regulatory provisions often establish the predominance of this urban framework over the production function. Many publications do explain how these urban interests take into advantage the agriculture sector benefits. Poncet (1961) and Sethom (1987a) reconstructed the processes by which large urban property was put in place at the expense of rural ones. Ben Romdhane (1981) has demonstrated how mechanization, cereal price fixing and the monopolistic market drain the superfluous quantity of grains from the North-West regions towards the cities. Sethom (1992) summarizes the facts and mechanisms of domination by the city on the countryside.
- 5 Geographically speaking, the quest for higher productivity and gains is driving management structures to focus on close large urban markets, large production basins and large-scale farming (Figure 1). Hilly regions centered on the Majerda Valley and opening onto the plains and Northeastern coastline regions is the major development area of this modern and intensive agriculture. We can add to these the least-extended isolated small islands such as the irrigated lands of Kairouan, Sidi Bouzid, Sbiba and Kasserine and new oases plantations of the Southern Tunisia. These areas are distinguished by the importance of water infrastructure, the density of farms and intensive production units, the presence of processing and storage facilities, large number of small towns, etc.
- 6 This productivist agriculture, which was at first export-oriented and then it was directed towards the satisfaction of big cities demands, practically took hold of the national market as a whole, and thus distributing products even in small towns and inner mountainous regions. For example, the whole country, up to the most remote douar, receives pasteurized milk, cheese and yoghurt from largest dairies. Tunis wholesale market redistributes the most popular fruits and vegetables from intensive farming regions to all small towns and weekly markets of northern Tunisia, and thus strongly competing with small-scale local farm products.

Figure 1. Agricultural spatial differentiation in northern and central Tunisia



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- 7 Therefore, expansion of modern agriculture occurred at the expense of the so-called traditional agriculture that is practiced by small farmers in the interior, mountainous and forest regions.

Traditional and peasant agriculture crisis

- 8 In the interior regions, small farmers, who are isolated in the mountainous regions and who own small farms of less than 10 ha, have joined the so-called modern agriculture through the development in cereal plants, and to a certain extent through olive-growing. This change has resulted in extensive agriculture that has created few job opportunities, adding to the increasing costs of renting machines and buying agricultural chemical inputs. Secure harvest marketing and stable cereal prices do not hide the erosion of real profits in the face of rising costs. Since subsistence agriculture is no longer applicable, maintaining this extensive and mechanized cereal production by small farmers has become a social, economic and ecological maladjustment.
- 9 Government support for peasant agriculture has been delayed by the failure in spreading production cooperatives (1962-1969). It was an attempt to connect the peasants to modern agriculture in large collective farms. The conditions for the success of this experiment were not met. In particular, large mechanized agriculture did not succeed in offering job opportunities and sufficient income to integrate the vast mass of peasantry and slow down rural exodus.
- 10 Without seeking agrarian structure reforms, direct government involvement in peasant agriculture has begun since the end of 1970's, with launching integrated rural

development projects in support of rural areas. Despite all the efforts made to help farmers develop plantations and small-scale irrigated farms and increase livestock production, the boosting of small-scale production in the interior mountainous and forest areas have always encountered competition from large modern and productivist agricultural basins that tightened their hold on all important agricultural sectors of the country.

- 11 For a long time, the crisis of small-scale farming has led the peasants in the mountainous and interior forest regions to overexploit forest resources through deforestation, clear-cutting and overgrazing. This rural dynamic is primarily responsible for the seriousness of the ecological crisis that is manifested by forest degradation and soil erosion on the mountain slopes that forest policies have had to face.

Forest Policies and Practices

- 12 **Forest policies** remained in the service of metropolitan, national and urban issues (Gammar *et al.*, 2016) and it has become a peasant concern since the late 1970s.
- 13 The fight against erosion and the conservation of water and soil resources have become a priority concern after 1950, which led to the construction of several large dams on which the water supply of Tunis and large irrigated lands depend. This strategic and ecological national interest was at the origin of an important reforestation with so-called protective plants, which concretized more strongly the marginalization of the resident peasants and the constraints made before their agro-silvo-pastoral activities.
- 14 Environmental motivations are reinforced by biodiversity conservation, whose adoption was materialized from 1977 by the creation of the Ministry of the environment and by the creation of national parks (whose first decree dates also from 1977), which add more restrictions on farm forestry activities.
- 15 All these motivations for forest policies refer to interests external to local populations and justify the intervention of national and international actors in the management of forest areas. Social local argument, which remained secondary in the discourse of the first foresters, is progressively imposed by the need to bring forest policies in harmony with the general economic and social development policies that have been launched since 1960 with the creation of different integrated rural development projects, which have succeeded each other since the 1970s and since the end of the Rio Conference in 1992, under the influence of international organizations which condition their support for the adoption of the objective of sustainable development for the benefit of local populations .
- 16 Thus, as early as 1960, forest administrations have initiated work sites to create employment opportunities, and that was in response to the demands of local authorities. It integrates the creation of pastoral reserves for the benefit of forest residents. Forest populations promoted the launch of non-timber forest products. Forest and mountainous regions development structures have been created and they help, among others, in the renewal of livestock, development of beekeeping, diversification of female activities, etc. Despite all these interventions, the development of pastoral and non-timber resources that are of interest to residents is still considered by forest regulations as a logical result and not a basic objective of forest management that focuses on the conservation of biodiversity, water and soil

conservation, and the increase in wood resources. On the other hand, these policies ignore the anthropised nature of the Mediterranean forest formations of northern Tunisia such as the Subera of Kroumirie, where exists the various pine forests of the Dorsal and they do not sufficiently integrate the active role of the resident farmers in the structuring of training farmers in fire-fighting (Bouju, 2016).

- 17 **Forest regulations**, which were quite extensive from the beginning of the Protectorate, are very restrictive and repressive for the activities of forest residents. It has been continuously reinforced with each revision of the Forest Code. Traditional rights over forest areas are abolished; the rights of use are limited from one text to another; the number of beneficiaries of the rights of use is reduced in the last reform of the Forest Code in 1988; forest protection is expanding and it has been strengthened with reforestation and nature reserves; The auction of forest products does not appeal to residents...
- 18 On the other hand, **the practices** of the forest administration offer great flexibility and a continuous adaptation to social constraints. At each serious crisis, practical solutions are adopted outside the regulations. The decommissioning of forest lands, measures deemed unfair by local residents, have been abandoned since the 1927 Jebel Mansour affair (Poncet, 1961); also since the Kessra affair in 1958, there have been no more mass forced evictions of residents, who settled in forest requisitions (Directorate of Forestry, 1973-74); prohibition against goat breeding in the northern governorates was definitively abolished in 1967; in a good part of the forest domain, rangelands have become free of those practices (Gammar, 2010), etc. Part of these practices of reconciliation between the peasants and forests are at odds with regulations, which remained rigid and lagging behind this *modus vivendi* result of interactions between residents, authorities and forest management.
- 19 This discrepancy between the severe forest regulations and the flexible practices of the forest authorities does not put an end to the conflict around the forest lands, since the interventions of the local residents are placed in the informal or even in the unlawfulness that is more or less tolerated. This situation shows that the State and the Forestry Administration have remained faithful to the colonial origins of forest conservation that do not conceive an active role for local populations in forest management (Gardin, 2004 and 2016).
- 20 It was necessary to wait until 2019 to see the Ministry of Agriculture initiate contracts with resident farmers who give them responsibilities in forest exploitation and conservation (Project of integrated management of the forest landscapes in the least developed regions of the Northwest and the Centre). In case of success and generalization, these contracts will constitute a radical shift in forest policy. The launch of these contracts responds to the needs of the 2010/11 revolution that highlight better access of people to natural resources at the local and regional levels. It also takes advantage of the impact of recent rural dynamics on the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the small peasants of the mountainous and forest regions.

Recent changes in the rural environment of forest areas

- 21 Through the decades, the cumulative effects of various slow dynamics have profoundly reshaped the characteristics of the countryside and peasants, who are in contact with forest areas. If the dynamics that are characteristic of the 20th century are well analyzed in the works that have already been mentioned, the most recent peasant dynamics can only be approached in this article from examples studied and works in progress, with placing much importance on examples from the Central Dorsal, which we followed personally and which are the subject of a collective work that is sent to print, and that is prepared as part of the MedInnLocal research project.

Demographic balance

- 22 The last two censuses of the population (2004 and 2014) indicate a general downward trend in the population in northwestern Tunisia since the end of the 20th century, which spares only the chief towns of the governorates and some fairly small dynamic centers (Table 1).

Table 1. Population evolution in few delegations of Siliana governorate from one census to another (The names of the Central Dorsal delegations are in italic; the numbers indicating a decrease in the numbers are in bold)

Delegation	1975	1984	1994	2004	2014
Siliana N	40385	48622	31764	26102	28907
<i>Siliana S</i>			25370	29286	30233
<i>Makthar</i>	39504	29067	32500	31139	29052
<i>Kessra</i>		16909	18788	17763	16404
<i>Robaa</i>	14307	14755	15899	13823	12482

Sources: Census data for 1975, 1984, 1994, 2004 and 2014

- 23 This population decline is older in the countryside and can be perceived from the census of 1995. It becomes difficult to evoke a context of general aggravation of overpopulation of the countryside in the mountainous and forest regions of northern Tunisia (Auclair 2006). While some sectors still have slower population growth, others, which are becoming more and more numerous, have a population that is stagnant or sharply declining. For some administrative divisions of Central Dorsal, rural densities quickly fell to the rates noted around 1921, that is before the population explosion, and thus realizing a real rebalancing of rural densities (Sidi Hmada, Ain Boussaadia, Sfina).
- 24 This development is the result of a combination of the early fertility decline that characterizes the north-west of Tunisia (Sethom, 1987b) and an intense rural exodus to the largest cities of eastern Tunisia and the main regional administrative centers such as the small towns of Siliana, Bargou, Oueslatia and Makthar of the Central Dorsal.

These departures virtually affected all educated youth who automatically found stable jobs in the cities.

- 25 However, this outflow of educated youth has been thwarted since three decades by increasing unemployment of graduates in the country. Without breaking completely with the city, some of the graduates return to the countryside and small inner cities after finishing their studies and experiencing a professional career that does not guarantee stable jobs in the big cities.

Mobility, pluriactivity and relations with the city

- 26 The diversification and consolidation of relations between mountainous and forest areas and big cities are now facilitated by the densification of the road network, the promotion of schooling and the constitution of important urban diasporas resulting from nearly a century of massive emigration of rural people.
- 27 Remarkable examples show that in the mountainous and forest areas of the North, family networks that are widely distributed in cities and abroad develop a variety of activities and solidarities that contribute to the maintenance of farms and inherited heritage and attract investment. In Sodga (Bargou delegation), the intensification of farms through irrigation from public wells is based on income from the pluriactivity and the diaspora and involves emigrants according to different forms of family associations. In Sidi Hmada (South Siliana Delegation), a small town in the Central Dorsal, diaspora members, mainly active or retired civil servants, come back every summer for long holiday resorts and invest in holiday homes (Gammar *et al.*, 2019). In Dhibet (El-Ala delegation) located between Kessra and Kairouan, local residents rely on parents settled in the cities to specialize in the collection and resale of used clothing and scrap metals (Dhehbi, 2019).
- 28 The mobility that drives the mountainous and forest residents is partly generated by cities. This is the case of the return movements of members of the diaspora to their home country for relaxation or retirement. This is also the case for domestic tourism from the big cities, whose populations ask mountains and forests for spaces to satisfy their desire to relax and encounter nature and their rural origins. This encounter resulted in bringing to light tourist sites that attract investment (Ain Boussaadia, Kessra, Douga) and eventually orient some rural people to tourism activity (Gammar *et al.*, 2019).
- 29 These facilitated relations with the city mean that a large proportion of rural dwellers have gone through city trips for study and for various jobs and practice spatial and professional mobility in a continuous relationship with the city. In many cases agriculture is no longer the primary source of income. It is preceded by administrative jobs and resources from the city as noted in Table 5 for the three *Imadas* (local administrative units): Ain Boussaadia, Sidi Hmada and Dhibet.

Table 2. Primary source of income for heads of households in three rural Imadas in the Central Dorsal (%)

Activities Imada	Ain Boussaadia	Sidi Hmada	Dhibet
agricultural activities	29	4	9

temporary workers (forest, building, agriculture)	20	30	23
employees in the administration	44	51	6
commerce and other services	7	15	62
Total	100	100	100

Sources : Swaihi ,2016 ; Gammar et al., 2018 and Dhehbi, 2018.

- 30 In Soughas on the western side of the Central Dorsal, peasants still attached to pastoralism, engage in new activities such as fattening animals, beekeeping and non-agricultural activities which in the majority of douars become the first source of income (Abdallah, 2015).
- 31 We no longer find the uneducated peasant mass that Fremont (1969) has noticed in villages and douars, engaged in poor subsistence farming, suffering from substantial underemployment and resigned to migration or waiting for their turn to work a few days in the construction sites that were meant to fight unemployment. An educated population emerges instead. It is very mobile and follows trajectories from cities to towns and from rurality and urbanity.
- 32 A modification of the living conditions accompanies this evolution of the characteristics of the rural populations. The gourbis disappeared gradually and they were replaced by reinforced concrete and brick constructions. Domestic equipment, even imperfect ones, is more and more inflicting people with the burden of using water resources and energy wood and timber. The highly advanced monetarization of daily life has freed up the exploitation of the necessities of self-consumption, including the regular practice of cereal farming. Benefiting from the help of various organizations and small development projects, small farms extended their olive-growing activities, and they introduced small-scale irrigation and livestock.
- 33 These are changes that have been progressively made in the life styles and cropping systems that reduced peasants use of forests to seek new croplands and satisfy vital needs (wood energy). Combined with the developments undertaken by the forestry administration, the reduction in pressure on forest areas, which are linked to these transformations in the lives of farmers, explains the slowdown in the decline of the vegetation cover and successful conservation and restoration of forest formations that several diachronic studies highlight (Gammar and Ben Rhouma, 2010, Swayhi, 2016). The links between small farms and forest areas also evolve in the same direction because of the renewed dynamism of peasant agro-forestry sectors.

Renewal of farmers' sectors

- 34 Among the sectors that retain a certain peasant vocation, as still unattractive to conventional productivist agriculture, we will quickly evoke the examples of fig-tree farming and agro-sylvo-pastoral activities, such as pastoral farming, beekeeping and the exploitation of non-timber forest products like the seeds of the Aleppo pine.

- 35 Growing figs that are most profitable in the market of fresh and dried fruits requires a large workforce for the daily picking and drying of fruits. The management structures of modern agriculture do neither provide selected and improved varieties of figs, nor mechanization, treatment, and fertilization procedures. This agriculture activity remains a small-scale traditional production. Small-scale water supply is at the origin of the revival of this traditional production in the Norwest of the country. In Kessra, in the Central Dorsal, new plantations have been created using water resources released from hillside dams that were created after 1980. In Jebba, on the northern slopes of Jebel Goraa, the spectacular revival of the growth of figs benefits from the management after the year 2000 of catchments of waters from sources and *sequias* and the distribution of water towards the plantations (Abaza, 2019, Gammar *et al.*, 2019). In both cases, local peasants have also found varieties and techniques that are adapted to the climate and to the unstable flows of water and they developed marketing towards the market of Tunis. Taking full advantage of the diverse local development organizations, the peasants in Jebba adopted a certification label of geographical origin that strengthens their position on the market.
- 36 Livestock farming is continuing despite episodes of strong hostility on the part of the forest administration and despite the development of modern livestock farming. This specifically peasant farming activity benefits from the important informal part in the red meat industry, which is beyond the control of the major stakeholders and which is intended to meet the local needs of the population and to raise sheep for *Eid el Kebir*, Muslim festival of sacrifice. The vitality of this pastoral livestock is also based on the adaptations made by the farmers. Taking advantage of the introduction of supplementation based on subsidized products, small farmers associate themselves with livestock grazing and fattening at the barn, thus ensuring a better share of the added value of the activity (Abdallah, 2007). Herd mobility is decreasing, and pastoral pressure, which remains strong around habitations, tends to refrain from distant slopes and classified forest areas where there is a clear renewed logging activity (Abdallah, 2007)
- 37 Peasant beekeeping that was completely ruined in the middle of the 20th century has been reborn after 1980 with the help of the state and development agencies. This activity adopts wooden hives and it is of interest to two categories of producers. On the one hand, farmers, who are traditionally oriented towards the production of honey, including forest communities such as douar Ouled Zouabi or peasants of the Bargou Valley in the Central Dorsal; and on the other hand, young graduates who are initiated to beekeeping programmes and develop their beehives in parallel with other professional activities in the city, before devoting themselves to beekeeping in several cases (Abdallah 2016, Ben Haj Jilani, 2008, Hammouda 2013). The marketing of the production is done mainly directly to the consumer according to relational networks and often goes through the diaspora in the cities. Current conditions in the national honey market encourage the expansion of beekeeping and protect smallholder farmers from the competition of major producers and importers (Khémiri, 2006). The affirmation of the quality and specificity of honeys from forest trails, which is currently very raw, is another perspective of protection for peasant beekeeping.
- 38 Examples of the development of the collection of non-wood products by farmers are numerous and varied and relate to carobs, lentisk fruits, rosemary, capers, mushrooms, thistles, snails, pine nuts, etc. The process of harvesting and marketing the seeds of the

Aleppo pine, called *zgougou* and used in the traditional pastry prepared on the occasion of the *Mouled* festival of commemoration of the birth of the prophet Mohammed, was built up throughout the second half of the 20th century thanks to the growing demand in the cities, the intervention of the forest administration in the protection and extension of pine forests and the specialization of small peasant groups in the Central dorsal in this activity. Empirically and entirely within the framework of the traditional economy, these farmers have selected the techniques adapted to the harvesting of Aleppo pine cones and to the extraction of seeds and they have created production relations among themselves, thus allowing them to access forest plots auctioned by the forest administration, and cope with the lifestyle that this activity requires from them, including travel and extended stays in winter in various forest areas of the country. This is a unique case where silviculture becomes the main activity of a rural community, resulting in a particular kind of life, whose development can serve as a basis for the management and conservation of Aleppo pine forests (Ayari, 2019).

Conclusion

- 39 The most recent rural dynamics that bring the peasants of the 21st century to the fore have a decisive impact on the success of forest management and the conservation of the vegetation cover. The reduction of rural densities in forest and mountainous regions, along with the improvement in small farmers' income that is related to the pluriactivity and the development of specific sectors should contribute to the alleviation of the peasant pressure on the forest lands. These farming sectors also involve new relationships between farmers' activities and forest areas. It is a perspective that should contribute to reduce the tension around the forest lands. This conflict is considered along with the demographic pressure as a major factor for the degradation of the vegetal cover by peasant farmers. The resurgence of forest fires after the 2010/11 revolution is also reminiscent of the fact that this conflict around forest land remains alive and episodically generating significant degradations and clearings. This highlights the urgent need to act for the consolidation, the structuring and the protection of the peasant economic sectors and the revision of the forest policies in the sense of the recognition of peasant objectives and their integration at the basis of the conceptualization of forest management.

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ABSTRACTS

This paper will first examine the causes of the ongoing forest crisis that was inherited from the French protectorate and that is associated with the agricultural and forest policies followed by the Tunisian government. Strict forest regulations have failed to contain increased population pressure on forest lands. This is mainly due to the crisis of traditional agriculture that has been undermined by large and modern production-driven exploitation of large basins, which is promoted by the agricultural policies of the state and supported by a powerful urban framework. Then, this article will show how, in recent decades, the multiplicity of original rural dynamics tends to give new clear-cut characteristics to the rural populations and their territories in the mountain forests. In particular, it focuses on issues like the reshaping of rural communities, diversification of peasants' income generation activities, and the dynamism of certain peasant economy. These sufficiently advanced changes are lightening the pressure of the population on the forest lands, and they especially modify Man-vegetation relationships, towards the reconciliation between the peasants and the forests. They therefore call for a re-thinking of forest policies to clearly integrate resident peasants into forest management and development.

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Keywords: peasantry, Mediterranean forest, Tunisia, forest policies, forest conservation.

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