

Tunisians and their affiliation to the Mediterranean region

Dalenda LARGUECHE

Dalenda Largueche analyses the perceptions of the Tunisians to the Mediterranean space, the impact of cross-cultural encounters and the population's response to the measures and actions that enable people to live together in multi-cultural environments. She explores their perception of the expected outcomes of the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation and investigates both the current perceptions and the evolution of these perceptions overtime since the Anna Lindh Report 2012. From the data, Tunisians register higher levels of openness than the majority of SEM and Europeans.

A principle of good neighbourhood relationships implies sharing a set of values. The main value is the one granted to this shared area, and in which the neighbourly relation takes place: the Mediterranean region. The cradle of a certain civilisation, the Mediterranean region has always been an area for sharing and meeting, divided by a border.

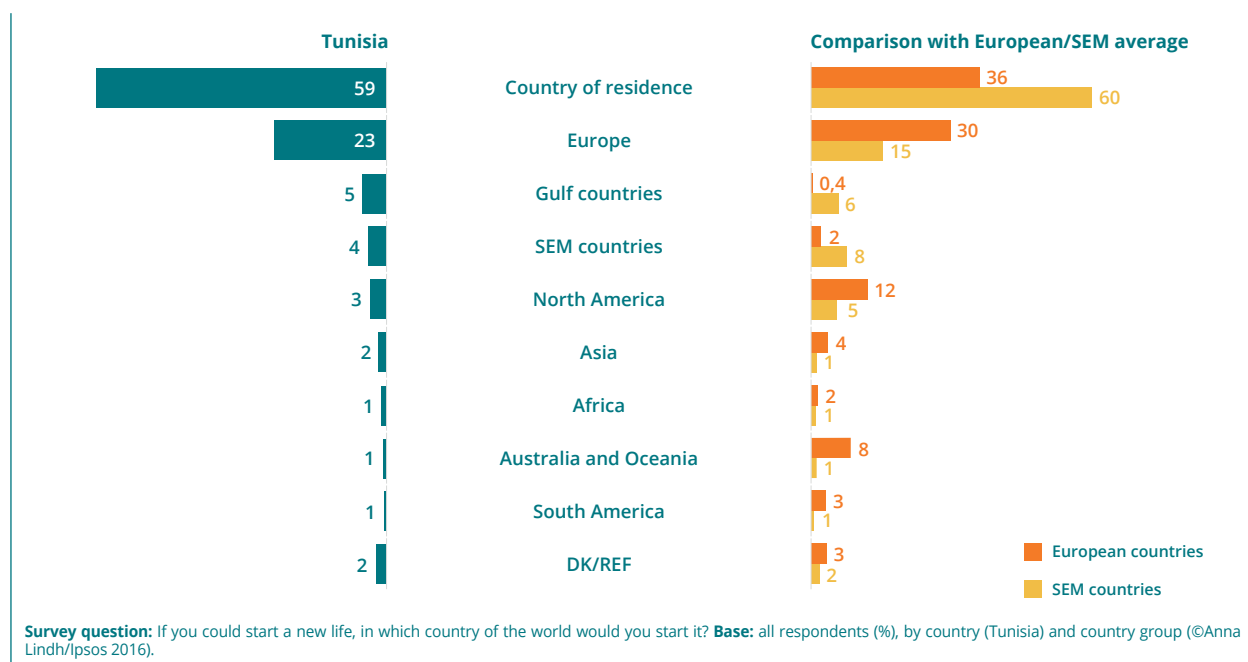
The symbolic importance accorded to this area by the inhabitants on both sides of the Mediterranean is an indicator of how a people can be open to trans-state citizenship and a citizenship of sharing. To what extent is the Tunisian open to multi-culturalism? The data from the Survey on Tunisian openness are significant.

The Mediterranean area is mainly perceived as a hospitable place: in 2016 85% of Tunisians see it

as such, a slight decline compared to 2012 (90%). This decline could stem from problems linked to illegal immigration and the expulsion of immigrants.

A decline can also be seen in the way the Mediterranean is perceived as a region with a common cultural and historical tradition (from 86% in 2012 to 79% in 2016), which could be explained by the rise of Islamism, and the attempt to reshape the basic Tunisian personality around the idea of a new form of Arab and Islamic consciousness. This is a point which is confirmed by answers to the question on the values of education, where 60% of Tunisians consider that religious beliefs and practices are fundamental in children's education compared to 9% in Europe. It should be pointed out that the Tunisian constituent assembly, in 2013 an Islamist

Chart 21.1 Preferred place to start a new life for Tunisians



majority, refused to include as a basic determining factor of Tunisia that it is an inherent part of the Mediterranean region. That ideological instruction goes against the historical and cultural Tunisian personality, which is profoundly Mediterranean.

There is also a significant change in attitude among Tunisians regarding the link between the Mediterranean region as a source of conflict (73% in 2012 vs 62% in 2016) on the one hand, and the resilience to change on the other (77% in 2012 vs 62% in 2016). This can be interpreted as a gain of confidence in the policy of the Northern Mediterranean countries towards Tunisia throughout the transitional period.

As a migratory people, Tunisians are more attached to their country of residence than are Europeans, 59% to 36% – a phenomenon which can be linked to the history of European mobility in the colonial empires, reinforced by the birth of the EU as an experience in de-territorialised citizenship (Chart 21.1). However, Tunisians, just as much as the SEM populations, immediately think of Europe when it comes to choosing another potential country of residence, rather than the Gulf States, notwithstanding the fact that they are Muslim countries associated with wealth, or North America, or any other region. This is further proof that the Mediterranean region is a unified through culture rather than religion.

The impact of multi-cultural encounters on how the Other is seen

Although 75 % of the Tunisian respondents have a relation or friend in Europe, only 37% of them have spoken to or met a European over the last 12 months.

This is a decline compared to 2012, which can be explained by the post-revolutionary situation, terrorist threats, less tourists and the reduction in European investments due to the context of crisis. Thus, business interactions have gone from 31% in 2012 to 15% in 2016, and encounters in streets and public spaces from 18% to 9% over the same period in the same way as interactions via social media from 32% to 23%. However, virtual interactions head the list of the way of encountering the other in 2016.

19% of Tunisians respondents said that encounters with Europeans led to a positive change of opinion compared to 15% of Europeans and 17% of SEM inhabitants. Not to remain trapped in preconceived ideas about others, changing opinions more positively, is a sign of open-mindedness, and Tunisians are more open-minded than Europeans and the inhabitants of the SEM countries. Moreover, only 1% of Tunisians interviewed said they were not interested in encounters, while 35% considered that there are no barriers to multi-culturalism. Cultural barriers hardly count for Tunisians (12%), whereas they count for 38% of Europeans and 25% for inhabitants from the SEM countries. Language barriers are important for 57% of Europeans, but are limited to 38% of Tunisians and 39% of participants from the SEM countries.

Nevertheless, attitudes towards diversity are more contradictory, since on the one hand, comparing the responses in 2016 to those of 2012, there is a rise in the number of those who consider cultural and religious diversity as a threat to social stability (54% of Tunisians participants, and as many from the SEM, compared to 39% in 2012). Also, 60% think that beliefs and religious practices are part of fundamental educational values and that religion is a factor of unity for society.

Chart 21.2 Perceptions about religious and cultural diversity in Tunisia

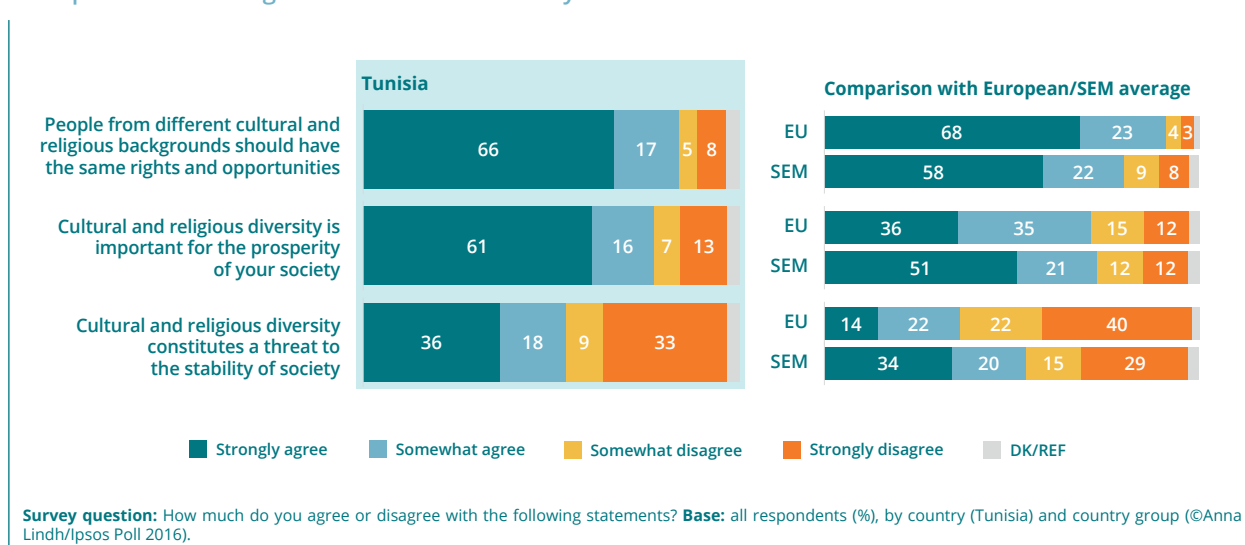
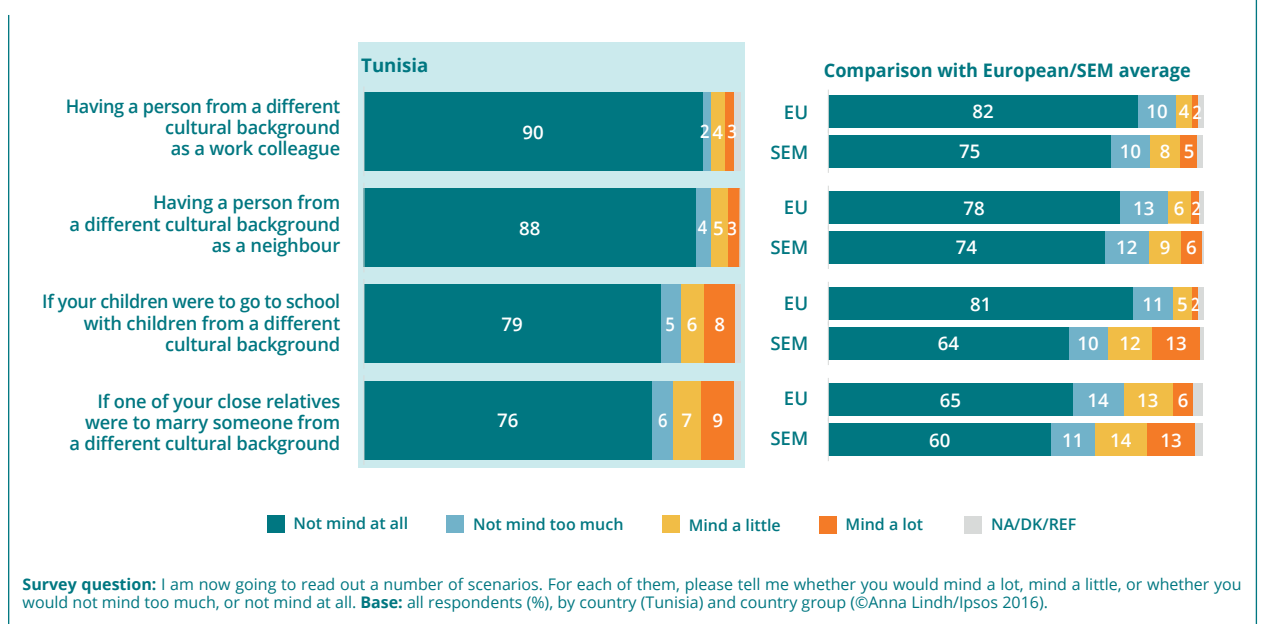


Chart 21.3 Tunisian tolerance towards people with a different cultural background



On the other hand, 77% of Tunisian participants, 72% of SEM participants and 82% of Europeans consider that diversity is important for the prosperity of society (Chart 21.2). It must be admitted that Tunisians have not yet solved the problem of the secularity of citizenship guaranteed by the constitution of 2014. And yet, beyond this general consideration, the way the level has progressed could be more linked to the openness of the media sector as well as freedom of speech because Tunisians have learned they can speak safely on any subject, including religion.

It must be noted that independently from the current state of affairs, on the strict question of religion, Tunisians remain strongly attached to the homogeneity of dogma, the absence of confessional divisions, within so-called Tunisian Islam. Paradoxically, this conviction which is firmly anchored in Tunisian psyche has served as an ideological bulwark against radicalisation of any kind. Homogeneity is seen as an absolute value to the point of considering that any infringement of that religious unity is a threat to its 'Tunisianity', and to the stability and cohesion of society in its entirety.

The rate of Tunisians linking cultural and religious diversity to threats to society is also contradictory with the rate of those who accept work colleagues or neighbours from a different cultural environment (92%), or who have no objection to their children mixing with, or even marrying people from a different environment (84% and 82%). These levels, nearer to those of the Europeans (92%, 92%, 79%) than those of SEM countries (87%, 74%, 71%) indicate that there are more similarities than differences between Tunisians and the inhabitants of the North and South Mediterranean (Chart 21.3).

When it comes to the system of values, there is an evolution in Tunisian society. Although it can be noticed that for an individual the place of independence is inversely proportional to that of obedience (39% for Tunisians compared to 43% for SEM countries and 20% for Europeans), and a minor place is granted to curiosity (4%) in educational values – more openness can be seen in that education in family solidarity has declined from 59% in 2012 to 46% in 2016, nearer to the European level (49%) and that teaching about others as an educational value has risen from 25% in 2012 to 34% in 2016, setting Tunisia apart from the other SEM countries.

Euro-Mediterranean cooperation should aim at reforms in school and include education about universal values and empowerment of each individual.

A Euro-Mediterranean consensus for successful living together

To the North, South and East of the Mediterranean region, the consensus is that it is necessary to found multi-culturalism through education and in schools, with 90% of Tunisians and 89% of Europeans agreeing on the matter.

Furthermore, promoting the organisation of multi-cultural events, enabling the expression of cultural diversity in public spaces, and incorporating cultural diversity in the work place, are methods Tunisians favour for making multi-cultural living together an easier process (87%, 85% and 81%). As a country open to culture and festivity, Tunisia ratifies its membership in the SEM cultural zone, while at the same time standing

out as being more tolerant than Europe or the SEM countries as far as using the expression of cultural diversity in public spaces is concerned (85% compared to 67% and 80%).

Equally exposed to the risks of radicalisation and conflicts, both Tunisians and the inhabitants of the SEM countries express substantially the same priorities and advocate the same solution: encouraging young people to take part in public life (89%); education and youth programmes (88%); cultural and artistic initiatives (87%); exchange programmes engaging young people from the Mediterranean zone (84%); multi-cultural dialogue training for the media (83%); interreligious dialogue (81%); and training in diversity management and the prevention of radicalisation (72%).

Advocating media training in multi-cultural dialogue (83% / 69%) and in interreligious dialogue (81% / 69%) as measures to be taken to prevent radicalisation and conflict, shows an awareness among SEM inhabitants in general and Tunisians in particular, of the role played by the media and by religious propaganda in what is known as the Arab Spring, and in the radicalisation of young people and conflicts. It gives an indication of a neighbourhood policy for peace and security around the Mediterranean basin.

The suspicion under which the media fall in Tunisia and the SEM countries must be emphasised: 44% and 38% do not use the media to form an opinion about what is happening around them or in the world. In the case of Tunisia, these results can be explained by decades of absence of freedom of speech and the press harnessed to the directives of the ruling power. 21% of Tunisians and 26% of SEM inhabitants think that the image they have of others has been changed negatively because of the media, while the proportion of Tunisians who believe that the media positively changed their image of the peoples of Europe and the Southern Mediterranean region is only 17%.

The advantages of inter-Mediterranean cooperation

What can a European neighbourhood policy do for the region on the Southern Mediterranean shore? First and foremost, entrepreneurship, innovation and youth employment for 91% of Tunisians. Education and training come in second place and a common approach to environmental problems in third. Following these advantages are expectations of respect for cultural diversity and the prevention of extremism, a policy of gender equality, individual freedoms and the rule of law. Although quite significant, the issue of responsiveness towards refugees comes next to the last for Tunisians and the SEM inhabitants, just before support for civil society and NGO's (73% and 69%).

Tunisian expectations from Euro-Mediterranean cooperation remain stable from 2012 to 2016, just a change in priorities can be seen. Thus, cultural diversity and the prevention of extremism, ranked in 2012 as the first expectation (90%), is relegated in 2016 to third place (84%), leaving the first place to entrepreneurship, innovation and youth employment (91%) – the fear of extremism having given way to the fear of an economic crisis which would overcome the State explains this desire for cooperation with Europe. In 2016, environmental sustainability also comes before cultural diversity and prevention of extremism, although it maintains the same level of priority as in 2012 (87%), while the issue of gender equality, individual freedoms, and the rule of law remains stable (82%, 83%). These expectations of Tunisians, recorded four years apart, show very little variation either in their expectations or in the other groups of questions treated in the Survey. This justifies a cultural affiliation which can serve as a basis for a common Euro-Mediterranean neighbourhood policy.

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