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The EU-Tunisian relationship after 2011: Resilience, contestation and the return of the neglected socio-economic question

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The EU-Tunisian relationship after 2011: Resilience, contestation and the return of the neglected socio-economic question

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Abstract

With rising socioeconomic problems reigniting popular contestation, Tunisia's democratic system is under strain. This report critically analyzes the EU's policy responses to Tunisia's transition and evaluates how they have evolved in line with the shifting challenges that Tunisia has faced. The report shows that, while EU policies have helped Tunisia in establishing formal democratic institutions and in tackling security challenges, they have produced disappointing results in supporting Tunisia in addressing its socioeconomic challenges and in fostering social resilience. The report concludes by offering policy recommendations for promoting more ambitious EU policies in Tunisia as well as in the wider North African region.

Introduction

From 1997 to 2008, Tunisia was widely perceived as the "economic miracle of Africa" (Lamant 2020). Embarking on the implementation of an IMF structural adjustment programme, the authoritarian regime of Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali (1987-2011) adopted neo-liberal economic policies and tried to transform Tunisia into a Singapore on the Mediterranean. He opened up the economy and succeeded in increasing the flow of FDI, trade exchanges and tourists. As a result, Tunisia's economy experienced sustained GDP growth and showed progress in reducing poverty.[1] Ben Ali's Tunisia was also held in high regard by Europe, which considered it a strong, reliable and secular partner with which to do business and Tunisia was often referred to as a "non-member member" of the EU (White 2001: 80).

However, by the end of the 2000s the neo-liberal reforms had not succeeded in addressing long-standing and new developmental bottlenecks. Unemployment persisted at around 15% (Saleh 2010) and remained at a staggering 23% among young graduates (Yerkes and Ben Yahmed 2018). Economic inequality had increased[2] – a clear indication that growth had not trickled down to the majority of the population. Indeed, the formal sector remained in the hands of a small economic elite and the political economy of the country was characterised by patronage, exclusion and rampant corruption. Ben Ali's family and its close circle reaped most of the benefits produced by the economic changes, leaving very limited opportunities for the bulk of the Tunisian population.

Poor macroeconomic management, growing public debt, rising inflation, a highly centralised and inefficient bureaucracy, an excessive presence of the state and state-owned enterprises in the economy and a large informal sector which was the source of low-skill low-pay employment completed the less than rosy socio-economic picture. In addition, Tunisia was marked by a deep centre-periphery cleavage. Infrastructure, industry and agriculture had been developed in the coastal areas, whereas the internal regions – where the poverty rate was 3-4 times higher – were marginalised. Their economies were based on the extraction of natural resources, poor agriculture and cross-border smuggling. An ever-growing number of young people were left with no option but to migrate.

1 GDP growth averaged 5% in the period 1997-2007 and showed economic resilience during the 2008 financial crisis, recovering quickly from the downturn (World Bank 2020).

2 Tunisia's Gini Index score between 2000 and 2010 ranged between 35.8 and 40.8 (World Bank 2020).

As a 2014 World Bank report stated,

> Ultimately, Tunisia's economic policies became inadequate to tackle the new development challenges: lack of competition and cronyism, dualism and overregulation increasingly suffocated economic initiative and prevented the transformation of the country. Economic performance was positive, but insufficient and unfairly shared. The persistence of inequality and unequal opportunity coupled with lack of transparency and rampant abuse by cronies fuelled frustration amongst the population and set the stage for the January 2011 revolution. (World Bank 2014: 7)

At the end of the 2000s, socioeconomic grievances culminated in protests, first in peripheral areas of the country and then gradually in critical urban centres. When Mohamed Bouazizi, a young under-employed street vendor self-immolated in December 2010, the mass demonstrations that followed rapidly turned into a full-scale uprising. Protesters initially demanded freedom, work and dignity, but their requests rapidly moved to profound political change. On 14 January Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia, starting a new phase in Tunisian history and igniting the fire of revolution which swept across most of the MENA region in 2011-12.

Long-standing historical, political and economic ties have linked Tunisia and Europe since the independence of the North African country. A special relationship with the EU has developed over the decades, with the concession of a favourable import regime in 1957, the signing of a Cooperation Agreement in 1976 and of an Association Agreement in 1995, the first with a Mediterranean country.[3] The legacy of the past relationship, the progress in establishing democracy after the revolution and the perception of the country as an island of stability to be protected in a region marked by growing instability and war make the Tunisian case of particular importance for the EU. European policies have aimed at fostering the resilience[4] of both the state and society by supporting the democratisation process, improving Tunisia's security capabilities and assisting attempts by the country's successive governments to address the key socio-economic problems. While the three priority areas have been present throughout the period, emphasis has shifted over time, with a stronger focus on democracy during the period 2011-14 and increased attention to security questions in the period 2014-18. The relative success of the democratic transition contributed to avoiding governance breakdowns and violent conflicts in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, and the focus on security has helped Tunisia overcome the challenges posed by terrorism and jihadi radicalisation.[5]

However, national policies and international support to tackle Tunisia's long-standing socio-economic problems have produced disappointing results. By 2019, fed by poor economic performance, policy

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3 The Tunisia-EU partnership is also profoundly intertwined with the broader framework of the EU-MENA relationship. With the 1995 Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), the 2004 European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the 2008 Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), the EU tried to create an area of shared prosperity, but it has also used its gravitational pull to promote democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights on the southern rim of the Mediterranean. Economic reforms have also been high on the agenda, incentivised by ambitious projects such as a Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Area, which was to be concluded in 2010 and which should have improved access to the EU market, increased foreign direct investment and enhanced MENA regional integration. However, over the decades neither the Barcelona process/UfM regional approach nor the bilateral approach of the ENP have been able to trigger sustainable growth and development in the MENA partners, or to promote democracy across the region.

4 With the publication of the EU Global Strategy (EEAS 2016), the EU has shifted its focus to resilience and the need to strengthen it in neighbouring countries to prevent crises. The EU has defined resilience as "the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises" (EEAS, 2016) and made it a key pillar of its policies in the MENA region.-

5 There have also been regular attempts by extremist Islamist militants to hold portions of territory, as happened in the border city of Ben Guerdane in 2016. See Amara Tarek and Markey Patrick, "Border attack feeds Tunisia fears of Libya jihadist takeover," Reuters, 13 March 2016, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-tunisia-security/border-attack-feeds-tunisia-fears-of-libya-jihadist-spillover-idUSKCN0WF072.

failure and popular discontent, order contestation[6] had returned in a more systematic way, manifesting itself in social movements and a protest vote in the parliamentary and presidential elections. Given the highly fragmented political field that emerged from the elections and the lack of vision and consensus on the way forward for Tunisia, it is unlikely that the situation will unblock. At the same time, the regional geo-economic and geo-political orders are being contested by the arrival of new international and regional actors which challenge the traditional predominance of Europe as the main partner for Tunisia and may shift it away from its pro-European course. The impact of these developments on the stability and resilience of the country is likely to be high and to demand more European attention and policy responses.

This report analyses the main dynamics of Tunisia's transition and the evolution of EU policy responses accompanying Tunisia's reforms, together with the impact of the latter on state and societal resilience. It divides the transition period into three main phases: the immediate aftermath of the revolution, 2011-2014, when the focus was mainly, although not exclusively, on democratisation; 2014-2018, when security issues took centre stage; and 2018-19 and beyond, when an increasing level of contestation posed new challenges for both Tunisia's future and EU policy responses.

The report has been prepared in the framework of the author's contribution to the EULISTCO project and is based on a combination of desk study and fieldwork, including interviews with civil society activists, social leaders, businessmen, experts, journalists and EU diplomats conducted in Tunis in June and November 2019.

1. A 'successful' transition which has left the root causes of contestation unaddressed

2011-2014: Building democracy

In contrast to the many cases in which an initial popular revolution led to authoritarian consolidation or an internationalised civil war, democracy seems to have taken hold in Tunisia, and in Western and European circles the democratisation process is widely regarded as a success story. As the only democratic transition triggered by the Arab uprising, it has assumed a symbolic value for both the West and the region, and Tunisia has received much support from the donor community.

In the period 2011-2014, the Tunisian transition secured a few important elements of democratic governance and institutions were built. The most important of these was the 2014 constitution, the result of intense negotiations and significant compromise by the political actors and the crucial final intervention by the Tunisian Quartet, a dialogue promoted by a coalition of civil society organisations.[7] The constitution is considered the most progressive in the MENA region, and settled the main differences between secular and Islamist political actors over fundamental issues such as the nature of the state, freedom of belief and pluralism (Meddeb 2020). It also guarantees civil liberties and the freedoms of speech and the press and introduces several checks and balances which allowed the political system to break away from the authoritarian past. In addition, a vibrant civil society,

6 In the EULISTCO conceptual framework (Börzel and Risse 2018), there are two main instability risk factors for countries in the EU neighbourhood: contested orders (CO) and areas of limited statehood (ALS). In CO, which is particularly important for this report, the principles and rules which inform the organisation of societies and political systems are contested by state or non-state actors. Just as in the case of ALS, CO may result in governance breakdown and violent conflicts, which in turn may pose risks to EU security.

7 See Julien Borger, "Who are the Tunisian national dialogue quartet," The Guardian, 9 October 2015, available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/09/who-are-the-tunisia-national-dialogue-quartet-nobel-peace-prize-winner.

where many young revolutionary forces converged after 2011, was established, allowing it to play an important role as a promoter and guardian of the democratic process.

Much of this success depended on strategic choices by key political actors, who privileged consensus politics over competition and polarisation. Islamist and secular forces, the two main camps in post-revolutionary times, "chose dialogue and cooperation, forming a secular-Islamist coalition government in 2011, approving a constitution by near unanimity in 2014, and […] governing by grand coalition from 2015-2019" (Grewal and Hamid 2020).

For the EU, the 2011 uprising in Tunisia was completely unforeseen. Taken by surprise, the EU showed some initial uncertainty but eventually relinquished its support for the regime and sided with the protestors and their demands for democratic change. A number of statements, a series of high-level visits and support for the preparation of the election were part of the immediate response.

In March 2011, the EU revisited its policies to respond to the Arab uprisings. In the 'Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity,' the EU stressed the need "to support the wish of the people in our neighbourhood" through a "joint commitment" to "common values: democracy, human rights, social justice, good governance and the rule of the law" (European Commission 2011, p.2). The new policy called for the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) to adopt greater differentiation and more tailored responses in a realisation that the EU needed to step up its support for democratic transformation and institution-building in countries that had started a difficult transition if it wanted these processes to succeed. A '*more for more*' approach was also adopted, introducing incentives to reward reform efforts with more aid, trade and an advanced relationship, which would include better access to the EU market. The EU Commission also created a new aid package entitled Strengthening Partnership and Inclusive Growth (SPRING).[8] However, this package had only very limited fresh funding and was generally considered insufficient to support the post-revolutionary countries in any significant way.

With the conclusion of a Privileged Partnership in 2012 and the adoption of a new EU-Tunisia Action Plan for the period 2013-2017, the relationship between the EU and Tunisia reached a new milestone. The confirmation of a strong European orientation of the Tunisian government was met with pledges to accompany the country's democratic and socio-economic reform process. Tunisia became the biggest benefiter of the new EU policies. EU funding was doubled to a total of €445m in the period 2011-2013,[9] half of which was allocated to supporting the consolidation of democracy and economic stabilisation,[10] with security, civil society, economic integration and mobility as other priorities.

Through several channels, the EU's policy instruments played a major role in steering Tunisia away from breakdown in 2013. In this year, Tunisia suffered major setbacks in its stability as the drafting of its new constitution by the Tunisian Constitutional Assembly reached an impasse and as two prominent politicians were assassinated. Fearing that these events would derail Tunisia's fragile democracy, the EU and EUMS increased their involvement in the mediation between the religious and secular parties. In August 2013, the Paris meeting, strongly supported by Germany, brought together Essebsi, representing 'modernist' forces, and Ennahda's leader, Rached Ghannouchi. Several EU ambassadors also intervened through Tunisia's civil society actors to incentivise the bargain, while the EU made financial support contingent on the willingness of polarised forces to engage in dialogue,

8 SPRING was a 350 million euro programme to support southern neighbourhood countries in the transition. It was intended as a complement to existing activities. Tunisia was the first beneficiary, receiving a total of €155m.

9 The budget was increased from €240 million to €445 million.

10 https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/neighbourhood/pdf/key-documents/tunisia/20160201-tunisia-financial-assistance-fiche.pdf; It channelled €167m to projects benefitting Tunisian citizens, in particular in marginalised areas (part of the emphasis on human security). Moreover, for justice reform, the EU allocated €25m in 2011 and €15m in 2014.

draft an electoral law and a constitution, and hold elections within the year. EU policies contributed to brokering the pact that prevented the breakdown of Tunisia's governance and fostered its resilience.

Significantly, the EU also stepped up its commitment to civil society organisations (CSOs). With a financial commitment of €8 million, a large number of small but important projects aimed at empowering civil society were funded and implemented during this phase (Bassotti 2017). Some of the CSOs supported with EU funding continued to play important roles throughout the transition. This is the case, for instance, of AlBawasala, an independent 'democratic watchdog' working to monitor the work of the constitutional assembly and the parliament, gathering data for advocacy campaigns and supporting parliamentarians.[11] However, although EU support helped promote the professionalism of Tunisia's civil society, this professionalism has at times resulted in 'tame' programmes, with activities which produce donor-pleasing outcome metrics while avoiding direct confrontation with undemocratic practices (Bush 2015). Some of these organisations have also damaged their credibility through wasteful spending, while their use of Western strategies and methods feeds suspicion about their work.

2014 - 2017: A shift towards securitisation

As we have seen, from the beginning the transition in Tunisia was marked by moments of crisis and political standoffs. However, from 2014-15 security took centre stage with challenges at the borders with Libya and Algeria and an unprecedented rise in radical Islamism (Solomon 2015; Fahmi and Meddeb 2015). High-profile terrorist attacks which targeted the Tunisian democratisation process and secular tradition (Kerrou 2017) hit the Bardo National Museum and a tourist resort in Sousse between March and June 2015. These events had major consequences for both the general atmosphere in the country and the Tunisian economy and led to an increasing securitisation of the political agenda.[12]

The Tunisian government adopted a heavy handed approach to border security to prevent a spill-over of the Libyan conflict. As a result, the strong presence of Tunisian army and security services in the border regions shifted the debate from development to security. The security-economy conundrum led to tensions between the army and the security services on the one hand and the local population which depends on the border economy for their living on the other hand. Restrictions on cross-border trade resulted in periodic conflict with the security services and the military. More importantly, by disrupting the informal and illegal economic networks on which much of the border population relies, the Tunisian government suffered strong setbacks to its legitimacy in the peripheral regions.

All in all, Tunisia's security institutions showed resilience in containing the numerous threats faced particularly in the period 2014-17.[13] Tunisia succeeded in countering the destabilising effects of attacks by jihadi armed groups and the level of security threats, and perceptions of insecurity among the population were successfully reduced in subsequent years. At the end of 2016-early 2017, 88% of Tunisians shared a positive view of Tunisia's security situation, reversing previous attitudes.

However, the increasing securitisation of the domestic political agenda was also one of the causes behind a stalling of the reform process. The post-2014 coalitions failed to address important questions like reform of justice, transitional justice and reform of the security sector, which continued to be plagued by undemocratic practices, human rights abuses and inefficiencies (Schaefer 2011). Landmark reforms which would mark a definitive departure from the authoritarian past by putting in place an

11 Interview with Selim Kharrat, President of Albawasala. Tunis, November 2019.

12 See, for instance, the approval of an anti-terror law in 2015 and the debate that surrounded it at https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-33662633.

13 Interview with an EUMS diplomat, Tunis November 2019.

effective web of checks and balances on the executive and legislative bodies were blocked. For example, while the organic law which created the constitutional court was passed in 2015, its 12 members have not yet been appointed (Marzouki and Meddeb 2015). The downside of consensus politics was an avoidance of difficult political choices as the government partners did not share a common vision and were wary of any move which could undermine the fragile basis of the coalition.

On the EU side, security became increasingly central in the relationship with ENP partners. The launch of the ENP 2015 review took place in parallel with work on the EU Global Strategy. By the time the two policy exercises started, the optimism of 2011 had given way to a sobering assessment of the political climate in the neighbourhood. The start of civil wars in Libya and Syria, the military coup against Egypt's president Morsi in July 2013, large refugee inflows from Syria and a surge in terrorist attacks on its own soil had changed Europe's assessment of the transformation taking place in MENA. Coupled with growing Russian assertiveness in the eastern neighbourhood – such as the annexation of Crimea and the destabilisation of eastern Ukraine – these events transformed the neighbourhood from the "circle of friends" mentioned in the 2004 ENP into a source of insecurity needing more effective partnerships. The EU Global Strategy focused on fostering resilience as a key objective in a less ambitious EU foreign and security policy, and 'principled pragmatism' replaced the transformative goals of the previous ENP and Barcelona processes. The new ENP played down the emphasis on democratisation in partner countries, which was now seen as a long-term process. Instead, the 2015 review had a "realpolitik tone, prioritising the EU's own short-term interests and establishing stabilisation as its main political priority" (Dandashly 2018).

Migration and refugee control rose to the top of EU priorities, given that in many European countries populist political forces with anti-migration agendas had been gaining consensus. Mobility partnerships and readmission agreements were sought with southern partners (European Commission 2015, pp.16-17). Moreover, the 2015 ENP Review opened to cooperation in the security field, including conflict prevention, crisis management and security sector reform (Dandashly 2018), and intensified joint work on terrorism and the prevention of violent extremism, a clear priority for the EU after ISIS terrorist attacks in Europe.

In Tunisia, the implementation of the new ENP represented a shift in EU cooperation and corresponded to the increasing level of insecurity in the country. In the new programming documents, security and migration were prioritised, with increased budget support in these sectors. The EU tried to strengthen the resilience of the security apparatus and key state institutions and mitigate possible spill-over effects in Europe of jihadi terrorism and the so-called migration crisis. From 2016, substantial EU support[14] went into improving the capabilities of the security sector in response to the above destabilising threats (Dworkin and El Malki 2018). Tunisia's security and counter-terrorism efforts were also supported by new intelligence sharing, coordination mechanisms and dialogue with international partners in the G7+5 format (the EU, Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland). Regarding migration, the focus of cooperation was on the fight against irregular migration and its root causes, and a Mobility Partnership was concluded in 2014, opening the way to more structured dialogue and cooperation in

14 One project on Integrated Border Management aimed to modernise command structures and strengthen border control structures. The *Programme d'Appui à la Réforme du Secteur de Sécurité* (PARSS) focused on strengthening the capacity of the security sector while fostering respect for democratic values and human rights. A project called 'Strengthening Security Through Dialogue in South-East Tunisia' aimed to build trust between the local population and security officers and to better manage border insecurity caused by smuggling and terrorism.

this area.[15]

The impact of EU security and migration policies on building resilience in Tunisia was, overall, mixed. On the one hand, the EU's security cooperation with Tunisia, along with the substantial security assistance given to Tunisia by EU member states, successfully reduced terrorist attacks in Tunisia. This, in turn, helped deepen the legitimacy of the political establishment and thereby contributed to political stability. However, the EU support was insufficient to push for profound security sector reform, full democratic control over the security bodies and an end to human rights abuses, which continued to undermine citizens' trust in the security forces. Despite EU initiatives to promote a comprehensive SSR, the Tunisian government selectively applied a security assistance package that it deemed politically convenient, focusing on modernising the security apparatus rather than reforming and democratising it.

In the field of migration, the recent increase in the number of Tunisians attempting the perilous journey to cross the Mediterranean as post-Covid-19 economic conditions in Tunisia deteriorate is revealing. The EU migration policies for Tunisia are built on a fragile basis and their effectiveness will only be ensured if socio-economic root causes are adequately addressed.

2018 - 2019 and beyond: neglected socio-economic transformation coming to the fore

Nowhere was the lack of effectiveness and the failures of both national policies and internal support more important than in addressing Tunisia's socio-economic problems and regional disparities. The Tunisian economy stagnated throughout the period, with growth between 2% and 2.5% a year, worsening unemployment and high inflation. Economic policies agreed with international donors aimed at reducing the public sector and increasing the role of the private sector and competition were not implemented. Confronting a ballooning public debt, there was no serious attempt to undertake structural reforms.

Looking at the impact of European FDI, almost 90% of the foreign companies in Tunisia are concentrated in Greater Tunis, the north-east and east central Tunisia. This reinforces the divide between the more affluent coastal areas and the less developed interior and border areas (Meddeb 2020). European companies, especially French ones, have been involved in major contracts in telecommunications, mining, infrastructure and haulage. These major contracts tend to focus on lucrative sectors that offer high and short-term yields, thus perpetuating Tunisia's rentier economy and strengthening the country's crony capitalists. This, in turn, feeds corruption and predatory economic activities, as was the case under Ben Ali.

Most Tunisian exports are low-value-added products for France and Italy, most of which are built from imported intermediate components. This perpetuates trade dependency, limiting Tunisia's capacity to upgrade in global value chains. In addition, while Tunisia has signed several bilateral investment agreements with EUMS, these agreements have an arbitration boom in favour of multinationals. With provisions that liberalise the full repatriation of capital to the countries of parent companies, profits are not reinvested locally. Finally, with their heavy involvement in fossil energy, the chemical industry and the transport sector, foreign investments often further involve detrimental environmental impacts.

15 Throughout the nine years, Tunisia remained high on the EU agenda with continual political engagement in many EU programmes. For example, Tunisia is the only non-EU member country to be fully associated with the Horizon 2020 Programme. Overall, the EU spent €1.3 bn on Tunisia in the period 2011-15. The 2017-2020 indicative bilateral allocation reached amounts of up to €300 million a year (Programmation de l'Istrument de Voisinage 2014-2019). The EU also mobilised its low interest Macro-Financial Assistance loan. Since 2015 the EU has provided Tunisia with €800 million under this facility.

The coalition parties were paralysed by diverging interests, a lack of vision and fear of the consequences of reforms on employment and social peace. All the main economic players, from large family businesses to trade unions, were entrenched in a corporatist defence of vested interests. Regarding the centre-periphery issue, key legislation was approved and municipal elections took place in 2018, but decentralisation was not accompanied by fiscal and administrative devolution or an actual empowering of local administrations. Municipalities were given more competences but a lack of political will and implementing legislation, together with political resistance from the ministries of the interior and of finance, undermined the success of the reform.

Socio-economic grievances

The revolution was sparked by economic inequality, socio-economic marginalisation, corruption and a lack of opportunities, but these issues remain dangerously unaddressed (Yerkes and Ben Yahmed 2018). In 2018, 35 percent of all young people and half of all university graduates under 35 were unemployed and it took university graduates an average of six years to find a stable job: "According to Tunisian statistics one million youth are considered NEET, no employment, education or training" (Yerkes 2017). Brain drain continues to be a major phenomenon among young graduates and migration is seen by many as the only viable option to ensure a dignified future.[16] More generally, "Tunisians are exhausted by the fact that many see no real improvement in their daily lives, and the social and economic reforms that were announced after ousting former president Ben Ali never happened" (Otay 2019). The 2019 Arab Barometer survey showed that expectations of a better economic future had plummeted. Only a third of Tunisians believed that the situation would improve in the coming years, compared to 78 per cent in 2011. The young had even worse expectations (Arab Barometer 2019).

Frustration with the failures of the transition has taken various forms of renewed contestation at various levels. Strikes and demonstrations called by the powerful trade unions and spontaneous mobilisations by marginalised communities have been on the rise in recent years and Tunisians have returned to the streets, protesting against corruption and unemployment. A national strike to demand a pay increase for the large number of public employees in January 2019 – symbolically coinciding with the anniversary of the revolution – brought the country to a halt. Local communities in the internal regions have become increasingly vocal (Young 2017). Many protests have targeted national and international investors exploiting natural resources with no benefits for local development.[17] In Tataouine, on the eastern border, protesters blocked all the economic activities in the region, calling for oil companies to assume their social and environmental responsibilities. Demonstrations have recently escalated, asking the government to implement a 2017 government deal to bring jobs to marginalised regions. Violent extremism has not disappeared, and the most recent attacks have targeted police and security officials as symbols of the state.

Disenchantment with politics and parties and even with democracy itself has spread among the population. In the 2018 municipal elections, participation was low, independent candidates won more seats than traditional party candidates and "the frustration of the public opinion deepened when the elected representatives in the local municipality councils appeared totally unable to enforce their power or implement any real change, suggesting that the long-expected decentralisation process was not actually in effect" (Otay 2019).

16 Interview with an international expert, Tunis, June 2019.

17 See, for instance, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/14/world/africa/tunisian-discontent-reflected-in-protests-that-have-idled-mines.html

The 2019 parliamentary and presidential elections were characterised by protest votes and demands for change. Formally, the electoral process was able to withstand challenges in a difficult moment in the Tunisian transition – including the death of president Essebsi in July – and the elections took place as planned and were internationally deemed free and fair. However, strong discontent materialised in the poor performance of traditional political forces – both Islamist and secular – and in the emergence of new populist figures. Kais Saied, a relative outsider, achieved a landslide 72.71% of the vote in the second round of the presidential ballot (MacDowall 2019). Saied ran on a populist platform and on vague promises to increase the accountability of parliamentarians, address the neglected roots of socio-economic discontent and get the revolution back on track. He successfully projected an anti-system image[18] and at least temporarily galvanised the electorate. However, popular mistrust of the political establishment is widespread and many new forces with anti-corruption agendas and strong calls to adopt new economic models entered the new highly fragmented parliament (Sigillò and Blanc 2019). A government coalition, approved in February 2020 after a deadlock which lasted months, resigned in July.

The Covid-19 crisis has further increased people's scepticism about the capacity of the state and politicians to address citizens' concerns (Cherif 2020; Barbarani 2020). Its impact on the economy and society risks being the last drop. Tunisia's vital tourism sector, which was slowly recovering from the shock of terrorist attacks in 2015, will be hit hard again with an estimated loss of USD 1.4 billion and 400,000 jobs, while the IMF forecasts that the Tunisian economy will shrink by 4.3%, the steepest drop since independence, and its fiscal deficit will rise to 4.3%, compared with the previously expected 2.8% (Amara 2020).

Against this backdrop, the persisting incapacity of the Tunisian government to deliver in key socio-economic areas could feed even higher levels of social discontent, endangering social trust in democracy and its institutions and generating a new cycle of widespread contestation. Social protest could pose major challenges and result in new territorial, sectoral and social areas of limited statehood[19]. A crisis which might impact the existing political order cannot be excluded.

2. EU policies and the unaddressed socio-economic reforms

Have EU policies increased Tunisia's capacity to withstand pressures, grievances, shocks and crises? How well is the EU equipped to support the country in the face of mounting socio-economic and centre-periphery challenges which might give rise to new waves of contestation, lead to social, sectoral and territorial areas of limited statehood and eventually precipitate governance breakdown and violent conflicts? Given the importance of the role that Tunisia has played in the post-Arab-uprising setting, and the consequences that a failure of the Tunisian transition could have for the EU and the MENA region, it is important to analyse the role that EU policies have played and might still play in these dynamics.

European policies and views

The EU has both short- and long-term interests in a strong partnership with Tunisia. In the short term, its objectives are to accompany the country's fragile post-revolutionary transition and to contribute to its socio-economic stabilisation, thereby preventing security spill-overs in Europe and new migration waves that a possible collapse of the process could entail. In the long term, the EU's objective is to have a strong pro-European democratic partner in the region which could function as

18 Interview with an EU diplomat, Tunis, November 2019.

19 See footnote 7

a successful example and facilitate relationships with a turbulent southern neighbourhood. Indeed, a fully-fledged and economically prosperous and resilient Tunisian democracy would be strategically important for Europe as it could signal to other regional partners that a privileged partnership with the EU can be the best way to move up the development ladder.

Between 2011 and 2018 the international community invested over €10 billion in supporting Tunisia's transition, and the EU alone spent some €2.5 billion (over €1.7 billion in grants and €800 million in macro-financial assistance).[20] Since the Jasmine Revolution, the EU-Tunisia partnership has been marked by some important successes but also by many misunderstandings, half-hearted commitments and much unfinished business.

There is agreement that the political and financial support that the EU and its member states have provided to the democratisation process – although not necessarily a determining factor (Bassotti 2017) – has been a positive input fostering the resilience of institutions in various phases of the transition. This is a widely held belief in the EU, which, for instance, considers that its "financial support to Tunisia in 2011-2013 […] proved essential during times of political stalemate, such as throughout most of 2013, as it encouraged dialogue with the authorities and on efforts for reform"(European Commission, DG DEVCO 2014). Similarly, EU support has been key in the development of Tunisian civil society and in fostering the role that it has played in the transition.

EU technical and financial assistance has contributed to facilitating dialogue between political forces and to strengthening the legal and institutional framework, thus providing the new democracy with the resilience needed to face the various shocks it encountered over the transition years. In addition, EU support has helped improve the capacity of the security apparatus so that it could keep the threats from jihadi terrorism at bay, even though it has not been sufficient to push for a profound security sector reform which would ensure full democratic control over the security bodies and put an end to human rights abuses by security forces.[21]

Assessment of the impact of EU policies on the socio-economic and centre-periphery challenges and how they have contributed to the resilience of the social groups affected is more complex. The EU has continually stressed the importance of addressing socio-economic and regional disparity priorities, inequality, marginalisation of the young and women, environmental issues and the need for a new social contract. However, while the transformation of the Tunisian socio-economic situation has been a reiterated priority in EU policies since 2011, these policies have had rather limited impact.

As mentioned, successive governments have lacked vision, political strength and the will to pursue genuine socio-economic reforms.[22] The Tunisian governments have been hesitant to commit to and implement structural reforms, as they are politically unpalatable and economically costly. The negative interplay of a variety of structural factors has impeded EU-supported policies being catalysts for change. Among the factors having an impact, the analysts we interviewed stressed the following:[23] 1. the political economy dynamics in an economy dominated by rentier groups seeking to maintain their status and resisting systemic changes; 2. the related difficulties encountered in transitioning from a state-dominated to a private-sector-based, open and competitive economy; 3. the blocking role played by the UGTT, the powerful trade unions, in defence of their members and their own quasi-political position; 4. the high level of youth unemployment, also fed by a mismatch between the demand in the job market and the supply by the education system; 5. the structural tensions between centre and

20 See https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/countries/tunisia_en

21 Interview with the head of a civil society organisation, Tunis, November 2019.

22 Interview with an expert, Tunis, June 2019.

23 Interviews with Tunisian experts and EU diplomats, Tunis, November 2019.

periphery and the continual marginalisation of peripheral areas; and 6. the preponderance of the informal economy, which accounts for 40-50 percent of Tunisian GDP (Pollock and Wehrey 2018) and is characterised by blurred boundaries between informal and illegal activities.[24]

A lack of strategy in the relationship with the EU and other international players and the Tunisian elite's lack of a shared vision of the country's future has meant being unable to make the best of external support. As an EU diplomat mentioned in an interview, "if you don't have a strategy, it is difficult to negotiate with an international partner."[25] The unintended result of a large inflow of aid has been an over-reliance on external support and aid dependency. Knowing that they could always count on external funds, governments have exploited their special democratic status to avoid making difficult political decisions. The lack of reforms has been a source of constant frustration for the EU and has fed criticism and endless debates about the moral hazard of aid and fatigue among western donors. Moreover, poor absorption capacity and public administration inefficiencies have further limited the effectiveness of EU-Tunisia cooperation.

In turn, the EU has not implemented policy conditionality and has continued its macro-financial assistance and budget support despite the government's poor performance in implementing the reforms which had been agreed as conditions for post-revolution IMF packages (e.g. pension reform, reduction of the public-sector payroll, improvement of the business climate and greater fiscal transparency, among others). EU policymakers are now unsure how to further the relationship.

Tunisian perspectives

On its side, Tunisia has a long tradition of considering itself special among the MENA countries. This is due on the one hand to its relatively good endowment of skilled human capital and a highly educated middle class, which are legacies of Bourguiba investments in education and which have facilitated freedom of speech and critical thinking. On the other hand, it is also due to the fact that Tunisia has always been a rather open country used to constructively managing relations with its neighbours. These features have fed both feelings of superiority vis-à-vis Tunisia's neighbours and of entitlement with regard to Western partners, which have been reinforced during the past decade due to the international attention the country received after the successful democratic revolution.[26]

Many Tunisians we interviewed claim that the successful partnership should be used as a showcase for the EU to demonstrate that it is willing to establish win-win partnerships in the MENA. For Tunisia, Europe is still its leading economic partner, with 75% of its exports and 50% of its imports. It is also the origin of 85% of incoming FDI and 3000 enterprises employing 300,000 people which operate in Tunisia (EEAS and European Commission 2019) and many Tunisian would like a stronger relationship. According to a survey, in 2016 three-quarters of citizens favoured stronger economic ties with the EU (Robbins 2016).

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24 While smuggling across the Sahel has taken place for centuries, the current economic structure of smuggling started in the post-revolutionary years (Scheele 2012). The most notorious border crossing, Ras Jedir, at the southern point of the border between Tunisia and Libya, has witnessed a significant increase in illegal trade since 2011, facilitated by a system which involves tacit cooperation between smugglers, the army, custom officers, the police, municipalities and the local community. Smugglers of consumer goods between Tunisia and Libya have developed a highly regulated system which determines "the types of goods that may pass informally through the crossing, their quantity, the means of transport and the cost of this informal trade – meaning both under-reporting and side payments made to border agents" (Gallien, 2018).

25 Interview with an EU diplomat, Tunis November 2019.

26 Interview with an EU diplomat, Tunis, June 2019.

Nevertheless, several factors undermine Tunisian perceptions of European policies. The first factor is mistrust. Many Tunisians are suspicious of the EU's pro-democracy narrative. In line with long-standing anti-colonialist anti-imperialist views present in the country's culture, many Tunisians are not comfortable with the European policies and think that the EU is mostly motivated by defence of its security and economic self-interest: "democracy is important, but security comes first for Europe" (Sharif 2019). Moreover, "the harsh conditions stipulated by the EU with respect to the movement of humans and goods continue to be a significant cause of friction" (Sharif 2019: 92). The rise of a xenophobic and Islamophobic extreme right in Europe confirms these concerns and is perceived as something that will eventually impact Europe's relationship with the MENA countries.[27]

A second factor is linked to the rejection of the neoliberal models promoted by the EU, international financial institutions and other Western donors, which are thought to have increased the inequalities and patronage against which Tunisians revolted in 2011. Tunisian critics also stress that the lack of competitiveness of Tunisian industry does not permit an easy move to an export-led neoliberal economy without paying a painful social and economic price in the transition. In support of this argument, one economist we interviewed mentioned that even the depreciation of the dinar, which normally should have increased the competitiveness of Tunisian industry, has resulted in decreasing exports.[28] The post-revolution political instability and high inflation have limited Tunisia's export capacity and many off-shore companies have left the country. FDI is down to about 1 billion euros a year, mostly in hydrocarbons (Sereni 2019).

The case of the DCFTA

The main bone of contention between the EU and Tunisia and the policy that best embodies the current tensions in the relationship is the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA). This has become a highly politicised issue and there have been social movements and social media campaigns against it.[29] The negotiations are currently stalled, but the significance of this is high as the DCFTA is the main economic offer that the EU has put on the table.

The DCFTA is an ambitious trade project which would allow Tunisia's goods and services to enter the EU market without restrictions. Tunisia could benefit from closer integration with the EU, which could add 1.5% GDP growth a year. A DCFTA is broader than a normal FTA as it also addresses non-tariff barriers through approximation to EU regulations and convergence of other trade-related policies. To make it attractive, the EU has offered negotiating partners in the EU neighbourhood the right to temporarily exclude some strategic products from the liberalisation. However, a vision of the country's future is needed to negotiate long transition periods for those sectors which it wants to protect or develop.

The DCFTA has attracted much criticism from civil society because of social and environmental concerns[30] and the EU trade negotiations have often been accused of excluding civil society groups

27 Interview with a Tunisian expert, Tunis, November 2019.

28 Interview with a Tunisian expert, Tunis, November 2019.

29 See https://www.jeuneafrique.com/774103/economie/accord-de-libre-echange-avec-lue-laleca-renforcera-la-dependance-de-la-tunisie/; and https://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/entry/laleca-un-piege-pour-la-tunisie-le-politologue-riadh-sidaoui-s-insurge-contre-les-risques-de-cet-accord-pour-l-economie-nationale_mg_5d07a13de4b0f5338d40ed6d

30 See, for instance, "Pas d'ALECA en Tunisie," 2 May 2019, http://www.cadtm.org/Pas-d-ALECA-en-Tunisie-No-DCFTA-in-Tunisia-%D9%84%D8%A7-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A2%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%83%D8%A7-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%86%D8%B3 ; See also https://www.cncd.be/IMG/pdf/alecatunisie_notecommune_mai2018.pdfCADTM; and https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/eu-tunisia-dcfta-good-intentions-not-enough/

and trade unions that would critically address consequences of the policy.[31] Some left-leaning analysts consider the DCFTA a trojan horse for European corporations to the detriment of less modern sectors in the local economy which could eventually lead to a complete de-industrialisation of the country. There are also doubts about the developmental impact of FDI, which has historically concentrated on energy, natural resources and construction, with little contribution to high value export-oriented manufacturing or high-tech services. Others stress that in the absence of compensation for the losers from trade liberalisation, the DCFTA could potentially play a destabilising role, increasing inequality and exacerbating social and political tensions.

The controversy over the DCFTA is not surprising. The EU Commission attributes it to undue politicisation and defence of the elite's vested interests,[32] but it is also conscious of the limitations of the current DCFTA offer and is reflecting on how to move forward.[33] However, in a context in which globalisation and the neo-liberal economic model are increasingly put into question, a DCFTA is not necessarily the response to Tunisia's complex development problems. The impact of trade liberalisation on societal resilience without important aid to accompany the adjustment process is doubtful as socio-economic transformation is costly from a social point of view and social contestation that it might trigger could be highly disruptive for the country.

Growing geo-political and geo-economic competition

These internal dynamics are compounded by growing contestation of the geo-political and geo-economic orders in North Africa. While the MENA regional order is currently being contested at multiple levels by international and regional players, the rivalries between, for instance, the Turkey-Qatar axis and the Egypt-UAE-Saudi Arabia one are increasingly played out in North Africa. Turkey, the Gulf states and also China and Russia have increased their political and military presence there, developing their own Mediterranean strategies and pursuing objectives which risk putting them on a collision course with Europe. The increasing tension between some EU member states and Turkey over Libya is a good case in point. It is not to be excluded that international contestation may lead to escalatory dynamics (e.g. a direct involvement of Egypt in the Libyan conflict), further destabilising the region and spreading the military confrontation to other countries in the North Africa.

On the geo-economic front, despite decades of EuroMED policies, the EU has never succeeded in becoming a strong economic anchor and an engine of regional trade, investment and growth for its southern neighbourhood and today it is losing both political influence and market shares. Turkey's, the Gulf states', China's and Russia's economic dynamism in North Africa are on the rise and Europe will need to compete with them geo-economically, just while it is going through internal crises like Brexit, the rise of populist movements and more recently Covid-19.

These geo-economic dynamics are clearly reflected in trade and investment trends. Although the EU remains the most important trade partner for North African countries, China has in many cases moved into second place. As mentioned, 50% of Tunisia's imports come from the EU, but the average was 80% in the early 2000s. Meanwhile, imports from Asia have increased from 10% in the early 2000s to about 25%.[34] The EU is still the main investor in the region but the level of FDI is inadequate to support growth and a higher level of participation in global value chains. With its Belt and Road Initiative, China proposes a comprehensive package which includes investment and financing and a development

31 Interview with a Tunisian expert, Tunis, November 2019.

32 See, for instance, a recent interview with an EU ambassador in Le Monde, available at https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/07/09/face-aux-turbulences-regionales-l-europe-ne-veut-pas-perdre-le-soldat-tunisie_5487381_3212.html.

33 Phone interview with an EU official, July 2019.

34 See https://oec.world/en/visualize/tree_map/hs92/export/tun/show/all/2016/

model which has the potential to become very attractive for countries in the region. Meanwhile, the MENA's intra-regional trade is among the lowest in the world, due also to political blockages and the presence of high non-tariff barriers, generally imposed to protect politically connected firms.[35]

Given the heightening of structural social and economic problems, MENA countries are reviewing development models and partnership options, and the search for new opportunities and for alternative cooperation models has intensified. Europe is still the place where most young Tunisians go to study or migrate: 57% of those hoping to move would choose Europe as a destination (Robbins 2016). Europe also remains a source of inspiration in terms of human rights and democracy. While Tunisians are conscious of their geographical proximity to Europe and value the historical relations with, for instance, Italy and France, many businesses are open to rapprochement with the Arab states. Much thinking about which economic direction – European, US or African – the country should follow is under way. Meanwhile international players are increasingly flagging their interest in the Tunisian economy. Tunisia is actively exploring partnerships with the Gulf states, China and Russia, trying to exploit its potential as a transport and logistics hub and as a trade facilitator between the East and the West, and the North and the South. During the 'Tunisia 2020' investment conference held in 2017, for instance, a big group of Chinese investors were present prospecting for potential projects, mostly in infrastructure.

While geo-political and geo-economic competition in an area that is only a few hundred sea miles away from Europe's southern border has not yet turned into major rivalry, the order contestation that it represents may possibly become a strategic challenge for the EU or a destabilising factor for the region itself. The international contestation dynamics should not be neglected and will require adequate responses from Europe.

3. Conclusions

As this report has shown, Tunisia's achievement of creating a formal democracy is always at risk of being overturned if socio-economic conditions do not improve and the disparities between the centre and the periphery are not properly addressed. Fostering resilience in Tunisia cannot be solely based on improving the security situation and Tunisia's capacity to respond to security threats, nor can stability be achieved only by improving governance and establishing formal democratic institutions. These factors are important, but in the absence of sustainable social and economic development they may not be sufficient.

Since the start of the transition, cooperation funding has been allocated to these areas, but in view of the magnitude of the problems and the dysfunctionalities of the Tunisian economy and political system the efforts have not been successful. In addition, Europe has been increasingly more preoccupied with its own security agenda, with fencing off arrivals of migrants across the Mediterranean and with promoting its own economic interests, than really embarking on long-term engagement and providing the economic anchor that might help Tunisia to realise a deep socio-economic transformation.

Today, Europe lacks ambition, creativity and courage in its relationships with its privileged partners. In the face of strong internal and international fragmentation, diverging member state priorities, a lack of MENA regional integration and conflicts, current EU policies are unlikely to succeed in promoting long-term stability and resilience in southern Mediterranean countries. Therefore, the many risk factors emerging from social and geo-political/geo-economic order contestation in Tunisia and in

35 For Tunisia, this is documented in Baghdadi, Leila., Ben Kheder, S. & Arouri, H. (2019), Impact of nontariff measures on firms in Tunisia, Review of Development Economics, 23(4), 1562-1579.

other MENA countries remain largely unaddressed.

To improve the EU's capacity to support Tunisia, two main focus areas would need to be explored:

1. *A new ambitious vision for Tunisia and North Africa*. The EU's economic offer is mainly limited to the DCFTA, to macroeconomic stabilisation and to supporting governance reforms but, as has been shown, it is clearly not sufficient to catalyse a widely shared socio-economic transformation project. The EU could act as a credible external pole of attraction and coalesce and mobilise a large variety of social and political forces around one vision of Tunisia's future which could provide the country with incentives and a more solid sense of direction. Trade alone will not suffice, especially if the EU's trade policy follows a totally separate track from the rest of EU policies on Tunisia. There is a need to develop a more holistic approach involving many policy areas and incentives.[36] The DCFTA, if it is decided to maintain the project, should be inserted into a broader political and economic framework where the EU strategically mobilises all the available means (political assistance, investment financing schemes with EU guarantees, large trans-regional projects, EU and EU member state jointly programmed financial and technical assistance, local and international public-private partnerships etc.) to help Tunisia achieve a few objectives with high socio-economic and developmental value. This could take the form of large regional and trans-regional programmes like, for instance, a multi-sector connectivity-based integration project linking Tunisia to the Maghreb with Europe providing opportunities for private-sector actors. It could also be achieved by helping Tunisia focus its educational and investment efforts on developing a few high-value high-potential economic sectors linked to the European supply chain. These types of ambitious holistic programmes could play an important role in fostering socio-economic resilience in both Tunisia and the EU's other southern neighbours while at the same time providing a response to the geo-political/geo-economic challenges posed by other actors.

2. *More targeted EU assistance should go to the periphery, focusing on peripheral regions, the young, local communities and micro enterprises and SMEs.* This approach, which is partly already followed, should include more bottom-up initiatives with more inputs from local SMEs, civil society, municipalities etc. with the aims of enhancing social solidarity, building trust and also increasing the legitimacy of the state institutions involved. It should try to be more hands-on and support inclusive participatory processes which foster the resilience of these actors. For instance, it could be used to create dialogue platforms on conflicts between local communities, international investors and state institutions in managing natural resources.

These more visionary and granular approaches on the part of the EU appear difficult in the current international setting. Internal EU difficulties and crises, including the most recent Covid-19 pandemic, make it unlikely that EU policy approaches will change in this direction. However, at the same time, the daunting problem of Tunisia's transition may require no less.

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36 Phone interview with an EU Commission official, Brussels, 1 July 2019.

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