

## “EU Democratisation of Tunisia Since the “Jasmin Revolution”: Between Continuity and Changes”

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## Abstract:

This article attempts to further the understanding of the EU's democratisation of Tunisia and to assess its effectiveness. Tunisia, uniquely, became the only viable democracy in the Arab world. Following the Jasmin revolution, the EU support in conjunction with the Tunisian willingness for reforms has created an environment where democracy could flourish. This article argues that the EU did not apply a democracy promotion but rather democracy support following the regime collapse in 2011. The EU's (socialisation through civil society and more-for-more) were important mechanisms in supporting the Tunisian young democracy through the transition and consolidation phases. The EU approach, nevertheless, tends to be fluctuating between continuity and changes. Although security remained an important factor in the EU's democracy support to Tunisia, the positive engagement with Islamic party Enahdha indicates a substantial shift in the security- democratisation relationship. However, in terms of continuity, the EU emphasis on further economic liberalisation may have a negative impact on this young democracy.

**Keywords:** EU, Tunisia, European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), Arab Spring, Revolution, Democracy,

## Introduction:

Aiming to maintain peace and stability in the region and establishing a “ring of friends” (Mathlouthi, 2021, p3), the EU since the Barcelona Agreement claimed to support Tunisia's democratic progress. Yet, despite its autocratic regime, Tunisia has succeeded in developing a strong relationship with EU. However, the cosy affiliation was shattered in 2011 when the “jasmine revolution” emerged. The sudden dichotomy between the EU's pro-democracy ideals and its de facto support for anti-democratic regimes was politically embarrassing, and it ultimately found itself obliged to signal support for the aspirations of the people.

While the security dimension remained of the utmost importance, the Arab uprisings comprised a solid incentive to reconfigure the EU's approach towards the region, and to galvanise its latent commitment to democracy. This entailed a fundamental reorientation away from the stabilisation of autocracies toward supporting substantive efforts to support fully fledged democracy (Hill, 2013, p 12).

In response to the events in the Southern Neighbourhood, the EU acknowledged the ineffectiveness of its democratisation approach under the ENP. The ENP Review itself, subsequently, highlighted this conclusion, declaring that the current revolutions in the Southern Neighbourhood “have shown that the EU support to political reforms in neighbouring countries has met with limited results” (European Commissioner, 2011a, p 3). Nonetheless, despite the democratic euphoria in the immediate aftermath of the uprisings (c. 2011-2012) and the EU attempt to insert much needed democracy promotion in its reform agenda, the emerging configuration of MENA reflects a return to the entrenchment of autocratic regimes, and Tunisia remains the only surviving functioning democracy in the Arab world (Ekiz, 2018). It is therefore instructive to explore the reasons why democratisation has taken a relatively firm foothold in Tunisia, which is addressed to answer the following question:

- How does the EU support the young Tunisian democracy and is its approach effective?

This article considers the role played by the EU in the last 10 years in supporting Tunisia's young democracy, including the mechanisms of conditionality (more-for-more) and the empowerment of civil society, as well as assessing the continuity and changes of the security issue in relation to democracy, and finally evaluating the possible impact of economic liberalisation.

### Positive conditionality: the “more-for-more” approach

The “more-for-more” concept has been emphasised as an innovative policy under 2011 ENP review which initially implemented in Tunisia through the Action Plans 2013/2017 (European Commission, 2013b). However, positive conditionality is a traditional mechanism that the EU has relied on since the EMP, although mainly for economic liberalisation and security objectives rather than democratisation purposes. The Action Plans 2013/2017 aimed to establish the basis for future EU-Tunisia cooperation. The comprehensive Action Plan stipulated the general principles as well as the detailed objectives of this relationship in the nine-page “Political Cooperation” and 25-page “Economic and Social Cooperation” sections (European Commission, 2013b). The stabilisation agenda was a short-term objective, but the Action Plan contained a detailed approach, informed by a clear, long-term perception, visualised with the prospect of a “Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area” (Ekiz, 2020, p 11). The Action Plan stipulated that the normative principles of democracy,

human rights, and the rule of law development, as well as economic reforms and related conditionality, would be applicable for all EU financial support (Ekiz, 2020, p 7).

In this context, the 2011 progress report requested that the Tunisian government, as a priority, reform its electoral legal provisions, by adopting independent electoral organisations ( European Commission, 2012). Despite some wrangling, a national dialogue appointed a new Election Commission, and new electoral institutions responsible for running the elections activated for the first Assembly of the Representatives of the People on 26 October 2014. The EU Commissioner and Catherine Ashton (High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy) expressed their satisfaction with the Tunisian elections, following a report by the EU's monitoring mission (European External Action Service, 2014). The EU mission was able to assess the effectiveness of the new electoral code produced in 2013, which is based on essential pillars to conduct free fair and inclusive election, such as the compulsory voters' registration before the elections. According to the electoral Observational Mission, the legal framework was effective in providing democratic elections and meeting the international norms, although some irregularities were present, such as electoral campaigning restrictions and a sanctions regime for violating electoral financing norms (European External Action Service, 2014).

Following the satisfactory democratic reforms, during the establishment phase (2011-2014), the EU allocated a fair amount of financial resources to support the Tunisian reforms, reaching €475 million by the end of this phase (Joint staff working document, 2014, p: 2). Primarily, the funding came from the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (INPI), through the "SPRING" programme setup under the ENP on 27 September 2011, in response to the uprisings in the Mediterranean region (European Commission, 2011, 2012). During the consolidation phase, between 2015 - 2018, the overall support to Tunisia reached nearly €570,000 million (European Commission, 2016), gradually increasing from €169 million in 2014 to €187 million 2015, €213.5 million in 2016 ( European Commission, 2016) , and €300 million in 2017; it remained at this level until 2020. The EU allocated €1.2 billion in grants, and €800 million in micro-financial assistance, in addition to multiple loans from the European Investment Bank, reaching over €2 billion in total. The EU de facto positioned itself as the main sponsor of the Tunisian democratisation process, as it provided substantial support in the building and consolidation of democratic institutions and policies, in an effort to reinforce its credibility as a normative power, following its humiliating volte-face after supporting the Ben Ali regime during the initial stage of the Arab Spring and decades before (Bremberg & Borg, 2021).

The uprisings enacted a new broad consensus between the EU normative goals and the Tunisian democracy aspirations, forming a level-playing field for deep political cooperation and enhanced co-ownership. This approach indicated that democratic support on the basis of conditionality was intensified along three main axes (European Parliament and of the Council, 2014). It started in the transition period by monitoring the progress made through the annual progress reports, in which its recommendations were developed to guide the new democratically elected government (Hatab, 2018, pp:6-8). This was accompanied by multiple EU officials' missions to Tunisia to promote the adoption of key reforms, including the monitoring of the elections and supporting the constitution draft. Second, the EU had an important role in developing the capacity of democratic institutions, whether financially or by contributing through expertise and training (EU Delegation to Tunisia, 2015). Third, it promoted democratic norms, such as freedom of expression and association, and freedom of the press, through recommending the adoption of international treaties (Bremberg & Borg, 2020, pp:143-135)

#### **EU-Tunisia relations: improved engagement with civil society**

The EU commitment to support the civil society was manifested by the Commission communication which stipulated that "an empowered civil society is a crucial component of any democratic system" (European Commission, 2012, p 9).The implementation of this aspect of EU policy in the Southern Neighbours after the Arab Spring was divided between the establishment and consolidation phases.

During the establishment phase, the EU allocated a fair amount of financial resources to the Tunisian civil society, reaching nearly €8 million (EU Delegation in Tunisia, 2014, pp:55-73) which succeeded in creating civil society projects. To a large extent, the EU relied on the empowerment of civil society to promote democracy, and its financial support and political dialogue with the Tunisian institutions has been intensified, by conducting constant high-level meetings with different institutions (Weilandt, 2021).Subsequently, the EU highlighted two main priorities for effectively supporting local NGO's: to encourage a favourable milieu for civil society development; and to enhance civil society participation in the decision-making process of the country. However, the EU initiative had two main flaws. First, from a procedural perspective, this is reflected in the scattering of EU financial support across multiple funding mechanisms. Each instrument has its own criteria

and logic for supporting national NGO's, which in the end reduces any possibility of coordination (Wydra, 2020, pp 318-322).

This situation, in turn, creates further flaws in the local civil society. To be clear, EU financial support tends to be given to the big, capital-based institutions. The EED, which was created following the Arab Spring, was presented as an instrument to focus on small NGO's and rural projects, but its efforts were limited due to the complicated bureaucratic restrictions required to secure funding (Wydra, 2020, p 315). The application procedures for EU funding have been described as "extremely difficult and incomprehensible" (Krüger & Ratka, 2014, p 4). Aside from purely bureaucratic barriers, the realpolitik of the EU approach in Tunisia has necessitated mediation between different political faction, including members of the former RCD regime. Many NGO's criticised this approach for prioritising mediation over political reforms. For example, the Civil Society Support Programme (CSSP) was criticised for the selection and financial support of its main partner, the European Partnership for Democracy (EPD), whose director was a prominent supporter of the old regime, well-known for criticising the EU democratisation role as an "external interference in Tunisian internal affairs" (Robert, 2016, p.10).

Secondly, EU support is predicated on its own-liberal democracy model. In this context, NGO's as socialisation actors are considered complimentary to the state institutions, rather than an integral component of democracy. The EU tends to view NGO's as harmonious institutions, based on their counterparts in Western political spheres, where NGO'S are a space of political struggle and competition. By viewing national NGO's through the prism of Western models, the EU risks overlooking important civil society organisations and grassroots individuals capable of enriching the political and social landscape of Tunisia, instead of concentrating merely on organisations that foster liberal policy. The EU approach has direct implications for fragmented Tunisian NGO's, and the groups it targets for support are often referred to as detached from the broader societies they claim to represent (Colombo & Meddeb, 2018). Indeed, despite the EU rhetorical statements on the mutual-understanding and cultural dialogue, its engagement with Islamic civil society organisations has been selective since the Jasmine Revolution, in contrast to relatively more accommodating engagement with Islamist political parties (EU delegation to Tunisia, 2016, pp113-118).

During the consolidation phase, the financial provisions supporting civil society was over €10 million, resulting in the implementation of a large number of programmes (79 funded directly by the EU) (EU delegation to Tunisia, 2016, p 114). During this phase, the EU attempted to overcome the flaws has been made during the establishment phase. The EU co-founded the Jamaity platform by the end of 2014, to provide "information, and geo-localisation of projects, measures, events, funding opportunities, documents, and tools as well as links to other relevant initiatives and stakeholders" (Krüger & Ratka, 2014, p 9). However, the main innovation in the case of Tunisia was the creation of the flagship Tripartite Dialogue initiative, which offered a space for consultation and dialogue between the EU, local NGO's and the Tunisian authorities. The Tripartite Dialogue was intended to resolve the main criticisms of the EU's socialisation policy through civil society by creating a mechanism to enable further NGO involvement in the national consultation and decision-making processes. It also enhanced civil society organisations' knowledge and understanding of the EU's multiple schemes financial resources, which in turn creates more transparency and accountability. (EU report, 2014). The Tripartite Dialogue was an important and unique innovation in the EU's socialisation process in the Southern Mediterranean, but it did not really live up to the high expectations held for it. However, it did lay the groundwork for broader political dialogue in Tunisian national policy discourse, which was reflected in the observation of the Commission in 2016 that the reforms attained by the Tunisian government had paved the way for a democratic transition in the Mediterranean region, and "the role played by the civil society was "vital"(European Commission, 2016, p32).

The Communication emphasised on the positive role played by the Tunisian civil society quartet in the election of 2011, and its spirited mediation efforts following the assassination of Chokri Belaid in 2013, which was considered by the EU as an example of political dialogue in the region. Indeed, the most important example of the NGO's influence in the Tunisian political arena is the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet, whose efforts to establish democracy in Tunisia has been recognised by a Nobel Peace Prize in 2015 (European Commission, 2016, p 30). They remain instrumental in building consensus among the political clusters. The High Representative Federica Mogherini notably called them "the architects of a unique transition and a model for crisis resolution in the region"(European External Action Service, 2015).

The EU generally welcomed the Quartet's inclusive approach to political dialogue, identifying civil society involvement as the anchor against political instability, in a discursive framework recently stipulated by the ENP review regarding the EU's pledge to the Southern Mediterranean civil society support (Colombo & Meddeb, 2018). However, despite the EU's generally positive appraisal of Tunisian civil society, recent trends show some striking inconsistencies in the latest negotiations

regarding the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA). The closed doors approach in these negotiations may have been intended to silence the unhappy voices regarding the potential problematic impact of the economic reforms on grassroots Tunisians, which could intensify if consolidated with the IMF policy approach (Gstöhl & Phinnemore, 2019). The DCFTA negotiations marked a difficult point in the relations between the EU and Tunisian NGO's, as the former continue to insist on economic liberalisation, while the latter oppose it. The criticisms of the EU ambassador Laura Baeza of the NGO'S and journalists critical of the DCFTA exacerbated the situation and were considered an attack on freedom of speech and the role of the civil society in the country (Kammoun, Ghédira, & Ayoub, 2018). The DCFTA negotiation prompt unprecedented criticisms regarding the lack of transparency in the EU-Tunisia policies. In fact, many activists referred to the lack of substantive changes in the EU approach towards NGO's since the MEDA assistance programme ( Khakee & Weilandt, 2021).

Overall, despite increased financial support and enhanced institutional settings, the EU engagement with the Tunisian civil society remains selective. The participation of NGO's in the decision-making process is very limited, which leads us to conclude that continuities have tended to prevail over changes.

### **Security issues: between continuity and change**

This section considers the role of security in the consolidation of Tunisian democracy. It indicates that while EU security was prioritized through the mobility partnership, there is a substantial change in how the EU deals with political Islam.

### **Security matters: EU interest-centred approach**

Following the Jasmine Revolution, there is still a “substantial discrepancy between the rhetoric and practice of EU policies on the ground” (Ayadi & Sessa, 2016, p 7), notwithstanding the significant changes in in the scope and magnitude of the EU's policy towards Tunisia. The development of the security policy following the uprisings is a representation of this very fact. The EU relied on its financial assistance and conditionality principle primarily to enhance the security of its borders from the flow of illegal immigrants. Soon after the uprisings, the number of illegal immigrants originating in or crossing Tunisia to reach Europe (via the Mediterranean) increased significantly. The situation forced the EU to take different measures to tackle this problem (European Commission, 2013b). During this period the Arab Spring was sweeping through MENA, but regardless of its partners' inability to negotiate external security matters, the EU launched the Dialogue for Migration, Mobility, and Security (European Commission, 2014b). Hence security issues, specifically counter-terrorism and migration, were on the table of negotiations from the outset of the democratic transition in Tunisia.

What can be observed is that considerable advances have been achieved, notwithstanding the political and social turmoil. Initially, the EU pumped considerable financial resources into enhancing the judicial and police capabilities, yet limited results were achieved, especially in the early years. This eventually led to the signing of the comprehensive (though controversial) Mobility Partnership in 2014 (Rivera Escartin, 2020, p 1198). From one perspective, the agreement stipulated an expressed priority by the Tunisian side regarding the recovery of assets misappropriated by the former oligarchy, while in practice, very limited results were achieved (Boogaerts, 2018). The inability of the Tunisian government to recover countless assets from the European countries raised many criticisms of the EU's hypocrisy. The clandestine nature of many European financial interests in Tunisia were highlighted by Tunisia being listed on the EU's tax haven blacklist. Much of Tunisia's 'hot' tax-haven money flows into the West, and the EU in particular, but the list did not include any EU member states (Polakova, 2018). The situation signposted the EU's hypocrisy and double standards, and its absolute self-interest, despite its rhetoric and purported role as an anti-money laundering force.

The contradiction between EU rhetoric and practice increased criticisms of this partnership, whether by the Tunisian media or NGO's. EU agreements intended to simplify visa procedures in fact facilitated the repatriation of illegal aliens, whether Tunisian nationals or those who transited in Tunisia (Nawat, 2016). Different observers indicated that the far-reaching measures adopted under this agreement were not in the best interests of Tunisia, considering EU reliance on strict conditionality (taking-it-or-leave-it). The management of migratory flows provided a simplification of visa procedures, but the repatriation of alien illegal immigrants to Tunisia raised strong opposition from human rights activists and NGO's (Ayadi, 2017). Moreover, at the time of the agreement, Tunisia had no clear and developed immigration policy, while the EU declared that the policy was based on a mutually agreed policy framework that was developed based on the Tunisian national agenda (Ayadi, 2017). The formulation of this policy demonstrated the asymmetry in EU-Tunisia relations, and the EU prioritisation and imposition of its own security interests at a very delicate stage in the Tunisian democratic transition. The diverse view of Tunisians and the EU on major issues such as immigration undermine trust between the partners.

A few points can be noted in this regard concerning the mobility partnership and security in general. The Jasmine Revolution and democratic transition in Tunisia should change the EU's perception of Tunisian stakeholders' role in the development of policies that shape relations on a cooperative basis, based on respective interests, rather than a trade-off between them (Johansson-Nogués & Rivera Escartin, 2020). Many stakeholders' criticisms of the partnership are based on the timing and prioritisation of policy, rather than its content (Roman, 2019). Although it is in the best interests of Tunisia to have an effective immigration policy and enhance its terrorism prevention strategy, particularly when the country itself has suffered different terrorists' attacks (Marcusa, 2019), Tunisia was going through a very delicate democratic transition, and its priorities in internal affairs concerned building the security forces capacity or dealing the internal mayhem following the uprisings. Nevertheless, scrutiny of EU-Tunisia relations reveals an asymmetric relationship, and that the EU has continued to absolutely prioritise its security agenda, essentially continuing the same underlying policy it maintained with the former autocratic regime (Natter, 2021).

### EU and Islamic parties: selective engagement

The security-stability nexus has been the main framework of the EU approach towards the Southern Neighbourhood. The EU looks at political Islam from the perspective of self-security (Zardo & Cavatorta, 2019). It requires that the main element of identity should not be endangered, and a stable milieu should be encouraged, particularly in terms of relationships, taking into consideration the interactive nature of identity, largely shaped in relation with friendliness or hostility to the other (Voltolini & Colombo, 2018, p 4).

This imperative also applied to the construction and development of the EU identity. The construction of the European identity necessitated the creation of the outside (i.e. the "other") as characteristically different from and a danger to its own identity (Rumelili, 2004). The differentiation between the other is conducive to the creation of collective identity (Cebeci & Schumacher, 2017). The juxtaposition was demarcated in terms of civilisation and culture. The EU identity has been based on notions of liberalism and secularism, manifest in successive treaties (Appel, 2019). From a security perspective, there is a presumption of a constructive association between secularism and security. Europe has long departed from connecting political undertakings to religious philosophies, and this political model is positively linked to a stable and secure environment. Similar opinions centred around liberal and normative principles whether in terms of democratic principles or liberal economic policies (LaGro & Cavlak, 2021). Unsurprisingly, the EU considered political Islam as the "other", which should be defended against (Thyen, 2018). The EU perceived the role of political Islam as being counterpoised to its own liberal-secular fundamental positions in the political and public arena, reflected in different subjects including democracy, religious freedom, and women's rights (European Parliament, 2012). Based on this equilibrium and the perceived incompatibility between the EU's secular identity and political Islam, the EU thus preferred a non-engagement policy. However, following 9/11, EU policy towards political Islam became more nuanced, as the EU began to distinguish (at least theoretically) between the radical groups frequently associated with terrorism and "moderate" political Islamists groups with whom it could enter into a dialogue (European Commission, 2007, p: 7). In practice, engagement even with moderate Islamists remained very limited and restricted to some cultural dialogue. This impasse changed with the Arab Spring, which symbolized a failure of the EU's security-stability nexus and forced it to significantly reform its policy towards political Islam.

Following decades of exclusion and repression, Islamist parties like Enahdha won the elections in Tunisia and were on track to become the biggest political party in the country, occupying the vacant political space left by the secular regime (Kaouther, 2016). Although its fundamental views about the incompatibility of political Islam with its ontological security were not abandoned, the EU adopted a more pragmatic and appreciative distinction between different groups within political Islam. The EU's reform approach is based on the differentiation between three types of groups: moderate, conservative, and violent (Zielonka, 2017). The moderate type does not substantially challenge the EU's ontological security. It denounces violence and accepts some principles and rules which the EU deems essential for cooperation, including adherence to liberal and democratic principles (Schraeder, Endless, Schumacher & Lynn Dobbs, 2018). Conservative groups, on the other hand, are Islamist actors who adopted a strict interpretation of sharia and who hope to incorporate religion as the cornerstone of political life. Due to their illiberal attitudes towards different issues, such as the rights of women and minorities, they were perceived as a potential danger to the EU's liberal identity (Cavatorta, 2015). This perception has been highlighted by the former High Representative Ashton, stating that "radical Salafists constituted a very small minority in Tunisia... they are outnumbered by more moderate Islamists" (High Representative, 2012). The fact that such groups often refuse to participate in elections gives the EU more reasons for not engaging with them. The EU consistently refuses to engage with violent organisations connected to terrorism, and non-engagement is reciprocal, as these Islamist organisations tend to rhetorically confront the

Western world and the EU in particular (Cavatorta & Resta, 2020). These groups are in accord with those in the West positing an ineffable clash of civilisations, manifest in violence perpetrated by these groups in European cities or in the Arab world, including Tunisia (Ash, 2021), further highlighting the construction of the EU's identity via the "other Islam".

The EU revised approach and differentiated categorisation of political Islam was the result of a political framework that the EU engaged in following the Arab Spring, and years of interaction with different Islamist actors during their exile in Europe. The EU new approach is framed based on the opposition parties' ability and willingness to engage with the Western world. In this context, the EU perceived the Tunisian political party Enahdha as an optimised specimen of a moderate Islamic party. The toppling of the Ben Ali regime marked the end of a long period of oppression and marginalisation of the party, and the forced exile of its leaders. Enahdha became a major force in the Tunisian political arena, winning most seats in the Constituent Assembly elections in 2011 and 2019 (Larroque, 2019). The party leader, Rached Ghannouchi, publicly claimed that the party had abandoned its previous stances on democracy and was ready to engage in the Tunisian political arena. Many Tunisians remained sceptical about Ghannouchi's statement, indicating that Enahdha's reformative claims were mere tactical manoeuvres to seek electoral legitimacy rather than a sincere revision of its political philosophy (Dihstehoff & Lohse, 2020, p 42). The Prime Minister Jebali's statement that the Enahdha election victory was the beginning of the return of a caliphate was interpreted by many as a sign that the party has not really reformed its attitude towards democracy (Jebali, 2014). Nevertheless, in contrast with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the EU was keen to welcome Enahdha as a viable political partner in Tunisia transitional process to democracy. This step responded both to the EU's normative consideration of the political reformative goal in Tunisia following the uprisings and a pragmatic attitude showing that is keen to open channels of dialogue with the political Islam.

Accordingly, the EU could successfully blend two main goals. First, by engaging with Enahdha, the EU demonstrated that Islamic liberalism with free capitalism is a viable option for the Southern Muslim majority neighbours. The Turkish model is an archetype of this relationship (Dihstehoff & Lohse, 2020, pp: 29-59). Second, given that Enahdha was the ruling party, EU engagement was a means to foster political inclusion, stability, and security in a country in the middle of political turmoil (Dihstehoff & Lohse, 2020). In fact, the enhancement of democratic inclusion was seen as a security strategy. The EU seemed to be satisfied with Enahdha's negotiation and compromise in the process of making a new Constitution, in terms of civil rights and liberties and the new democratic institutional settings. Indeed, in the Assembly Enahdha helped with the formulation of a democratic Constitution by asserting its support for parliamentary democracy and compromising by not insisting on stipulating that Islam is the main source of Tunisian law, in addition to accepting the principle of gender equality (Bartal, 2020). In response, the European Commissioner reached out to the Tunisian Islamist Prime Minister as a sign of the EU's readiness to cooperate with moderate Islamists, based on common values and interests. The joint declaration emphasized that: "The visit has allowed to start a high-level political dialogue between the new Tunisian authorities and EU authorities with the aim of starting a new stage in the bilateral relations which will allow, on the basis of shared values, to envisage a more sustained support to Tunisia by the EU and a progressive integration in the common European market" (European Commissioner, 2014).

The pragmatic approach towards Enahdha continued following the 2014 elections, which produced a coalition government between the secular Nidaa Tounes and Enahdha (Rahman, 2021). In fact, EU-Enahdha cooperation has been intensified following the multiple terrorist attacks in the capital and Sousse (Dihstehoff & Lohse, 2020). The radicalisation of the Tunisian youths, including European citizens originally from Tunisia, has become a big concern for the EU. Despite the small Tunisian population, it has become one of the biggest providers of jihadists in the region (Dihstehoff & Lohse, 2020). Subsequently, the EU has intensified its support, including economic recovery, political and legal reforms, security and border management, and anti-radicalisation reforms (Mogherini, 2015). The EU opened a window of cooperation with a moderate Islamist party to help appeal for political participation rather than radicalisation. Against this background, the emergence of institutional arrangement of power sharing between an Islamist and secular parties created greater opportunities for democratic transition.

However, following the Jasmine Revolution Tunisia not only experienced the emergence of the Islamist party Enahdha, but also a surge of Salafist movements. It should be noted that intellectually Salafism is not necessarily synonymous with political violence. Indeed, the Salafist movement is castigated by its critics for subservience to authoritarian regimes and Western neo-colonial interests, and Salafist scholars were always at the forefront of denouncing suicide bombing and any non-state violence. However, there are fundamental differences between Salafist movements and parties, with some simply wishing for the return of sharia as the sole source of legislation and abandoning the process of modernisation (Mogherini, 2015). . Jabhat al Islah (the Front of Reform) was the main fount of this conservative political Islam, however the EU perceived this

party as a threat to the Tunisia's young democracy, and a danger to national stability. As a result, although it is still active, the EU has avoided any sort of engagement with it (Pfeifer, 2019). On the other hand, Ansar al Sharia has been considered as a jihadist organisation and was declared as such by the Tunisian government in 2013.

What can be concluded is that the EU has developed a selective engagement with the moderate type of political Islam epitomised by Enahdha, based on common values and interests, including respect for democratic principles, human rights, and liberal economics. The EU intended to foster political inclusion (secular and Islamist), which in turn increases stability and security.

### **Economic cooperation: liberalisation and the struggle for socio-economic rights**

During the uprising, the democracy issue was embedded in protesters' more concrete demands for work, freedom, and socio-economic justice (Gherib, 2021). Those concepts go well beyond the restricted EU interpretation of democracy and the dominance of economic liberalisation and security interests. The EU prioritisation of market reforms negatively affected its image, as it was perceived as an agent of neoliberalism and corporatism rather than a promoter of democracy.

The aspiration of the Tunisian deep democracy seems to go well beyond and is even contradictory to the liberal recipe of deep democracy supported by the EU. The Tunisian top priority in the democratic transition is the improvement of the socio-economic situation through the creation of job opportunities and tackling the inequality in the society (Raji, Obiefule, & Fraden, 2019). According to the World Bank, Tunisia's high unemployment rate, averaging over 30% of the work force over the last decade, is a fundamental constituent of socio-economic instability, and arguably the central detriment of the social discontent that led to the 2011 uprising (Alvi, 2019, pp:33-62). In fact, the failure of the Jasmine Revolution to bring substantial economic prospects resulted in disillusion among many young people concerning the potential of the political process and opened the door for more radicalisation in the country. A UN report indicated that over 6,000 Tunisians had joined combat zones and jihadist groups between 2011 and 2016, especially in Syria and Libya (Lia, 2016, p 73). Against this background, the development of the socio-economic agenda is deemed not only a priority for the stability of the country but also a requirement for economic liberalisation, taking into consideration that any further economic reforms could add extra stress on the country's already volatile social status. Despite this, EU support for the democratisation of Tunisia is still accompanied by the explicit demand for more liberal market reforms. The DCFTA is clear example of this approach.

In (Huber's, 2013, p: 48) view "this is driven by the convictions that the liberalisation of economies of authoritarian countries, and their integration into the world economy, would pave the way for democratisation". This model and ideological objective has been subject to strong criticisms since the Arab Spring, as many scholars and national civil society organisations have indicated that the main root causes of the uprising in Tunisia have much to do with the negative effects of the liberalisation processes imposed by the EU and other international organisations (Ekiz, 2018a). The EU is acting as an "agent of globalisation" since it has been supporting the globalisation process through its economic and trade policies with the intention to enhance liberalism at the international level. In this process, the EU "contributes to international structures that, while positive in many ways, also reproduce and reinforce patterns of exclusion, alienation, and uncertainty" (Isa, 2018, p 17).

This hypothesis has been softened by several scholars' revisions, which indicated that while trade liberalisation is beneficial in the long-term, it can have a detrimental effect in the short-term, especially in vital sectors such as agriculture, where there is a great imbalance between the capabilities of Tunisian producers and their counterparts in the EU (United Nations, 2015) In this context, a Joint Research Centre report regarding the potential of the EU-Southern neighbours' integration in the agricultural sector argued that while the Tunisia agricultural sector is likely to expand in the long run, the expansion will be combined with an increased deterioration of working conditions (Ayadi, Sessa, 2013). In fact, many scholars have argued that since the Free Trade Agreement in 2008, Tunisia has suffered a fiscal unbalance due to the progressive elimination of tariffs and the substantial increase of European products import, which has not been combined with increased Tunisian exports to the EU (Ayari, Reiffers, Mouley, 2015). The Agreement was signed a couple of years before the international financial crisis, which had further deleterious effects on the Tunisian economy and significantly contributed to the worsening of the fiscal balances. Indeed, the Tunisian Central Bank published a statement showing the deterioration of the Tunisian economy, as determined by indicators such as exports to the EU, a slowed-down economy, declining direct foreign investment, and a significant drop in revenues from the tourist industry (Dandashly, 2012).

These trends and the limited benefits of the previous EU-Tunisia trade agreements fuel cynicisms regarding the new DCFTA. The Sustainability Impact Assessment commissioned by the EU for the next round of negotiations predicted substantial benefits for the Tunisian economy in the medium and long term, projecting up to 7% increased GDP and a 20% increase in



exports to the EU (Ayadi & Sessa, 2016). However, the short-term required reforms, taking into account the country's socio-economic instability and the high rate of unemployment, may not be maintainable. (Pace and Cavatorta, 2012, p:132) critically emphasised that DFCTA could further exacerbate the socio-economic unrest in the country, highlighting that during the Arab Spring: "ordinary Arab citizens rose up against precisely those rigged neo-liberal reforms imposed by Western organisations ... that led to an even more equal distribution of wealth in their countries and impoverished the masses over the last two decades".

There is a consensus between many economists that further liberalisation of the Tunisian economy without taking the necessary steps in terms of further modernisation and enhancing the competitiveness of the productive structures could lead to further negative implications on the already weak and struggling economy. These rationales informed the negative stances of many Tunisian NGO's towards the DCFTA, and ultimately raised their opposition to the new policy. In response, the EU declared that it does appreciate the Tunisian economic dilemma (long-term goals versus short-term difficulties), stressing the significance of asymmetric liberalisation as an effective approach in counterbalancing the adverse implications of the DCFTA in the short-term, and giving the opportunity for the Tunisian government to introduce more socio-economic policies in the process of preparing the country's economy for further liberalisation (Viceré & Frontini, 2020). However, it remains to be seen whether this approach is sufficient to counterbalance the negative implications of further liberalisation in the short-term, or if the economy is too fragile. Nevertheless, at the moment the Tunisian economy is facing countless difficulties in terms of development, social, and budget dimensions. From one perspective, since the Revolution unemployment has noticeably increased, which had further negative implications on the country's security by prolonging uncertainty and instability. Countless protests of the unemployed give the impression that the country is going in the wrong direction. On the other hand, the country's institutional failure due to the messy situation of the public administration following the uprising considerably reduced the financial resources available for successive governments, further complicating the possibility of stimulating the economy.

Tunisia's transitional government launched multiple programmes to address the quickly deteriorating economic situation, including \$1.5 billion to address the high rate of unemployment and regional development problems, especially in the south and western of the country. However, the allocated sum was inadequate to refresh the economy (World Bank, 2012b). In order for the democratic transition to succeed towards a consolidated democratic system, the economic deterioration required a serious and fast action. The EU response to these challenges was based on a two-dimensional approach: support the country budget, and socio-economic development.

During the establishment phase, nearly €500 million was allocated to Tunisia as micro-financial assistance, as complementary support for the Tunisian financial obligations under the IMF agreement (Memorandum of Understanding, 2013). The EU strengthened its position as Tunisia's main economic partner and a genuine supporter of its democratic transition. The financial support provided the new democratic governments with critical financial assets to tackle some of the socio-economic problems. The EU interest in Tunisia's economic transition developed into comprehensive economic cooperation. Although the support was conditional on further economic and political liberalisation, it increased during the consolidation phase, especially following the launch of the Privileged Partnership in 2014. Part of the financial support was used to implement the bilateral and regional programmes for specific partnerships regarding the development of the private sector, especially utilities, such as aerospace, transport, and water management. The programmes also intended to increase cooperation in regional development, especially for the west of the country, which faces acute socio-economic difficulties (Memorandum of Understanding, 2017). The implemented measures were intended to consolidate the country's economy, and ultimately the young democracy process. EU financial and technical support were positively received by the media and NGO's, in contrast to their substantial criticisms of the EU's liberalisation requirements under DCFTA.

EU financial and technical support in the context of socio-economic reforms is intended to enhance the capabilities of the private sector, which will ultimately create more jobs and improve the Tunisian economy. It seems the EU approach to economic reforms is much more comprehensive than before the Jasmine Revolution. EU-Tunisia economic cooperation has been developed from focusing on economic liberalisation and opening markets to wider sectors to build the prospects of further trade liberalisation under the DCFTA, while attempting to mitigate the negative effects of this in the short term (Zardo, 2020, p: 21). During this transitional period, the socio-economic problem was evidently behind the prolonged uncertainty and instability. Tackling this issue should be unequivocally prioritised over any economic liberalisation.

Based on this proclamation, the DFCTA seems to be fast-moving and may compromise the socio-economic reform agenda. Many Tunisian stakeholders' rejections of this agreement are likely to become even harder during the process of negotiations, and subsequently erode the perceptions of the EU and its role in Tunisian society. DFCTA policy paved the way for genuine

criticisms of the EU's indifference to social injustice in the Southern Mediterranean, and Tunisia in particular, despite its rhetoric to the contrary. By initiating the negotiation of DFCTA, it seems that the EU did not take into account Tunisian priorities, which can be summarised as the creation of employment to counter-balance the rise of inequality and to reduce the possibility of social unrest (Ghazali & Mouelhi, 2018).

### Conclusion

The Jasmine Revolution raised (or rather exposed) two main issues for the EU in its relationship with Tunisia, and the Southern Neighbours in general: destabilisation and democratisation. The revolution broke the status quo and its assumptions, including that stability was guaranteed by authoritarianism, and thus provided a case for active change and more comprehensive democratising political cooperation, based on common values and interests (Felipe Gómez et al, 2016). During this phase, the evolution of the EU-Tunisia relationship was characterized by financial and political support based on "deep democracy" reforms, but also by the rise of criticisms and linked challenges (Ouji, Ratka & Krüger, 2017). The EU has sought to contribute to the consolidation of democracy through its more-for-more conditionality, and its pragmatism in increased emphasis on the conditionality principle since 2011 is clear (Bassotti, 2017).

However, the EU's increased leverage of conditionality (i.e. a quid pro quo of mainly financial inducements requiring democratic reform from the Southern Neighbours governments) has been accompanied by deeper support for civil society organisations. Socialisation was always the mainstay of EU efforts through civil society prior to the Jasmine Revolution, but the practical impact of these activities was limited due to regimes co-opting, manipulating, and suppressing civil society groups. Since the Jasmine Revolution these organisations have enjoyed relatively more political freedom, which has been enabled by internal and external pressures promoting such liberty, including from the EU itself. The EU has meaningfully engaged with civil society organisations in Tunisia since the Revolution, despite many criticisms of this approach, particularly the involvement of NGO's in the decision-making process (Youngs, 2017).

The overall EU approach has remained pragmatic, which is a fundamental continuity of its long-term strategy dating back to the Barcelona Agreement. Its most important underlying interests are its own security and economic liberalisation, and it is because authoritarianism was no longer a guarantor of these ends that it sought more obvious democratisation promotion and accommodation with the emergent realities in Tunisia and elsewhere. Indeed, its virtue signalling about democracy can be seen as part of its accommodation with new post-revolutionary regimes and their constituents; just as it was prepared to work with the old autocratic regimes to support its interests, it is prepared to work with the new post-revolutionary regimes for the same purpose. For instance, the Mobility Partnership and the economic cooperation were clearly very sympathetic to the Tunisian Transitional Government's priorities in addition to EU goals (Ayadi & Sessa, 2016).

In the new configuration, one of the most menacing spectres for many EU interests is the prospect of political Islam, but the EU has taken remarkably accommodating steps to positively engage with democratic Islamic parties. The Enahdha political party in Tunisia is a conventional political platform that openly encourages inclusiveness in the Tunisian political transition, and it is a political movement like any other in terms of potential EU engagement. This represents a very proactive approach in the formal political sphere, but in order for the EU to support a suitable environment for democracy consolidation it also needs to enhance political cooperation based on interests other than its political and philosophical priorities, including in terms of economic liberalisation. In this context, the DCFTA can have a detrimental effect on the Tunisian democracy, especially in terms of the negative impact on the socio-economic status of the country (Grumiller & al, 2018). Hence, this article argues that socio-economic reforms should be given unambiguous prioritisation over economic liberalisation.

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#### ملخص البحث:

يحاول هذا المقال زيادة فهم وتقييم فعالية دور الاتحاد الأوروبي في مساندة الديمقراطية بتونس. في أعقاب ثورة الياسمين، أدى دعم الاتحاد الأوروبي الى جانب استعداد الدولة التونسية للإصلاحات إلى خلق بيئة يمكن أن تزدهر فيها الديمقراطية. يقر هذا المقال بأن الاتحاد الأوروبي وان لم يروج بالشكل الفعال للديمقراطية أقر إجراءات قانونية وسياسية لدعمها بعد انهيار النظام في عام 2011. وكان الاتحاد الأوروبي (من خلال مساندة المجتمع المدني وإجراءات "المزيد مقابل المزيد") قد أقر آليات مهمة في دعم الديمقراطية التونسية خلال الانتقال الديمقراطي ومراحل توطيدها. نهج الاتحاد الأوروبي، مع ذلك، يميل إلى التآرجح بين سياسة الاستمرارية والتغيير. على الرغم من أن الأمن الأوروبي يظل عاملاً مهماً في دعم الاتحاد الأوروبي للديمقراطية لتونس، إلا أن التعامل الإيجابي مع حزب النهضة الإسلامي تشير إلى تحول جوهري في العلاقة بين اشكالية الأمن والديمقراطية. من حيث الاستمرارية، فإن تركيز الاتحاد الأوروبي على المزيد من التحرير الاقتصادي قد يكون له تأثير سلبي على هذه الديمقراطية الفتية.