

TOWARDS A NEW PARTNERSHIP WITH SOCIETIES?
EUROPEAN CIVIL SOCIETY COOPERATION AFTER THE ARAB SPRING
CASE STUDY: TUNISIA

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ABSTRACT

Charlotte Katharina Koyro: Towards a New Partnership with Societies?
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Case Study: Tunisia
(Under the direction of [Holger Moroff])

The Arab spring confronted EU officials with the shortcomings of past democracy promotion initiatives. As a consequence, the concept of civil society experienced a rhetorical renaissance and was put at the heart of renewed EU policies for its southern neighborhood. Utilizing Tunisia as a case study, this paper compares and contrasts EU civil society cooperation in an autocratic context with its new initiatives during Tunisia's transition to democracy. Did the Arab Spring change European civil society cooperation in Tunisia? It will become clear that in an autocratic context EU civil society cooperation contributed to "authoritarian resilience", instead of initiating reforms. Since 2011, the EU created new instruments which support a wider range of civil society actors. However, EU officials still hesitate to include faith-based groups in the dialogue. This is a sensitive issue in Tunisia, where social cleavages between secular and religious groups continue to widen.

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INTRODUCTION

On January 26, 2014, the Tunisian constitutional assembly adopted a democratic constitution, which was domestically and internationally celebrated for its ability to combine the protection of civil and human rights with the Islamic traditions of the country (Sadiki 2014). Catherine Ashton, the EU's foreign affairs chief, congratulated the Tunisian people on the adoption of the constitution, which "will ensure the promotion and protection of citizens' rights and the democratic legitimacy of its institutions". She reaffirmed the EU's commitment to the country's democratic transition and promised that "the Tunisian people can count on the support of the European Union and its commitment to deepen our privileged partnership" (quoted in EUNIC 2014).

Three years before these events, in the wake of the successful public uprising in Tunisia, European officials publically admitted that in the past the Tunisian people could in fact not count on EU support. They acknowledged that European cooperation had often not supported the democratic transformation in its southern neighborhood, but rather strengthened autocratic rule. "It is crystal clear to us that we need to reflect on our entire approach towards the Southern Mediterranean and seek to adapt all our policies and instruments to what is happening in the region", explained Stefan Füle, European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighborhood Policy, during his address to the European Parliament in February 2011 (Füle 2011). As part of this new approach, the EU Commission promised to build "a stronger partnership with the people, with specific emphasis on support to civil society" (EU Commission 2011:3).

Considering the EU's poor track record in regard to supporting civil society in its southern neighborhood, did the Arab Spring reinvigorate and improve EU cooperation with civil society actors in this region?

Utilizing Tunisia as a case study, I argue that EU civil society cooperation did experience major changes after the Arab Spring. The popular uprisings in the southern neighborhood confronted EU officials with the shortcomings of past democracy promotion initiatives. The concept of civil society experienced a rhetorical renaissance and was put at the heart of renewed EU policies for this region. This included the creation of new instruments like the *The European Endowment for Democracy* and *The Civil Society Facility* to improve EU support for civil society organizations. Due to the EU's emphasis on civil society dialogue in the aftermath of the revolution, Tunisian non-state actors were able to communicate their needs and, as a result, EU initiatives and cooperation activities are now better equipped to address issues "on the ground". At the same time, these instruments symbolize an important step in reducing bureaucratic hurdles and in including a wider range of non-traditional civic actors, for example online activists and unregistered groups.

However, despite the EU's rhetorical assurance to refrain from "lumping all Islamists into one and the same category", EU officials still hesitate to include faith-based groups in the dialogue (Ashton 2012). This is a particularly sensitive issue in Tunisia, where social cleavages between secular and religious groups are widening since the Arab Spring. To support the consolidation of Tunisia's democratization process, the EU and other international donors should facilitate the dialogue between these different groups rather than take sides. Otherwise the EU runs the risk of contributing to a further widening of civil society cleavages, which could destabilize the country. European democratic systems struggle with severe structural problems

while globally, “democracy [has] lost its forward momentum” (The Economist 2014). Therefore, the EU has to be more open to different democratic models and accept the possibility of Islamic democracies in its southern neighborhood (Youngs / Pishchikova 2013:5).

This paper is organized as follows: The first chapter presents the concept of civil society and its relation to democracy. After the clarification of the terminology, it presents a short overview of the debate around democracy and civil society in the Arab world. It will then introduce Tunisia as the case study of this paper. To lay the groundwork for the analysis of European civil society cooperation after the Arab Spring, the second chapter will take a closer look at EU initiatives and programs in Tunisia before the fall of Ben Ali. In light of this analysis, it will become clear that the EU lacked any actual means of confronting this reform-resistant authoritarian regime. Instead it resorted to cooperating with the Tunisian government, including in deciding which civil society groups to support. A description of the EU’s resulting loss of credibility will close the second chapter. The third chapter will answer the main question of this paper: Did the Arab Spring change European civil society cooperation in Tunisia? To this end, the chapter will first investigate which new policies and instruments address the issue of civil society. It will then go into a deeper analysis of the efficiency and accessibility of these new initiatives. The focus in particular is on the question of whether EU cooperation engages with a broad range of civil society actors and bridges social cleavages between secular and religious groups. This is considered crucial for a successful transition from authoritarian regimes to democratic forms of government. The paper will conclude with a short summary of the most important findings and carefully look ahead into the future of EU democracy promotion in the southern neighborhood.

CHAPTER 1: ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1 Civil Society and Democracy

1.1.1 The Concept of Civil Society

Any analysis of EU civil society cooperation needs to be preceded by a clarification of the term civil society itself. Scholars agree that civil society originated as a distinctly European concept. It has been an integral part of philosophical and political debate since Aristotle and has been challenged, refined and further developed by scholars such as Hobbes, Ferguson, de Tocqueville, Gramsci, Hegel and others (Edwards 2009:6). Perhaps precisely because of its long history, the term civil society remains fairly ambiguous. Academic literature offers a multitude of interpretations and definitions. The EU itself has defined civil society in different ways over time. This makes it extremely difficult to determine precisely which actors are considered to be part of this category (Johansson-Nogues 2006:1). This paper will draw from the working definition introduced by Cohen and Arato, who understand civil society as a “sphere of social interaction between economy and state”, which is “created through forms of self-constitution and self-mobilization” (1997:ix).

Civil society therefore refers to actors that are distinct from the political society, including parties and parliaments, as well as economic society, consisting of private businesses and other for-profit organizations. Howard argues that both economic and political societies are controlled by elite actors, who seek either profit or power. In contrast, he considers civil society to be “the realm of ordinary citizens” (2010:187). However, the line between these societies is

often very thin and in many cases blurry. For example, trade unions are located at the interface of economic and civil society and demonstrate the issue of overlap. It is also misleading to conclude that any form of social life outside the political and economic sphere constitutes civil society. Rather, the term is utilized to distinguish between society as a whole and institutionalized “structures of socialization”, meaning associations and organizations, through which people represent, defend and advance their interests and needs (Croissant et al. 2000:17). In addition, the term carries, especially in an EU context, a normative connotation. In general, EU officials characterize civil society as peaceful as well as religiously and politically tolerant (ibid. 18).

In 2012, EU Commission formulated an in-depth definition of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the document *Europe’s Engagement with Civil Society in External Relations*. This definition combines the points mentioned above and will serve as a reference point during the following analysis:

“The EU considers CSOs to include all, non-State, not-for-profit structures, non-partisan and non-violent, through which people organize to pursue shared objectives and ideals, whether political, cultural, social or economic. They include membership-based, caused-based and service-oriented CSOs. Among them, community-based organizations, non-governmental organizations, faith-based organizations, foundations, research institutions, Gender and LGBT organizations, cooperatives, professional and business associations, and the not for profit media. Trade unions and employer’s organizations, the so-called social partners, constitute a specific category of CSOs. Operating from the local to the national, regional and international levels, they comprise urban and rural, formal and informal organizations. The EU values CSOs diversity and specificities, it engages with accountable and transparent CSOs which share its commitment to social progress and to the fundamental values of peace, freedom, equal rights and human dignity” (EU Commission 2012:3).

1.1.2 European Democracy Promotion and Civil Society

Cooperation with foreign civil society actors is an essential part of the EU's broader goal to promote democracy abroad. According to Jünemann and Knodt, the concept of external democracy promotion includes "all strategies and instruments which are intended to contribute to a process of democratization or democratic consolidation in a third country" (2008:261). While many governments, international organizations and NGOs support democratization, the EU can be described as a unique democracy promotion actor. It presents itself as a normative, value-driven international actor that has mainstreamed democratization as an integral part of its foreign policy. Since 1995, all treaties between the EU and third countries contain a reference to democratic values such as human rights, the rule of law and good governance (ibid. 260). At the same time, the question remains which form of democracy the EU intends to support. Kurki argues that the political pluralism of the EU member states leads to a "fuzzy" vision of democracy. It is often unclear if the EU supports a "social democracy" or a "liberal democracy" model (2012:1). Subsequently, the role of civil society during the democratization of a country also remains vague.

"Most empirical research – whether qualitative or quantitative, contemporary or historical – has pointed to a strong positive relationship between civil society and democracy" (Howard 2010:189). The work of Putnam emphasizes the positive correlation between civil society participation and a more peaceful and democratic society. He argues that active membership in organizations and involvement in public debate increases the social capital of the individual, which in turn has beneficial consequences for the governmental structure of a country or region (Putnam 1993). In addition, scholars argue that an active civil society can check and limit the powers of the government and other elites. It therefore ideally prevents the agglomeration of

power and improves the functioning of democratic institutions (Edwards 2009:15). These assumptions foster the conviction that promoting civil society development is essential to building democracy (Carothers / Ottaway 2000:4). However, the beneficial consequences of civil society seem to require a democratic context. Freedom of association and assembly are vital for an active and influential civil society.

Nevertheless, the EU's democracy promotion also includes cooperation with civil society organizations in autocratically ruled countries. By supporting these organizations the EU hopes to apply indirect pressure on state elites who are not willing to allow the development of democracy, thus promoting democratization from the "bottom up" (Jünemann / Knodt 2008:262). This focus on the transformative power of civil society is directly linked to the democratization in Eastern and Central Europe. The political changes in the late 1980s and early 1990s gave the idea of civil society an unprecedented boost (Edwards 2009:12). The revolutions and transformation processes in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany seemed to demonstrate that civil society was the key to democratization (Carothers / Ottaway 2000:7). One report concluded that civil society had played a crucial role in "50 out of 67 modern transitions from authoritarian rule" (Yom 2005:15). This enthusiasm served as the foundation for EU civil society cooperation in the southern neighborhood. Western policymakers and scholars argued that Arab civil organizations, bolstered by outside assistance, could pressure their governments to embrace meaningful reforms, which would eventually bring about political transformation (Yom 2005:14).

However, the hope that civil society could act as a democratizing force soon proved unrealistic, or at best considerably exaggerated (Hawthorne 2005:97). Working with unfamiliar civil society actors in an autocratic context turned out to be complex, time-consuming, and in

many cases highly inefficient (Howell et al. 2006:11). It became clear that European instruments for democracy promotion, which were based on the experiences in Eastern and Central Europe, were designed to consolidate young democracies rather than to create them (Jünemann / Knodt 2008:277). In particular since the early 2000s, the international community distanced itself from civil society promotion. One scholar observed that “the church of civil society has lost some of its membership and magic” (Edwards 2009:vi). For example, one German government official concluded in 2009: “Civil society is passé. It had its moment in the 1990s but now it is time to move on to something else” (ibid. 16). In this paper, I argue that the Arab Spring led to a renaissance of the concept of civil society. However, before the public uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and other countries across the Middle East and North Africa, many scholars had given up on the possibility of a bottom up transformation in this region.

1.2 Civil Society and Democracy in the Arab World

Despite the globalization of democracy, the autocratic regimes in the Middle East and North Africa remained stable and surprisingly resilient to change. While the number of democracies continuously increased internationally¹, there was not a single democratic regime in the Arab world (Diamond 2010:93). The stability and resilience of these autocratic regimes raised the question about the compatibility of democracy and Arab political culture. Some scholars even argued that Arab people had a distinct “preference for despotism” (Kubba 2000:84). Instead of seeking democratic rights, Arab populations seemed to prefer strong leaders who provided security and stability (ibid. 86). Due to the weakness of democracy in this region, many western scholars believed that civil society did not exist, or at best barely existed, in these countries (Brouwer 2000:21). They questioned if a western concept, based on centuries of

¹In 1990, less than half of the world’s states were electoral democracies, but by 1995, over 60% of states were considered democratic (Diamond 2010:93).

political debate, and revived by the enlightenment, was even applicable to the countries in the southern European neighborhood. Debates over the definition of Arab civil societies addressed four main questions: “Are religious associations part of civil society?”, “Is civil society necessarily bourgeois?”, “Are primordial groups, such as tribes, part of civil society?” and “Do associations have to be autonomous from the political sphere to be part of civil society?” (CCDP 2012:6).

This paper will focus on two aspects of this debate. It will analyze the implications for EU civil society cooperation in regard to the issue of autonomy and the question of religious civil society groups. First, autocratic leaders across the region were extremely successful in restricting independent civil society groups and tightly monitoring civic activities (Hawthorne 2005:91). Because these despots controlled all aspects of public life, it was extremely hard for civil society groups to gain autonomy and act independently of the government without risking persecution or harassment. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the concept of civil society itself is foreign to the peoples of the Arab world. On the contrary, when leaders loosened governmental control, a window of opportunity opened for civil society activities and the number of relevant organizations flourished (Vallianatos 2013:2).

Second, many western definitions of civil society excluded religious associations, because they believed that secularism is an integral part of civil society (Liverani 2010:270). They did not consider faith-based organizations a part of civil society and questioned whether these groups could have a pro-democratic agenda or if their beliefs were essentially inconsistent with democracy. In 1992, the British historian Elie Kedouri claimed that there is “nothing in the political traditions of the Arab world – which are the political traditions of Islam – which might

make familiar, or indeed intelligible, the organizing ideas of constitutional and representative government” (quoted in Diamond 2010:95).

The “supposed incompatibility of Islam and civil society” was especially criticized by officials from other democratic countries with a Muslim majority. Anwar Ibrahim, former Deputy Prime Minister in Malaysia, observed: “We do not talk about Christianity and democracy or Hinduism and democracy, but Islam and democracy has become the geo-political narrative of today” (quoted in Edwards 2009:39). Indeed western debate often neglects the fact that “the total number of Muslims living in democracies outside the West to almost half a billion” (Stepan / Linz 2013:17). Religion can therefore not serve as a convincing explanation for the lack of democracies in the Arab world.

Also the assumption that Arab people “prefer autocratic leadership” was questionable, even before the Arab Spring. Even in the early 2000s, over 80% of citizens interviewed in Arab countries agreed that “despite drawbacks, democracy is the best system of government” and that “having a democratic system would be good for our country” (Diamond 2010:95). When analyzing EU civil society cooperation, this paper will therefore assume that there was and continues to be a civil society in Tunisia. It will take into account the obstacles and limitations for civil society activities during the repression under Ben Ali’s regime, as well as the influence of religious forces in the country.

1.3 Introduction: Case Study Tunisia

In this paper, Tunisia will serve as the case study to analyze EU-civil society cooperation in its southern neighborhood. This country is an interesting case to compare EU engagement before and after the Arab Spring for multiple reasons. First, Tunisia was the birthplace of the Arab Spring. The Tunisian revolution truly began on December 17, 2010, when desperate fruit

and vegetable seller Mohammed Buazizi set himself on fire after his cart, his only source of income, was confiscated by the police. In the following weeks, demonstrations, strikes and acts of civil resistance spread across the country. Within a month, the peacefully protesting Tunisians had accomplished their goal: Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who had ruled Tunisia autocratically since 1987, was forced to leave the country, fleeing to Saudi Arabia on January 14, 2011 (Hamid 2011:116). This first revolution not only triggered a “tsunami” of public protests across the region, it also renewed the debate about civil society’s transformative power among academics, policy makers and the broader public. Tunisia is therefore a good example to examine how the renewed focus on civil society influenced EU rhetoric and policy-making.

Second, the EU and Tunisia have a long history of bilateral relations. Tunisia and the European Economic Community signed their first cooperation agreement to create a framework for commercial relations in 1969. Furthermore, Tunisia was the first Mediterranean country to sign an Association Agreement with the EU as part of the Barcelona Process in July 1995, and one of the first Mediterranean countries to adopt an ENP Action Plan in 2005. In 2008, Tunisia became a member of the Union for the Mediterranean and entered a free trade area for industrial products with the EU. Since the Barcelona Process all treaties and agreements have stressed the importance of cooperation with civil society. After the popular uprising, EU officials vowed to put civil society at the heart of their reformed policies and new instruments, which are the basis of EU-Tunisian relations today. It is therefore possible to directly compare and contrast EU civil society policies in an autocratic context with its new initiatives during Tunisia’s transition to democracy.

Third, even before 2011 Tunisia’s associational life was considered to be very active and vibrant, especially in comparison to other civil societies across the region. It benefitted from the

ethnic and religious cohesiveness of the country, which was approximately 98% Sunni Muslim (Deane 2013:8). In 2009 Edwards described civil society in Tunisia as a “fascinating mix of the secular and the religious, the traditional and the modern, co-option, independence and all shades in between” (Edwards 2009:40). Although some apolitical groups were able to create room for autonomous activities, most organizations were closely linked to the government, either by patronage ties or through continued monitoring and harassment (Hawthorne 2005:88). The revolution abruptly opened the highly controlled state and freedom of association and assembly were legally protected (Freedom House 2012:9). The people of Tunisia established scores of organizations, with more than 2,000 new associations officially registered by 2012 (EU Delegation Tunisia 2012:12).² During the revolution, religious and secular groups of all political orientations were united by their common cause. Over time, however, deep cleavages within Tunisian civil society began to widen, especially between Islamic and nonreligious groups and urban elites and the rural periphery. This paper consequently also examines to what extent the EU engages with this broad spectrum of civil society actors.

²This development was further boosted by the “explosion of new platforms for expression” including traditional formats such as TV and radio stations and newspapers, but also blogs and online podcasts (Freedom House 2012:3).

CHAPTER 2: EU CIVIL SOCIETY COOPERATION BEFORE THE ARAB SPRING

In theory, civil society promotion to support democratization and progress of human rights was at the heart of all treaties between the EU and the Tunisian government even before the Arab Spring. They are based on the conviction that cooperation between the EU and its southern neighbor has to be laid down in intergovernmental agreements, but should also embrace the participation of civil society actors (Jünemann 2005:249). In 1995, the Barcelona Declaration emphasized “the essential contribution civil society can make in the process of development of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership and as an essential factor for greater understanding and closeness between peoples” (EU Commission 1995:7). The subsequent European Neighborhood Policy was based on the same assumption. The framework was introduced in 2003 with the document *Wider Europe*, in which the European Commission proclaimed:

“The importance of dialogue between civilisations and the free exchange of ideas between cultures, religions, traditions and human links cannot be overemphasised. The EU should contribute to the development of a flourishing civil society to promote basic liberties such as freedom of expression and association” (EU Commission 2003:12).

However, despite this repeated emphasis on the importance of civil society cooperation, European politics in the southern neighborhood was unquestionably state-centered. EU civil society support was exclusively implemented in cooperation with the Tunisian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and closely monitored by the Ministry of the Interior (Burgat 2009:627).

2.1 Focus on Governmental Collaboration

2.1.1 Co-ownership and Tunisia's Controlled Liberalization

The EU's cooperation with Tunisia is a good example of the engagement approach, which aims at developing a close relationship with a country's regime to promote human rights, democracy, and the rule of law (Van Hüllen 2011:119). The majority of EU programs and projects intended to improve economic growth and fuel democratization in Tunisia were created in partnership with Tunisian authorities, implementing the concept of co-ownership. This approach was supposed to include and reflect Tunisian national policies and therefore make implementation more likely. In contrast to American efforts to actively democratize countries, the broad consensus among European leaders was that democracy had to be created from within a country (Youngs 2005:245). In 2004, the French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin, summarized this conviction, arguing that any political reform efforts would have to "start from the needs of Middle Eastern states themselves" and that "we need to associate [Middle Eastern states] as much as possible in our thinking in a genuine partnership" (quoted in Youngs 2005:139).

However, the EU had to cope with a rather weak bargaining position in relation to the Tunisian government. In 2002, Romano Prodi, the President of the EU Commission, noted: "The goal of accession is certainly the most powerful stimulus for reform we can think of. But why should a less ambitious goal not have some effect" (quoted in Kelley 2006:38)? Yet, by refusing to give the countries in North Africa and the Middle East an accession option, the EU had weakened its own leverage and influence in the region. Countries are observably less likely to embrace domestic reforms in "the absence of the final carrot" (Balfour 2012:19). In fact, it is hard to imagine how cooperation with an autocratic regime would lead to true regime change. As

Kahader points out, “real democratic reform means the political suicide of repressive regimes” (2012:28). Instead of fueling democratic reforms, EU cooperation therefore often led to political stagnation. Thepaut describes this phenomenon as a “vicious circle, in which change has to start with cooperation, but in which cooperation progressively excludes change” (2011:15). This was exactly the case with European civil society promotion in Tunisia. Because the EU cooperated with the government in the hope of achieving political change, Ben Ali was able to hijack EU support for civil society and make them part of his “controlled liberalization”.

Since the early 1990s, the autocratic regimes in the Arab world were experiencing considerable foreign pressure to democratize and liberalize. As mentioned before, at this point in time the international community increasingly focused on the democratic potential of civil society organizations and emphasized the importance of active non-state actors. Attempting to appease this foreign pressure and to simultaneously ensure the stability of their regimes, long-standing autocratic leaders resorted to “controlled liberalization” (Yom 2005:23). This means that while on the surface these leaders at least partially complied with the international community’s calls for democratization, in practice they tightly controlled any step towards political and economic liberalization. In 2010, Diamond pointed out:

“Liberalization is not linear but rather cyclical and adaptive. When pressure mounts, both from within the society and from the outside, the regime loosens its constraints and allows more civic activities – until political opposition appears as if it may grow to serious and effective, then the regime returns to more heavy handed methods of shrinking the political space, and arresting the usual subjects” (2010:99).

Thus, reforms often contributed to the “authoritarian resilience” of these regimes, instead of undermining their power.

2.1.2 Rise of GoNGOs

In Tunisia, one of the reforms to address the “democratic deficit” of the regime and, at the same time limit real political change, was the establishment of a state-centered civil society (Deane 2013:9). As a result of this “controlled liberalization”, the number of registered civil society organizations began to rise rapidly. It increased from 1,886 in 1988 to 5,186 in 1991 (Edwards 2009:21). In 2006 over 10,000 organizations were officially registered in Tunisia. But this large number should be called into question with regard to the autonomy of these groups. Experts estimate that these groups were in many cases very small, often only consisting of two or three members, and that only approximately 50% of them were actually active. Of the remaining organizations, approximately two thirds were “government appendages”, often referred to as Government-backed NGOs or, for short, GoNGOs, by critics (Liverani 2010:269).

Government control of associations and organizations was the main characterization of Tunisia’s civil society before the revolution. Because Tunisian civil society organizations had to comply with a web of bureaucratic codes and rules to stay officially registered, the Ministry of the Interior was able to monitor and heavily influence their activities. Hawthorne points out that the Tunisian government was able to neutralize groups whose activities were risking the stability of the regime through “a combination of sticks (the threat of repression) and carrots (funding and political protection)” (2005:93). One example of the Ministry’s rigorous actions is the repression of the *Tunisian Bar Association*, one of the most vocal professional associations under Ben Ali. The association was subjected to constant surveillance and was habitually harassed by the state police. In 2005 Ben Ali replaced the association’s leadership with officials loyal to his regime and the Tunisian Bar Association became effectively a “shadow organization” (Freedom House 2012:11).

These shadow organizations served as surveillance mechanisms that infiltrated civil society forums, both within Tunisia and abroad. Yom argues that this rigorous monitoring and infiltration meant that Tunisian civil society was more an “instrument of state control than a mechanism of collective empowerment” (2005:24). In many cases, civil society groups protected themselves by strictly focusing on non-political activities. For example, the *Tunisian Association for Management and Social Stability* provided educational programs for children, in particular young girls. The association was closely monitored by the police and their office was repeatedly raided by intelligence officers. Chema Gargouri, the association’s president, explained:

“(We) neither directly challenged Ben Ali’s regime, nor overtly supported the government. We were strictly apolitical; if they asked me to become political or they thought I was becoming political, I would have closed the doors” (quoted in Mirescu 2013).

Ben Ali was able to benefit from the fact that EU officials preferred to work with civil society groups that were most similar to the ones they encountered and worked with at home. In particular, organizations that wanted to secure EU funding and expertise had to have a certain level of professionalism. They had to be able to produce quality grant proposals and demonstrate high administrative capabilities. Matters were made even more difficult by the fact that, in most cases, organizations had to provide important documents like budget proposals and project reports in English or French (Carothers / Ottaway 2000:13). To achieve the required level of professionalism, civil society groups needed the support and acceptance of the Tunisian government. Smaller and less professionalized groups, for example from rural areas, struggled to meet these bureaucratic conditions. As a result, the EU showed a clear preference for working with GoNGOs, which were officially accepted by the Tunisian government.

For example, the Anne Lindh Foundation offered financial support to GoNGOs such as the *National Union of Tunisian Women* and the *Ben Ali Chair for the Dialogue between Cultures*

and Civilizations (Powel 2009:204). These groups were able to meet the EU's criteria possessing the necessary administrative capabilities. Yet their dependency on the regime made these organizations also considerably less likely to initiate change which could actually threaten Ben Ali's power. While Ben Ali was able to channel EU funds to organizations close to the regime, he also ensured that other civil society groups, which he considered a political threat, did not receive EU support. In particular, this was true for Islamic associations, which suffered considerably at the hands of Tunisia's security apparatus.

2.2 Exclusion of Islamic Groups

2.2.1 Repression by the Tunisian Government

Ben Ali saw Islamic organizations as representing the greatest threat to his power. Islamic groups like the *Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique* and the *Ennahda Movement* had challenged the rule of Presidents Bourguiba and Ben Ali since the 1970s (Powel 2009:199-200). In turn, both presidents claimed repeatedly that if these groups ever gained political power, their religious fundamentalism would erode domestic stability and security, as well as the rights of women and secular citizens (Stepan / Linz 2013:23). Deliberately using the "Algerian scenario"³ as a powerful propaganda tool, Ben Ali initiated in the early 1990s a violent crackdown on Islamic movements (Yom 2005:20). By the mid 1990's the *Ennahda Movement* was accused of being a terrorist organization and forcibly dismantled. Many members were imprisoned and tortured, and most of the group's leaders forced into exile (Paciello 2011:3). This practice continued into the early 2000s, when Ben Ali's regime was able to utilize the "global war on terror" to further criminalize the Islamic opposition in Tunisia. Human rights activists and pro-

³In 1991, the Algerian military seized control to prevent a national election victory by the Islamic Salvation Front, which initiated a bloody civil war that lasted for almost ten years and, according to estimates, cost 150,000 lives (Diamond 2010:97).

democratic organizations were now prosecuted under the accusation of sponsoring terrorism (Howell et al. 2006:15). In general, Islamic groups were put under close watch and accused of cooperating with radical groups. This way, Ben Ali was able to silence his biggest political opponent and secured domestic and international support for his personal “war on terror”.

Domestically, by end of the 1980s and into the early 1990s, many secular groups in fact supported Islamic groups in their struggle and cooperated with them to achieve true liberalization of the civil society sphere. However, once the regime felt threatened and increased its repression against Islamic groups, secular groups were pitted against faith-based groups. Fearing the destabilizing influence of these groups and believing the repeated propaganda of an “Algerian scenario” in Tunisia, they withdrew their support (Hawthorne 2005:96). Economic factors played an important role in the domestic acceptance of government repression. The state-controlled public media constantly reminded the Tunisian population that the economic future of their country and, thus, their own livelihoods depended on a positive investment climate.

Pointing not only to Algeria but also to Egypt, government officials and analysts close to the regime insisted that the toleration of any influential Islamic forces would inevitably lead to economic chaos and a sharp decline in foreign investment (Alexander 1997:35). In the eyes of many pro-business Tunisians this economic reasoning legitimized the rigid line of action by the government. Even in 2012, a survey released by the *Sigma Conseil* and the *Al-Maghreb* newspaper demonstrated that 41% of people still favored the economic and political stability they associated with the Ben Ali regime (Freedom House 2012:2). Arguably, many Tunisians sided with the regime and accepted certain limitations on their civil liberties as the price for financial security and the repression of possibly violent religious groups.

2.2.2 Narrow Focus of EU Cooperation

Just as the majority of the domestic population accepted, or at least did not openly oppose, the repression of groups rooted in political Islam in the name of political and economic stability, European officials fell prey to the same assumption. This became even more prevalent after the terrorists attacks in New York City and in Washington D.C. on September 11, 2001, when the EU shifted towards the priority of hard security issues. The dominance of the concern to combat and contain terrorism overshadowed any previous inclinations to widen EU civil society cooperation to include groups with an Islamic background (Spencer 2012:225). Burgat argues that by utilizing the argument “help us to resist these Islamists who are also your own enemies”, autocratic leaders exploited European fears to serve their own political interests (2009:624). Abbas Aroua, an Algerian academic and human rights activist, agreed that the fear of political Islam had “afflicted Europe with an undeniable political ‘blindness’” (quoted in *ibid.* 631). Jünemann coined the term “Democracy-Stability Dilemma” to describe this phenomenon:

The process of democratization normally goes through a very sensitive phase of transition during which there is a growing risk of civil wars, the failure of states, or seizure by undemocratic or anti-western regimes. Confronted with such risks, the EU opts for stability rather than democracy (Jünemann / Knodt 2008:279).

Convinced that a radical democratization would lead to instability and chaos in the southern neighborhood, EU officials chose the lesser evil: non-democratic leaders. Hoping to control Islamic trends and to ensure social stability, the EU increased antiterrorism and security cooperation with these governments. At the same time, funding for civil society projects decreased rapidly. Between 2001 and 2003, the European Commission actually halved the money available for the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights in the Middle East to €7 million (Youngs 2005:240).

Autocratic leaders profited in particular from western unfamiliarity with Islamic organizations (Burgat 2009:624). This unfamiliarity made it extremely difficult for EU officials to distinguish between moderate and extremist organizations and made them dependent on the cooperation with autocratic regimes (Jünemann 2005:257). As a result, autocrats like Ben Ali were able to justify their aggressive repression of Islamic groups and prevent external support for their potential political opponents. The Tunisian opposition figure Moncef Marzouki, who was elected president after Ben Ali's fall in 2011, claimed in 2009 that "since 9/11 dictators have it never had it so good" (quoted in Burgat 2009:625). More than ever, EU civil cooperation was coordinated with the Tunisian government and excluded religious civil society groups, even if they openly supported democratic values and human rights.

The narrow focus of EU civil society cooperation had multiple undesirable consequences. On the one hand, the EU missed the opportunity to help people from different sides of the civil society spectrum to engage in dialogue and to build coalitions, which could increase their influence as well as their social base (Hawthorne 2005:102). Thus, the EU strengthened Ben Ali's approach to criminalize certain organizations and thereby divide civil society. On the other hand, many of the NGOs and human rights groups supported by the EU were not only closely linked to the Tunisian government, but also often lacked public support and only addressed the interests of a small social elite. In contrast, many Islamic welfare associations, which enjoyed popular legitimacy and catered to a large part of Tunisia's population, were unable to secure EU funding. To finance groups with "dubious popular support" raised the question of whether EU civil society cooperation was indeed just a way to promote western interests (Hawthorne 2005:103). Overall, the EU's narrow approach to civil society cooperation had a negative impact on the EU's image in the region.

2.3 Loss of European Credibility

The focus on intergovernmental cooperation and the refusal to cooperate with a wide range of civil society groups led to the loss of Europe's credibility abroad. A whole generation of civil society activists questioned the authenticity of the EU's focus on democratic values and human rights principles. Sihem Bensedrine and Omar Mestiri, two Tunisian human rights activists and journalists who faced severe repression by Ben Ali's regime, criticized the EU's double standards and the "criminal hypocrisy of EU officials" in their book *L'Europe et ses despote* (2004). They explain how "human rights violations and corruption are, to varying degrees, the common traits of those regimes to which Europe constantly lends its political and economic supports" (quoted in BURGAT 2009:626).

The well-known truth that the EU had always preferred state-centered cooperation with its neighboring countries caused mistrust among civil society organizations (European Parliament 2012:26). The double standards of European policy-making had, therefore, already severely damaged the Union's credibility among civil society groups in the Mediterranean region long before the revolution. How were these groups supposed to trust European cooperation if they saw the dictators who repressed their freedom of speech and association on a daily basis welcomed with open arms in the capitals of Europe?

The extent of Europe's detachment from Tunisia's civil society became especially apparent during the first weeks of the uprising in January 2011. When the Arab Spring started in Tunisia and spread to other southern neighbors, the majority of European politicians and academic specialists were caught completely by surprise; none of them had expected a popular uprising in Tunisia. For 20 years, the Ben Ali regime was considered a "bulwark of stability". As a result of this first moment of surprise, the European institutions adopted a "wait and see"

approach, while some European leaders initially even tried to support their partners in the south. France offered to provide Ben Ali military help for his overwhelmed security forces (Khader 2012:33). Even EU officials working at the European Delegation in Tunis, supposedly experts on the situation in the country, were caught unawares by the revolution. Michel Mouchiroud, the delegation's Attaché for Civil Society, Culture and Media Affairs, explained:

“Over the year and a half I had worked in Tunisia, prior to 14 January 2011, we could sense that inequalities were growing, as people individually commented on the systematic corruption that was taking place, but the awakening of the Tunisian people and their persistence to go to the streets and defy the power in place was a surprise, and it opened our ears to unexpected voices coming from the regions and from the youth movement.” (Mouchiroud et al. 2012).

As Mouchiroud points out, the revolution was a turning point because European officials were confronted with their own shortcomings concerning their role in the region. Their way of doing business with the former regimes was now openly questioned by civil society actors.

Mouchiroud admits that he and his colleagues were approached by non-state actors to explain “the ‘why’s and ‘what’s of the presence of an EU Delegation in Tunisia” (Mouchiroud et al. 2012).

However, it was not only EU officials in the Delegation who had to reevaluate their credibility and legitimacy in the region. Also in Brussels, European representatives had to reflect on the EU's past political approach with regard to the autocratic regimes in the southern neighborhood. According to the 2012 EU Neighborhood Barometer, only 39% of Tunisians interviewed believed that the position taken by the EU during the Arab Spring was supportive of the local population (Lannon 2012). Representatives publicly admitted that they had indeed cooperated with the regimes in the region and failed to embrace the uprisings wholeheartedly (Balfour 2012:27). Multiple speeches by European officials like Catherine Ashton, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and Stefan Füle, the

European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighborhood Policy, were characterized by a new rhetoric revolving around the themes of “humility and modesty” (Balfour 2012:7). Exemplary is Füle’s speech to the European Parliament given in 2011:

“We must show humility about the past. Europe was not vocal enough in defending human rights and local democratic forces in the region. Too many of us fell prey to the assumption that authoritarian regimes were a guarantee of stability in the region” (Füle 2011).

Analysts later described this wave of admissions of guilt as a unique *mea culpa* in the history of the European political elite.

CHAPTER 3: EU CIVIL SOCIETY COOPERATION AFTER THE ARAB SPRING

3.1 Revision of European Policies

3.1.1 Renewed Focus on Civil Society

This European *mea culpa* was also translated into a revised foreign policy approach, which included a renewed emphasis on civil society cooperation. Policy documents drafted by the European Commission, the European Parliament and other EU institutions stress the importance of balancing inter-governmental relations with a strong “partnership with societies”. They assert that European support of civil societies makes the EU’s overall foreign policy approach more effective and, at the same time, increases Europe’s legitimacy abroad (Hale / Ursui 2011:1).

An excellent example for the renewed emphasis on civil society cooperation is the joint communication *A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean*, which was published on the 8th of March 2011 as a direct reaction to the uprisings in the Arab world. In this document the EU promises to build “a stronger partnership with the people, with specific emphasis on support to civil society” (European Commission 2011a:3). It is based on the assumption that “a thriving civil society can help uphold human rights and contribute to democracy building and good governance” (European Commission 2011a:6). The European Parliament’s 2012 document *Improving the EU’s support for the civil society in its neighborhood: rethinking procedures, ensuring that*

practices evolve dedicates 44 pages solely to this issue. It stresses the importance of civil society “as an indispensable societal actor that can give impetus to desired reforms or act as their alternative motor” (European Parliament 2012:1). In regard to the Union for the Mediterranean, European Parliament President Martin Schulz concluded one year later:

“The UfM, launched in 2008 at the Paris summit and since linked to the Barcelona process, is at a watershed. It was born under a purely intergovernmental aegis. This model is outworn, because it ignores civil society” (European Parliament 2013).

Thus, cooperation with civil society was put at the very heart of the EU’s revised approach to its southern neighborhood.

3.1.2 The new “Listening Mode”

As part of this new approach to civil society cooperation, the EU vowed to turn away from imposing ready-made solutions. Catherine Ashton emphasized in a speech to the European Parliament that the European response had to be “built on the need to acknowledge past mistakes and listen without imposing” (2011a). She reaffirmed this point of view during a senior official meeting on Egypt and Tunisia, where she argued that the EU should “not dictate outcomes or impose solutions” (2011b). Instead the EU’s new civil society approach is intended to revolve around the so-called listening mode: rather than to impose what is considered appropriate or needed, every cooperation measure should be a direct reaction to needs defined by civil society actors within each neighborhood country.

To this end, the European Commission specified in its communication *The Roots of Democracy and Sustainable Development: Europe’s Engagement with Civil Society in External Relations* that the input of local civil society organizations “as partners in dialogue and in oversight will be at the heart of future EU engagement” (European Commission 2012:6). The European Commission furthermore proposed in this paper to base civil society cooperation on

comprehensive country roadmaps, which are developed collaboratively with civil society actors and improved through constant dialogue between the EU and its partners (European Commission 2012:10).

These in-depth needs-analyses are essential in fully comprehending the civil society landscape in a country and in ensuring the efficiency and impact of EU cooperation. At the same time a comprehensive analysis can also prevent overlapping between different EU instruments or even competition with other donors. This is especially crucial in the southern neighborhood, where the Arab Spring generated a massive increase in public and private donor activities. The need for government agencies, international organizations and private foundations to cooperate is therefore more important than ever (Hale / Ursui 2011:5). Yet, Southern-Mediterranean actors rightfully criticized that, while these policy papers focus on dialogue and an equal partnership, Arab intellectuals and activists were not given the opportunity to contribute to the documents (Khader 2012:38). The reluctance to include civil society actors in the drafting process is arguably a missed opportunity.

Despite this initial contradiction, the new listening mode seems to have been successfully embraced by EU officials working at the European Delegation in Tunis. Michel Mouchiroud, the delegation's Attaché for Civil Society, Culture and Media Affairs, points out that his first response to the revolution was to "just open the EU Delegation doors and listen" (Mouchiroud et al. 2012). To identify specific needs and pressing problems, the European Delegation organized six regional workshops in El Kef, Kasserine, Gafsa, Gabes, Kairouan and Tunis, with a total of 130 civil society associations participating (European Delegation to Tunisia 2012:4). During these workshops, participants identified different types of problems and constraints civil society actors faced in Tunisia.

Based on the result of these workshops, the EU Delegation published an extensive report and established the *Programme d'Appui à la Société Civile* (PASC) with the collaboration of the Tunisian Ministry of Development and International Cooperation. Signed in July 2012, the program has a budget of €7 million and lasts for 48 months, until 2016. Its main objectives are to strengthen the capacities of Tunisian civil society organizations so they can actively support democratization in their country (ENIC 2014b). Another initiative to support the transformation process which can be understood as part of the new listening mode, is the EU-Tunisia Task Force. Established in September 2011, the Task Force brought together EU and Tunisian officials, but also extended the invitation to relevant civil society actors to “listen to voices on the ground” (Balfour 2012:23).

3.2 New European Instruments

While the delegation's PASC and the EU-Tunisia Task Force are initiatives particular to Tunisia, other EU instruments were installed to address civil societies across the southern neighborhood states. In 2011, the EU established the *Civil Society Facility* with an initial budget of €26.4 million. Its aim is to help civil society organizations and other non-state actors to develop their capabilities by offering training and supporting the exchange of best practice (Ioannides / Missiroli 2012:7). In 2013, Füle assured representatives of the *Civil Society Facility* that “the Commission will continue to make significant funding opportunities available to support civil society's efforts to participate in the implementation of the transformation process” (ENCI 2013b). In addition, the EU created the *European Endowment for Democracy*, which came into effect in 2013. With an initial budget of €6 million its goal is to support political parties, trade unions and journalists by giving them access to funds in a direct and less bureaucratic way (Behr / Siitonen 2013:22). To finance new instruments and improve the

efficiency of the existing measures, the EU extended the Neighborhood Policy Instrument's budget to €6.9 billion (Balfour 2012:21). In total, €2.5 billion of the European Commission's aid budget (€13 billion) was allocated to "government and civil society" in 2012 (Youngs / Pishchikova 2013:4).

3.2.1 Inclusion of Non-traditional Civil Society Actors

One topic of discussion during the creation of the *Civil Society Facility* and the *European Endowment for Democracy* was the question of overlap with existing cooperation measures. They are initially designed to complement each other, as well as the European Neighborhood instruments and the EIDHR. There is, however, a chance that the large array of instruments available will leave civil society actors unsure of how to cooperate with the EU. However, when applied as intended, the *Endowment for Democracy* could indeed open the door for civil society actors that are currently under-represented within existing mechanisms. These include, for example, non-registered NGOs, but also pro-democratic individuals like journalists, bloggers and other online activists (European Parliament 2012:31). Since the uprisings in 2011, these non-traditional civil society actors have received more attention by academics, policy makers, and the media. As part of larger, mostly unorganized, social movements, their potential to influence democratization is a new focus of civil society cooperation.

Unlike what researchers originally expected, traditional civil society actors, including NGOs, human rights organizations and professional associations, did not lead the revolutions in the Arab World. Comparative studies show that in fact many well-established organizations too were surprised by the massive social movements that brought down the autocratic regimes (CCDP 2012:12). The journalist Bechir Ben Yahmed wrote in an editorial for *La Jeune Afrique* about the Tunisian uprising that "no party, no union, no politician gave the impetus for this

popular uprising nor were they in any way involved” (quoted in Cavatorta 2012:77). The official absence of civil society representatives does not, however, mean that the members of associations were not protesting. In fact, the opposite was the case, but instead of representing their organizations, they were there in a personal capacity (ibid.).

At the same time, the uprising in Tunisia demonstrated the rise of new civil society actors that see themselves as part of a movement rather than a particular organization. Youth activists, female campaigners for women’s rights, as well as individuals engaged in the protests utilized the internet, and in particular social media sites, to encourage change in Tunisia (European Commission 2012:4). As a result of the influence these new actors had on the change in the Arab world, Cavatorta even calls for a “profound rethinking of the definition, normative conceptualization and concrete application of the term” civil society (2012:80). The European Endowment for Democracy is designed to broaden the scope of civil society cooperation and to open the door for these new actors. Yet, how accessible are the European Endowment and the other new instruments?

3.2.2 Accessibility of EU Instruments

One of the biggest criticisms in regard to European civil society cooperation before the Arab Spring was the inability to make funding available to all kinds of actors. EU assistance was built on the assumption that a wide spectrum of civil society groups was actually able to compete for funding. However, as discussed previously, the competition process was primarily decided by the quality and professionalism of the funding proposals. And, while these proposals objectively ensure fair competition, they are in fact a major obstacle for small or newly formed groups. As a result only a small number of professional associations received funding on a regular basis, which left other civil society actors feeling overlooked and frustrated (European Parliament

2012:5). In addition, even among more professional groups, the application requirements for EU grants were perceived to be burdensome and tedious. For many civil society organizations, EU funding therefore became a “last resort”, when they had exhausted all other possibilities (Hale / Ursui 2011:4).

However, not only the proposals constitute a hurdle for less professional actors. Often they also lack basic capabilities and skills in achieving their goal of influencing the democratization of their countries. Therefore, international organizations like the EU should not limit their support to financial means, but also offer workshops on essential skills such as management, fundraising, lobbying, public relations and networking (Ioannides / Missiroli 2012:5). Otherwise, new instruments and initiatives will lack the ability to maximize the impact of European civil society cooperation.

In Tunisia, the limited experience and capacity deficit of civil society actors was considered during the implementation of the new cooperation instruments. In 2011, the European Delegation to Tunisia called for applications for funds allocated under the *Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights*. To level the playing field for all Tunisian associations, regardless of their experience or level of professionalism, the Delegation also trained around 50 organizations to make them familiar with EU procedures (Mouchiroud et al. 2012). This offering of workshops and training sessions is a clear acknowledgement of past mistakes and addresses the bureaucratic obstacles civil society actors had to overcome in the past. In addition, the newly established *European Endowment for Democracy* simplified the cooperation between the EU and Tunisian non-state actors.⁴

⁴For example, civil society organizations, movements and individual activists can now apply for European support online in English, Russian, French, and Arabic, which considerably lowers the application barrier (European Endowment for Democracy 2014).

Multiple Tunisian projects have already secured funding through the *Endowment for Democracy*. Examples of the wide range of organizations supported by this measure are the *Association for Development and Strategic Studies in Médenine* and the group *Mon art malgré moi*. The former reinforces civic education and political participation ahead of the upcoming parliamentary elections (January to June 2014), while the latter raises awareness of human and social rights among marginalized youth by organizing an itinerant dance performance across rural parts of Tunisia (February to October 2014) (European Endowment for Democracy 2014). The focus of these new cooperation projects is clearly on rural areas and actors that previously lacked support by the EU.

In conclusion, in Tunisia at least, the new instruments have been embraced by civil society groups and additional training programs make the old instruments more accessible. However, while rural civil society groups and other non-traditional actors are increasingly able to secure EU grants and practical training, one section of the society continues to be excluded from this new approach: faith-based associations.

3.3 Continued Exclusion of Islamic Groups

3.3.1 Widening Social Cleavages in Tunisia

During the uprising, the majority of Tunisian society was united by one common purpose: the fall of the regime. Civil society groups put their differences aside and, as mentioned before, their members participated as individuals rather than as representatives of their associations. As opponents of the regime, these individuals succeeded in cooperating with others with similar views, while also bridging the religious and political gaps between them (Deane 2013:5). The initial protests were characterized by their secularism, which the slogan “Bread, Freedom and

Dignity” illustrates (CCDP 2012:9). The protesters’ main goal was to ensure the free exercise of their rights as citizens in a Tunisia freed from Ben Ali’s repressive regime.

However, once the Tunisian people successfully ousted Ben Ali, the deep cleavages present within Tunisian civil society were no longer masked by this common cause (CCDP 2012:9). These cleavages were especially severe between secular, pro-western groups and more traditional, religious organizations. Islamic groups first joined the protests at a later stage, which is understandable considering the decades of repression and persecution they endured under Ben Ali. If the uprising had failed, these groups would most likely have served as scapegoats and paid the price for popular opposition. Yet, despite their late mobilization, it was Islamic groups who benefitted the most from the revolution because they were able to draw on extensive social networks in the poorer and more rural areas where they provided welfare services (CCDP 2012:10).

Islamic groups successfully embraced the opening of the public and political spheres after the revolution. The victory of the Islamic *Ennahda Party* in the election for a constituent assembly on October 23, 2011 demonstrated the broad support for moderate political Islam. In addition, the rise of conservative forces, in particular Salafist groups, show the extent of the social divide between traditional and secular forces. According to estimates, between 60,000 and 100,000 Tunisians identify themselves as Salafists today, with teenagers and young adults making up a large part of this movement (Feuer 2012). However, due to its diversity, the Salafist movement, and its influence on stability and security, is still poorly understood. High profile criminal acts by a violent minority, such as the attack on the U.S. embassy in Tunis, have dominated both the domestic and international public discourses and weakened faith in the democratic aspirations of religious groups in general (Freedom House 2012:1).

3.3.2 EU Focus on Secular Organizations

The mistrust between secular and religious groups is also reflected in EU policy making. Although the EU committed itself to base civil society cooperation on factors such as capability, impact and legitimacy, in many cases the religious affiliation of a group is still decisive. As Thepaut points out, many of the Islamic associations actually share the same goals as EU programs, such as poverty reduction and health care provision, and should therefore be seen as “a political challenge, not a security threat” (2011:20). In 2012, Catherine Ashton seconded this in an article published in The New York Times:

“I think there is an acute need for getting beyond this mutual suspicion and for getting to know each other better. Lumping all Islamists into one and the same category is misleading and unhelpful. We realize the need for more first-hand knowledge [...] This can only be done through direct dialogue” (Ashton 2012).

As discussed previously, the European Delegation to Tunisia actively embraced civil society dialogue after the Arab Spring. However, the inclusion of religious groups remained extremely limited. For example, the *European Endowment for Democracy* does not support a single faith-based group in Tunisia (European Endowment for Democracy 2014). Even more telling is the fact that the EU Delegation’s country report on civil society in Tunisia does not mention the term Islam once and shies away from discussing Muslim civil society activities (European Delegation to Tunisia 2012). Just as before the Arab Spring, European civil society cooperation is again mainly focused on cooperating with western-style organizations or liberal individuals.

The failure to include religious groups is not only a missed opportunity to widen Europe’s knowledge of their motivations and goals, but has more severe consequences for the stability of Tunisia. As described before, the social cleavages widened considerably after the successful ousting of Ben Ali. The narrow focus of EU cooperation and funding can further increase this social fragmentation and heighten competition between western-style NGOs and Islamic

organizations (Behr / Siitonen 2013:22). Furthermore, one-sided support can also lead to a delegitimization of the groups receiving training and funds. Because the EU lost credibility and trust before and during the Arab Spring, groups backed by EU funds are often accused of implementing a foreign agenda. This accusation is especially convincing if the group lacks public support. If voices of Islamic groups, which enjoy a broad base of supporters, are not even heard by EU officials, the suspicion of bias and lack of understanding of local realities seems to be further confirmed (CCDP 2012:20).

So instead of promoting dialogue and collaboration among members of different parts of the social spectrum, EU policies might indeed contribute to the mistrust between them. Yet, historical research shows that the future of countries in transition from authoritarian regimes to democratic forms of government highly depends on the ability to bridge social cleavages and to build consensus among civil society groups. While the opening of public and political spaces highlighted the frictions in Tunisia's society, it also created the unique opportunity for an inclusive debate (CCDP 2012:11). The aim of the EU and other international donors should be to facilitate this dialogue, not to take sides.

CONCLUSION

In summary it can be said that the Tunisian revolution changed EU civil society cooperation, both qualitatively and quantitatively. During Ben Ali's rule, EU cooperation measures were hijacked by the regime and instrumentalized to suppress potential political opponents. It became clear that European instruments for democracy promotion, which were based on the experiences in Eastern and Central Europe, were designed to consolidate young democracies rather than to create them. They were unsuitable and, therefore, unsuccessful in an autocratic context, where civil society was either oppressed by the state or closely linked to the government. As a result, the concept of civil society as a transformative power lost its appeal among European officials at the beginning of the 2000s.

The Arab spring, demonstrated the shortsightedness of the EU's preference to work with and not confrontationally against autocratic regimes to initiate change. EU officials publically admitted that the EU did lose its credibility abroad. Consequently, the EU reformed its foreign policy approach towards the southern neighborhood and renewed its emphasis on civil society cooperation. New EU instruments incorporate a wider range of civic actors, including non-traditional social movements. However, justifiably worried about the rise of radical Islamic organizations, the EU still struggles with including and supporting moderate Islamic groups. The question whether Islam and European values are compatible continues to have a lasting effect on EU policy making. I believe, the EU needs to update its concept of democracy that it hopes to promote and embrace different varieties of democracy.

The new Tunisian constitution proves that Islamic tradition can be compatible with universal freedoms and gender parity. Three years of uncertainty, economic struggle and widening social divides were the price for these 149 Articles. Despite the EU's previous cooperation with Ben Ali's regime, its support is still considered necessary to consolidate this young democracy. In February 2014, Mongi Hamdi, the Tunisian Foreign Minister, called on his European partners: "We, Tunisians, have done our job [...] Now we're waiting for our partners to come and help us accomplish our mission for a democratic transition" (Irish 2014). Civil society cooperation will be a vital element of this task.

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