

# Tunisians divided on international trade, wary of Western influence

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 1160 | Baba Adou**

## Summary

Classified by the World Bank (2025) as a lower-middle-income country, Tunisia occupies a strategic location on the Mediterranean coast of North Africa and boasts a diversified economy rooted in agriculture, light manufacturing, retail, and tourism. International trade plays a central role in Tunisia's development strategy. The European Union (EU) is by far Tunisia's largest trade partner, accounting for nearly 60% of its trade (International Trade Administration, 2024). About two-thirds (67.2%) of Tunisian exports go to EU markets, while 45% of its imports originate from the EU (European Commission, 2025).

Tunisia also maintains a range of regional and continental trade agreements. These include the 2004 Agadir Agreement with Egypt, Morocco, and Jordan and bilateral free-trade agreements with Algeria and Libya. In 2019, Tunisia ratified its accession to the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) (Kebe, 2018) after ratifying the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement the year before (International Trade Administration, 2024).

Tunisia is a founding member of the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), established in 1989 to promote regional integration with Morocco, Algeria, Libya, and Mauritania (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2016). However, the AMU's operations have long been stalled due to geopolitical tensions, particularly the rivalry between Algeria and Morocco over the status of Western Sahara (Boukhars, 2018).

In an effort to revive regional cooperation beyond the AMU framework, Tunisia hosted a "first advisory meeting" in April 2024 with Algerian and Libyan leaders in Tunis. According to Tunisian officials, this initiative aims to foster not only political dialogue but also enhanced social and economic collaboration among the three countries (VOA Africa, 2024).

How do Tunisians view their economic and political relations with the rest of the world?

Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey show that views on free trade are divided, with a substantial minority favouring limitations on international trade to protect Tunisian businesses. Very few citizens are aware of the AfCFTA.

Assessments of the economic and political influence of China, the AMU, the African Union (AU), and Russia are more positive than negative, but majorities reject the influence of the United States and France.

Majorities believe that the AU and the AMU take Tunisia's needs and interests into account in their decision making, but citizens overwhelmingly say African countries need a greater say in international bodies like the United Nations.

## Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life.

Ten survey rounds in up to 45 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 10 surveys (2024/2025) cover 38 countries. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

In Tunisia, the Afrobarometer team, led by One to One for Research and Polling, interviewed 1,200 adult Tunisians in March 2024. A sample of this size yields national results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Tunisia in 2013, 2015, 2018, 2020, and 2022.

## Key findings

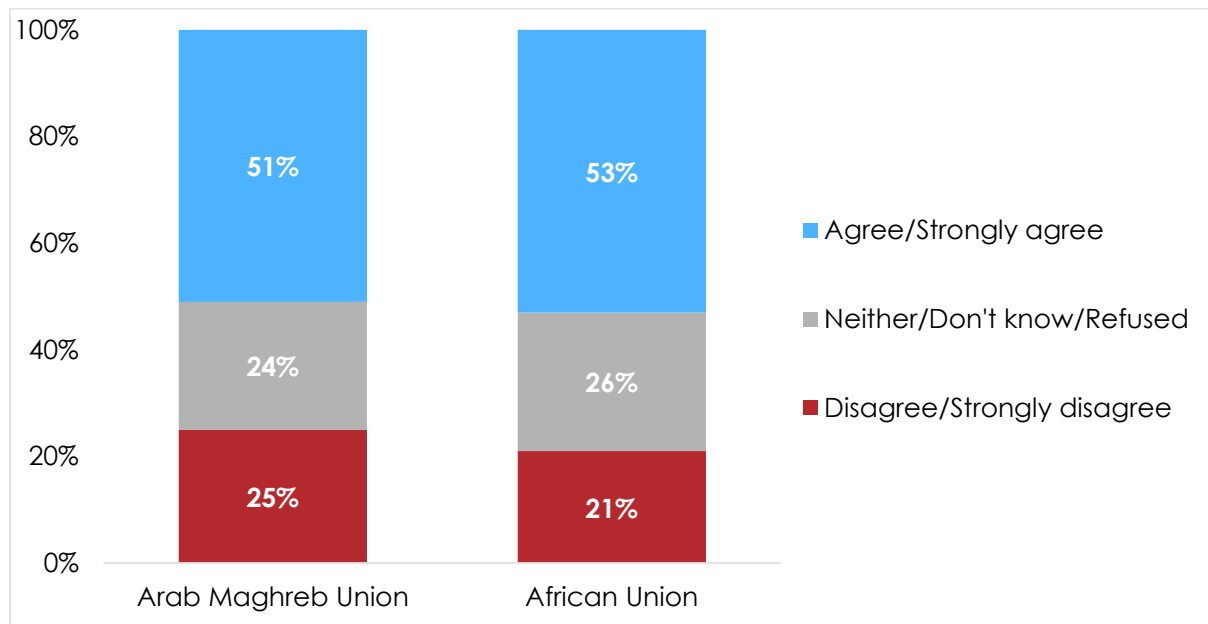
- Slim majorities of Tunisians say they are satisfied with the way the AMU (51%) and the AU (53%) recognise their country's needs and interests in their decision making.
  - But more than eight in 10 (82%) say African countries should have a greater say in international decision-making bodies like the United Nations.
- A modest majority (54%) of citizens prefer free trade over limiting international trade to protect domestic producers.
  - If the government decided to make international trade easier, nearly three-fourths (72%) of Tunisians would favour open trade with countries around the world, while fewer would prioritise trade with African countries (15%) or with countries in the AMU (7%).
- Only 5% of Tunisians say they have heard of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).
- Asked to assess the economic and political influence of various foreign powers on their country, Tunisians are more welcoming than critical of the influence of China, the AMU, the AU, and Russia. But Western powers fare far worse: Only about one in 10 respondents welcome the influence of the United States (11%) and France (12%).
- Asked who helped Tunisia most during the COVID-19 pandemic, respondents most frequently cite China (34%), followed by Europe (17%) and the United States (7%).
- The proportion of citizens who say China's economic activities have "some" or "a lot" of influence on Tunisia's economy declined by 15 points between 2015 and 2024, to 59%.
- Among the 88% of Tunisians who are aware of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, about two-thirds (65%) favour taking a neutral stance in the war.

## Africa's voice in global affairs

Tunisians express mixed views regarding their country's voice in international affairs. A slim majority (51%) say Tunisia's needs and interests are well represented in decisions made by the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), while 25% disagree and 24% don't offer an opinion (Figure 1). A similar proportion (53%) express confidence that the African Union (AU) takes Tunisia's interests into account.

However, when it comes to global decision making, most Tunisians perceive under-representation: More than eight in 10 (82%) say African countries should have a greater voice in international institutions such as the United Nations, including 57% who "strongly agree" with this position (Figure 2).

**Figure 1: Recognition of Tunisia's interests in continental affairs | Tunisia | 2024**

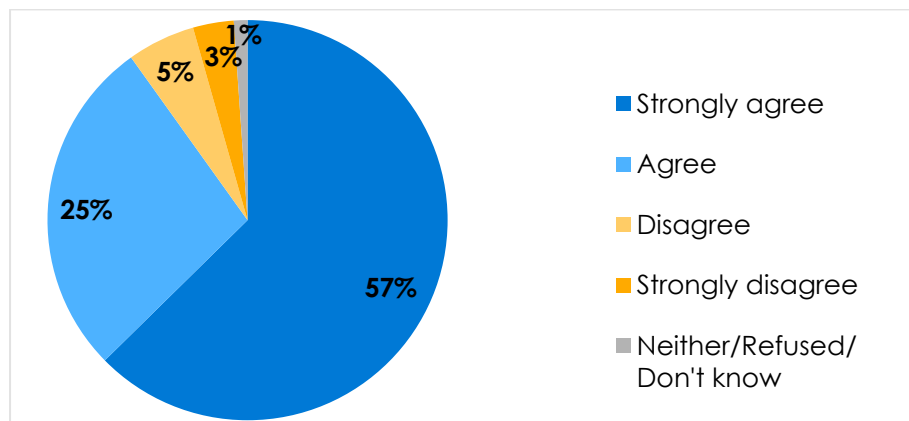


**Respondents were asked:** Do you agree or disagree with the following statements, or haven't you heard enough to say:

The needs and interests of Tunisia are adequately recognised in the decisions of the Arab Maghreb Union or AMU?

The needs and interests of Tunisia are adequately recognised by the African Union when it is making decisions for the African continent?

**Figure 2: Should African countries have more say in international bodies such as the United Nations? | Tunisia | 2024**



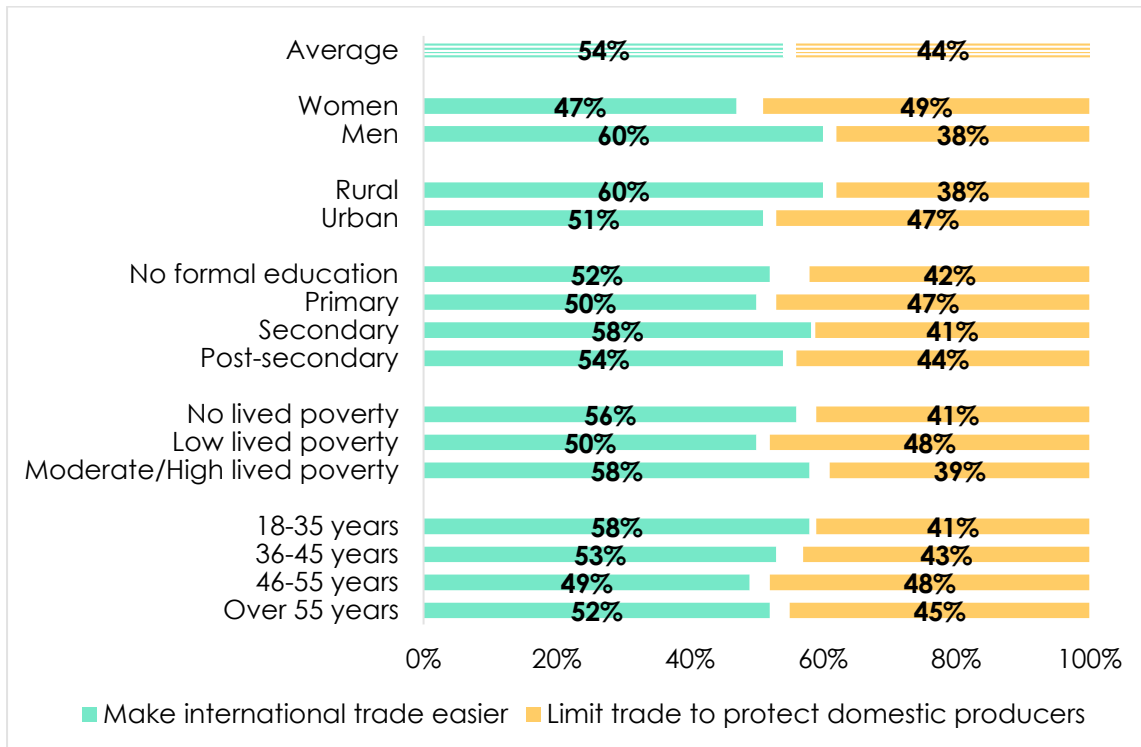
**Respondents were asked:** Do you agree or disagree with the following statement, or haven't you heard enough to say: African countries should be given greater influence in the decision making of international bodies like the United Nations?

### Trade with other countries

Tunisians are divided in their views on free trade. A modest majority (54%) say the government should promote economic growth by making international trade easier, while 44% prefer limiting trade to protect domestic producers (Figure 3).

Support for open trade is stronger among men (60%), rural residents (60%), and youth (58%) than among women (47%), urbanites (51%), and older cohorts (49%-53%).

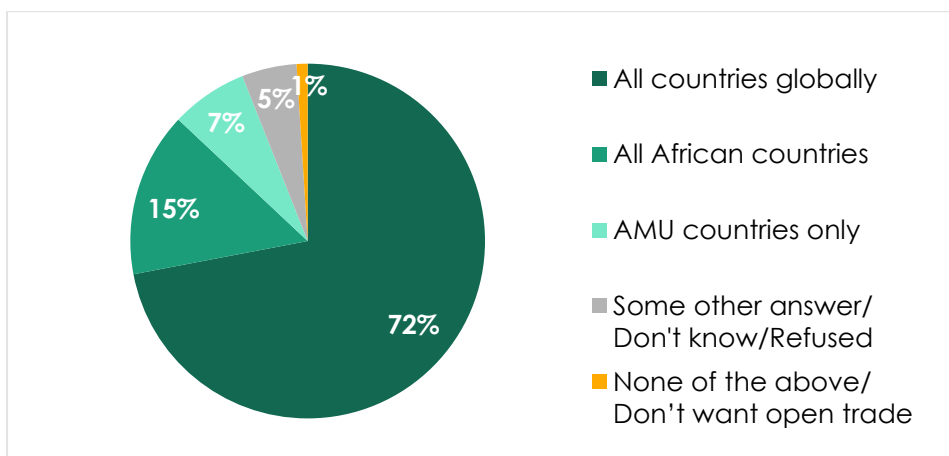
**Figure 3: Open trade or limit trade? | by demographic group | Tunisia | 2024**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?  
 Statement 1: It is better for our economy if the government makes it easier for Tunisia to trade with other countries to create economic opportunities.  
 Statement 2: Our country should limit trade with other countries in order to protect Tunisia producers.

If the government decided to make international trade easier, more than seven in 10 citizens (72%) would favour open trade with all countries globally, rather than restricting it to specific regions (Figure 4). About one in seven (15%) would prioritise trade with African countries, while 7% would prefer focusing on countries in the AMU region.

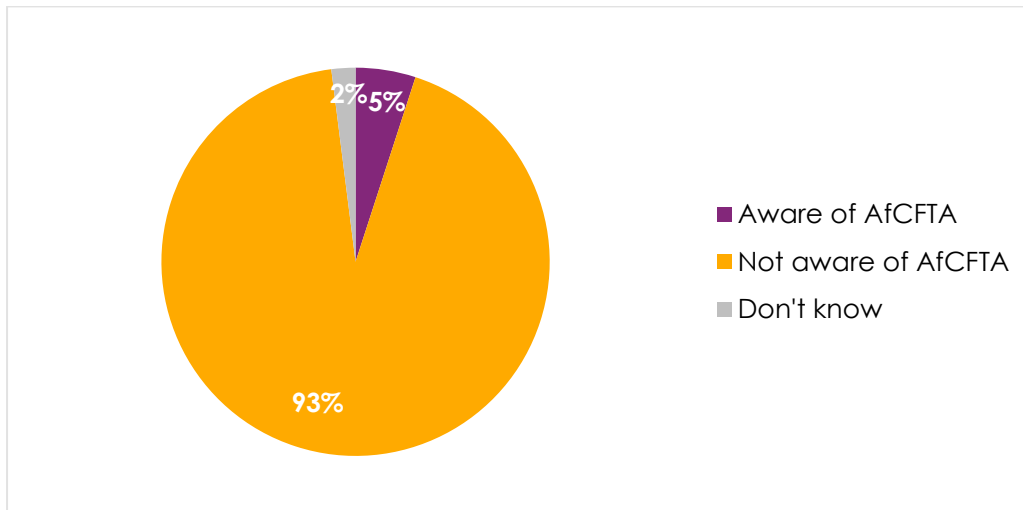
**Figure 4: Which countries should leaders make it easier to trade with? | Tunisia | 2024**



**Respondents were asked:** If Tunisia's leaders are going to make it easier to trade with other countries to create economic opportunities, which countries should they make it easier to trade with?

While a majority of Tunisians favour open trade, most are unaware of a key initiative their government supports to promote it. Only 5% of respondents say they have heard of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), while an overwhelming 93% are unfamiliar with this initiative aimed at creating a single African market for goods and services (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Awareness of the AfCFTA | Tunisia | 2024**



**Respondents were asked:** Have you heard about the African Continental Free Trade Area, also known as AfCFTA?

### Influence of external actors

Tunisians hold widely varying views on the economic and political influence of foreign powers and international institutions on their country (Figure 6). Favourable ratings (“somewhat positive” or “very positive”) outnumber negative assessments by about 2 to 1 for China (43% vs. 22%) and the AMU (41% vs. 17%).

Positives also exceed negatives for the AU (31% vs. 18%) and Russia (30% vs. 23%).

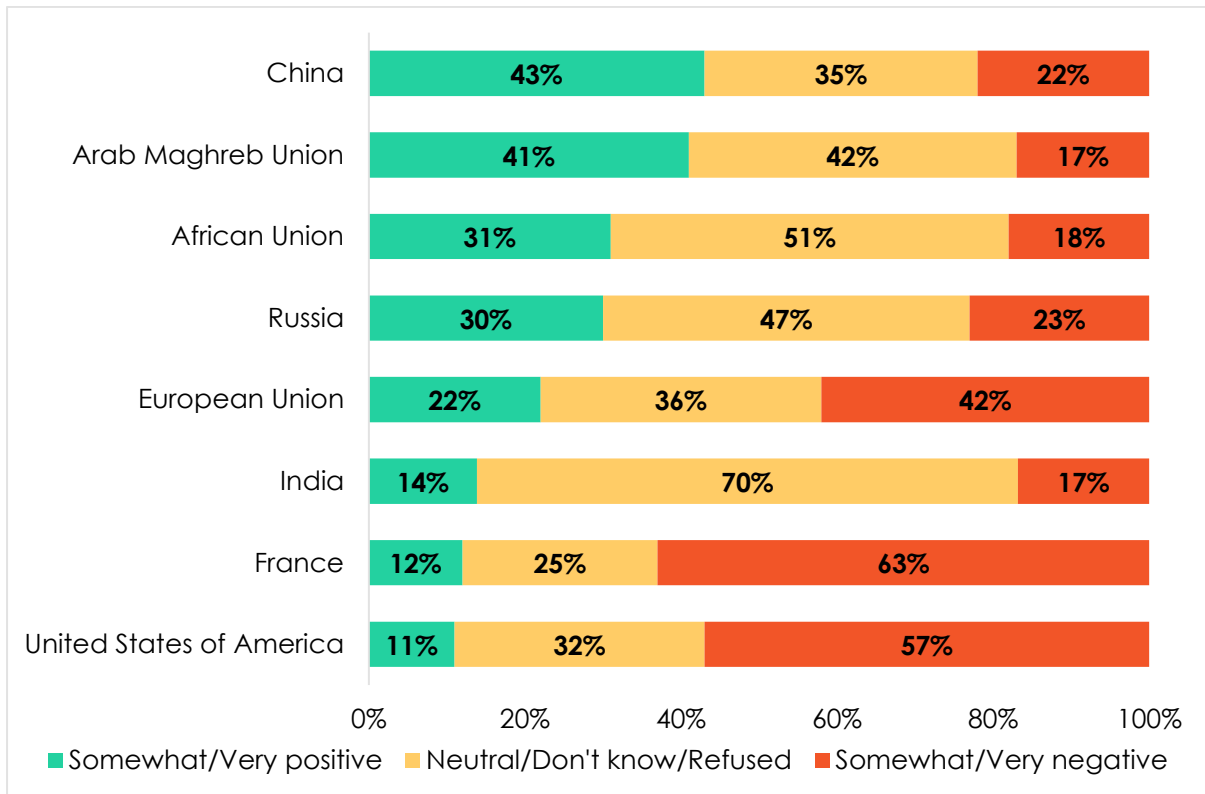
But the influence of Western powers is far less welcome. Only 22% of Tunisians see EU influence as positive, while almost twice as many (42%) consider it “somewhat negative” or “very negative.”

The United States and France fare even worse. Only about one in 10 Tunisians (11% and 12%, respectively) consider their influence positive, while about six in 10 (57% and 63%) see it as negative.

Substantial proportions of the sample declined to offer assessments, ranging from 25% for France up to 70% for India.

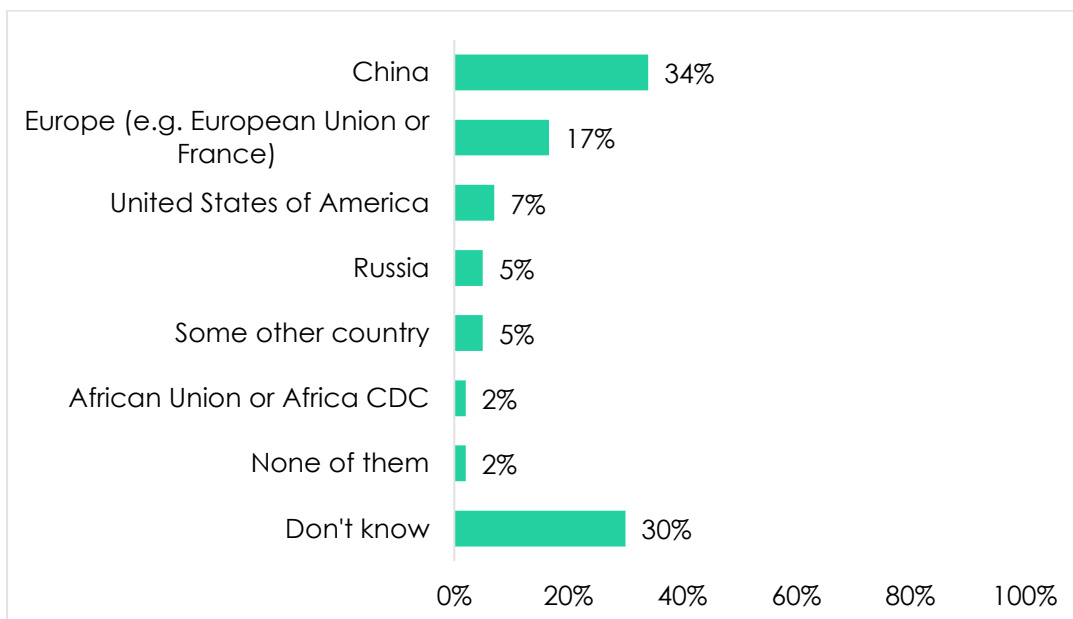
When asked which countries or organisations were most helpful to Tunisia during the COVID-19 pandemic, one-third (34%) of respondents identify China as the most supportive partner (Figure 7). Europe, including the European Union and France, is a distant second at 17%, followed by the United States (7%) and Russia (5%). Three in 10 Tunisians (30%) say they don't know who provided the most support.

**Figure 6: Influence of foreign powers | Tunisia | 2024**



**Respondents were asked:** Do you think that the economic and political influence of each of the following countries or organisations on Tunisia is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say?

**Figure 7: Most helpful in managing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic | Tunisia | 2024**

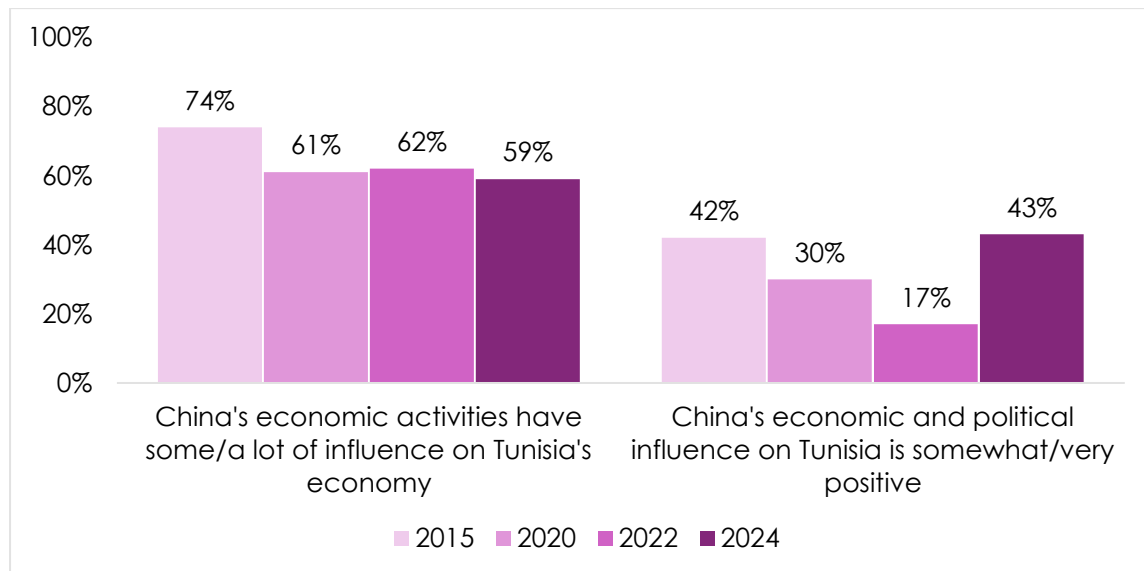


**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following countries or organisations, if any, did the most to help Tunisia manage the negative impacts of COVID-19, or haven't you heard enough to say?

With regard to China, a majority (59%) of Tunisians say the country's economic activities have "some" or "a lot" of influence on Tunisia's economy, but that represents a decline of 15 percentage points compared to 2015 (74%) (Figure 8).

The share of Tunisians who view China's economic and political influence as positive also dropped sharply between 2015 and 2022, from 42% to 17%, but has since recovered to 43%.

**Figure 8: Trends in perceptions of Chinese influence | Tunisia | 2015-2024**



**Respondents were asked:**

*How much influence do you think China's economic activities in Tunisia have on our economy, or haven't you heard enough to say?*

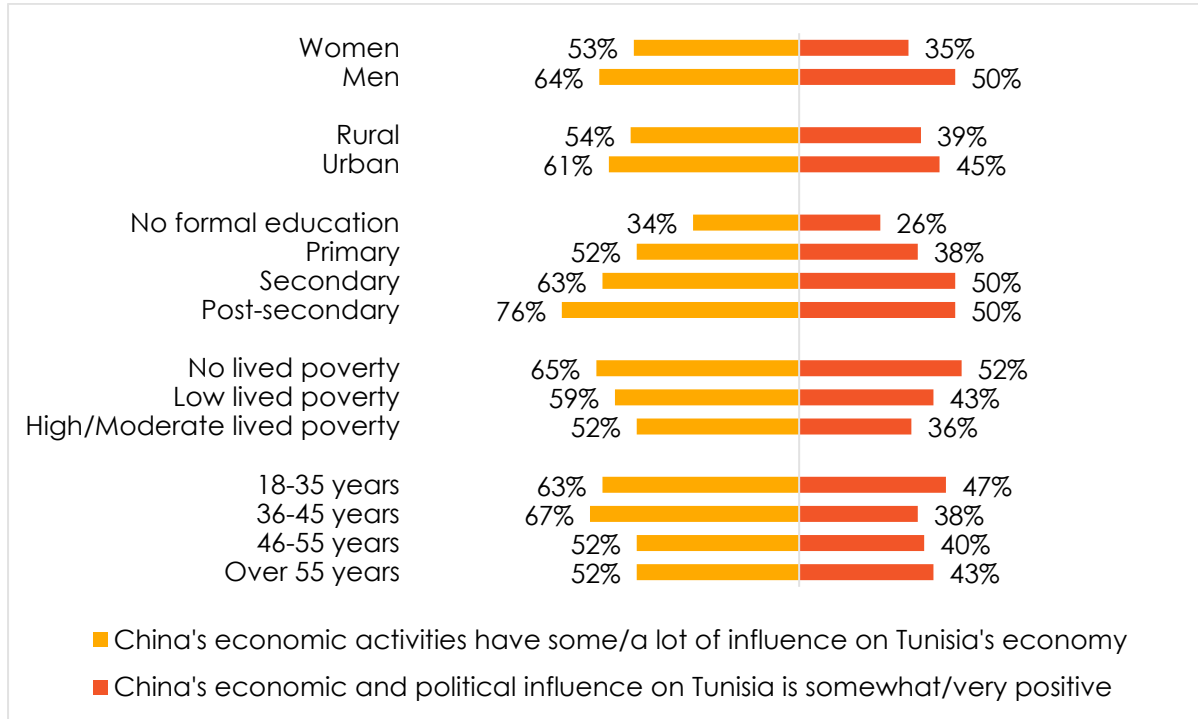
*Do you think that the economic and political influence of each of the following countries or organisations on Tunisia is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say: China?*

Perceptions that China's economic activities have "some" or "a lot" of influence on Tunisia's economy are more common among men (64%) and urbanites (61%) than among women (53%) and rural residents (54%) (Figure 9). They increase sharply with respondents' level of education, from 34% among those with no formal schooling to 76% among those with post-secondary qualifications. Similarly, economically well-off citizens are more likely to see China's influence as substantial than those experience various levels of lived poverty.<sup>1</sup>

Assessments of China's economic and political influence as positive follow the same patterns: They are more prevalent among men (50%), urban residents (45%), the most educated (50%), well-off citizens (52%), and younger adults (47%) than among their various counterparts.

<sup>1</sup> Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Lekalake (2025).

**Figure 9: Perceptions of Chinese influence** | by demographic group | Tunisia | 2024



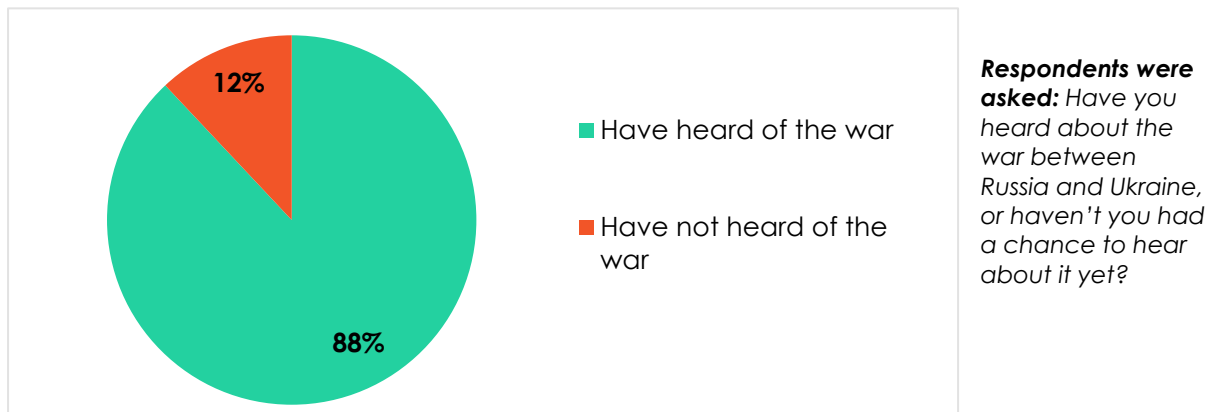
**Respondents were asked:**

How much influence do you think China's economic activities in Tunisia have on our economy, or haven't you heard enough to say?  
 Do you think that the economic and political influence of each of the following countries or organisations on Tunisia is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say: China?

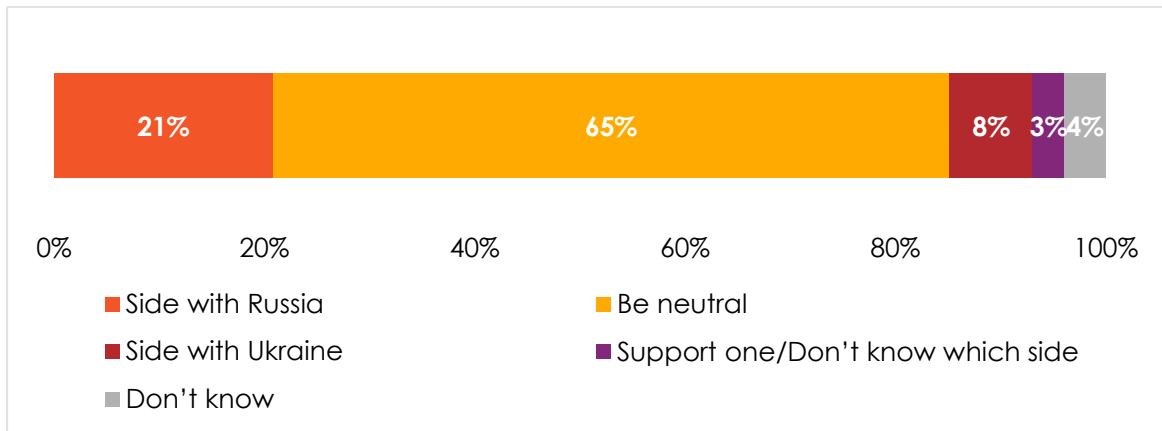
**Russia-Ukraine war**

Shifting to an important international issue, Afrobarometer asked Tunisians about the war between Russia and Ukraine. Almost nine in 10 respondents (88%) say they have heard about the war (Figure 10). Among those who are aware of the conflict, about two-thirds (65%) say Tunisia should remain neutral. Only about three in 10 favour picking sides, but among them, support for Russia significantly exceeds backing for Ukraine (21% vs. 8%) (Figure 11).

**Figure 10: Awareness of the war between Russia and Ukraine** | Tunisia | 2024



**Figure 11: Support Russia or Ukraine? | Tunisia | 2024**



**Respondents who have heard of the war were asked:** Should Tunisia be neutral or support one side or the other in the Russia-Ukraine war? [If “support one side”:] Which side? (Respondents who have not heard of the war are excluded.)

### Conclusion

Survey findings indicate that Tunisians broadly support international cooperation, particularly with China, the AU, the AMU, and Russia, but express strongly negative assessments of the influence of Western powers such as the United States and France.

Views on international trade are divided: A slim majority favour free trade, while a significant minority prefer limiting trade to protect domestic industries. Awareness of the AfCFTA remains low.

Few Tunisians express dissatisfaction with the way the AU and the AMU take their country's interests into account, but most say African countries need a greater voice on international platforms like the United Nations.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, nonpartisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 40 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and Innovante Recherche en Economie et Gouvernance (IREG) in Benin. Michigan State University and the University of Malawi provide technical support to the network.

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