

Tunisia inTransition

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American Democracy Promotion in Transitioning Tunisia: A Recipient-Centered Approach

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1. Introduction

At the wake of the protests which erupted across Tunisia between December 17th 2010 and January 14th, 2011, the population succeeded in ousting a sclerotic regime which ruled the country for over 23 years. The American response to this popular uprising was not static, starting as a cautious approval of the protests and culminating in utter support for Tunisians' desire to achieve a democratic transition. In the State of the Union address on January 26th 2011, President Barack Obama hailed "the will of the people" which "proved more powerful than the writ of a dictator". He clearly stated that "the United States of America stands with the people of Tunisia, and supports the democratic aspirations of all people".¹

Subsequent to the revolution, American officials frequently iterated the States' willingness to support the Tunisian transition to democracy. Speaking from the State Department on January 25th, 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pointed out Tunisians' lack of "experience" and "institutional muscle memory" to guide them through the democratic transition, and underscored the United States' commitment, along with other

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¹ United States. The White House. Office of the Press Secretary. *Remarks by the President in State of Union Address*. Washington, D.C. January 25, 2011.

international actors, to offer the needed help "to see this transition successful and leading to a democratic vibrant outcome".²

Hence, Tunisia witnessed a surge of international NGOs and aid agencies interested in implementing their activities in a burgeoning democracy. American donors were particularly strongly present. American officials have always stressed democratization as a key concern of their policy in the MENA region, mainly to counter the roots of terrorism. Therefore, bolstering democracy in this region was usually portrayed as a main component of the U.S.'s global war on terror. Nonetheless, U.S. democracy promotion efforts were heavily criticized for the discrepancy between rhetoric and actual performance. While claiming to support democracy efforts and champion human rights, the U.S. is still backing and protecting autocratic regimes which accommodate its interests in the region. This double-standard policy raises concerns about the legitimacy and credibility of American funding.

In "The Legacy of U.S. Intervention and the Tunisian Revolution: Promises and Challenges one year on", Azadeh Shahshahani and Corinna Mullin question the drastic shift in American stance towards the Ben Ali regime. The former president, a long-standing ally of the U.S., cooperated with the Bush

² United States. Department of State. *Remarks with Spanish Foreign Minister Trinidad Jimenez After Their Meeting*. Washington, D.C. January 25, 2011.

administration in the context of the war on terror through passing the Anti-Terrorism Law which resulted in serious breaches of human rights under the pretext of combating terrorism.³ The United States, nonetheless, turned a blind-eye to such violations of the law while publicly endorsing democracy. Therefore, the authors stress that American democracy promotion “often functioned as a means to maintain, rather than challenge, the status quo”.⁴

Considering this, it seems valuable to inquire about the motives of this dramatic change of attitude and to assess the changing American activism in Tunisia. This work particularly focuses on Tunisian civil society activists’ perception of American support for democracy after the 14th January. We raise the following questions: Why would the U.S. be interested in Tunisia? How has the revolution impacted the implementation of democracy promotion? And how can we assess American efforts to contribute to the democratic transition in the post-revolution period?

Regarding that Tunisian civil society is among the chief targets of international aid, we seek to consider the presence of American-funded donors through the opinions of the recipients of these funds. Inspecting the credibility of such actors is particularly critical in

transitional Tunisia as the country is still groping its way towards establishing its first democracy. Moreover, it is worthwhile to examine perceptions of the U.S. as an old actor in post-revolutionary Tunisia in order to detect change or continuity in these perceptions. Such an empirical inquiry would allow tracing the evolution of American democracy assistance efforts before and after the revolution as observed by Tunisian actors on the ground. In the following, we provide an overview of the major American actors which are engaged in strengthening civil society in Tunisia.

2. Overview of Key American donors in Tunisia

In support for Tunisia’s democratic transition, the United States has offered around \$500 million since the 14th January 2011. This aid focused on technical and financial endowment for the country’s economy, security, and civil society.⁵ The U.S. government is present through the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), operating in Tunisia before the revolution, and The United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The toolkit of American donors to boost the capacities of local civil society associations includes grants, trainings, workshops, and information-sharing sessions. The core

³ Shahshahani, Azadeh, and Corinna Mullin. “The legacy of US intervention and the Tunisian revolution: Promises and challenges one year on.” *Interface Journal*, 4.1 (2012): 67-101. p. 78

⁴ Ibid. p. 81

⁵ United States. U.S. Embassy Tunis. Foreign Assistance Unit. *U.S. Government Foreign Assistance to Tunisia*. Washington, D.C.: Department of State, Sep. 2014. p.4.

objectives of these efforts, as outlined on the Department of States' website, are to "bolster efforts to strengthen civil society and civic participation in the political process; support a free and fair electoral process; and promote an inclusive transitional justice process".⁶ According to a fact sheet released by the Department of State delineating U.S. government assistance to Tunisia, the United States has allocated around \$6 million in additional assistance for the 2014 elections.⁷

In May 2011, USAID set up an office in Tunisia. This agency particularly devoted more resources to civil society development.⁸ Its assistance for Tunisia grew from \$4.7 million in 2011 to \$107.7 million in 2012. Around 94% of the general funds by USAID in 2012 were directed to the sector of government and civil society.⁹ In May 2011, USAID initiated the "Tunisian Transition Initiative", through partnering with the Development Alternative¹⁰, Inc.¹¹ The initial objective of this initiative for the first six months, as stated, was to support the National

⁶ United States. Department of State. *U.S. Government Assistance to Tunisia*. Washington, D.C.: Department of State, 14 Dec. 2012.

⁷ United States. Department of State. *U.S. Government Assistance to Tunisia*. Washington, D.C.: Department of State, 7 April 2014.

⁸ United States. U.S. Embassy Tunis. *Tunisian American Cooperation*. N.p: U.S. Embassy Tunis., n.d.

⁹ United States. USAID. *CY 2012 Development Assistance Profile: Tunisia*. Washington, D.C.: USAID, n.d.

¹⁰ DAI (Development Alternatives, Inc) is a for-profit development consulting firm that implements USAID-funded democracy programs around the world.

¹¹ Development. Alternative, Inc. "Tunisia Transition Initiative (TTI): Final Report (May 2011-July 2014)". Washington, D.C.: USAID, July 2014.

Constituent Assembly elections. In the context of this initiative, USAID partnered with several Tunisian associations engaging in distinct areas of activity across the country.¹²

The presence of MEPI in Tunisia dates back to August 2004 with the inauguration of its regional office at the American embassy in Tunis.¹³ Its activities mainly concentrated on educational exchange. Recently, MEPI disbursed grants to five local civil society organizations to implement a project which involves voter education activities.¹⁴ MEPI also backs women associations through funding projects which seek to benefit particularly rural women in terms of personal and social development in the anterior governorates.

The National Endowment for Democracy (NED), an autonomous organization established and funded by the U.S. Congress since 1983, has no field office in Tunisia or anywhere in the world. Its central headquarters is located in Washington D.C., and it essentially operates through local partners in the target countries. Prior to the revolution, the NED used to fund three to four associations annually. In the aftermath of the 14th January, the NED expanded its thematic focus, its country budget, and its local partners, hence

¹² Development Alternatives, Inc. loc.cit.

¹³ United States. U.S. Embassy Tunis. *Tunisian American Cooperation*. loc.cit.

¹⁴ United States. U.S. Embassy Tunis. Foreign Assistance Unit. *U.S. Government Foreign Assistance to Tunisia*. op.cit. p. 3

increasing in visibility and activism. The NED holds activities and events in Tunisia also through its four affiliated institutes: The National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE), and the American Center for International Labor Solidarity (ACILS). They provide assistance for civil society through capacity-building trainings and workshops to help new associations with structuring their organizations.

In the ensuing part, we present our analytical framework, which draws on the concept of democracy promotion, and our qualitative methodology which relies on semi-structured interviews. Then, we proceed with providing the results of our case study.

3. The Analytical Framework: A Recipient-Centered Approach to Democracy Promotion

3.1 Perceptionist Framework and Democracy Promotion

The study of perception represents an own strand of research within the field of foreign policy analysis. Examining external perceptions of prominent international actors is particularly relevant to the field of democracy promotion because the success of democratization efforts partly hinges on local perceptions held about a particular actor. Besides this, studies of perception provide the

opportunity to evaluate the quality of democracy assistance, and hence to improve it and propose further recommendations. These are among the reasons why numerous studies¹⁵ explore perceptions of democracy promotion in the target countries.

The issue of American funding, and foreign funding in general, directed to civil society ignited heated political discussions in the post-Ben Ali era. This controversy has also elicited some scholarly interest. For instance, “Foreign Funding’ in Post-Revolution Tunisia’ by Kristina Kausch attempts to assess the development of foreign assistance in Tunisia after the revolution and how it is viewed locally by representatives of civil society, political parties, government officials, and foreign donors.¹⁶ It focuses on both donor and recipient views of the question of foreign funding. Our research pursues a similar objective; however, we attempt to provide a focused in-depth study of the local civil society activists’ perception of the American endeavor to endorse the transition to democracy in Tunisia. This study adds to the existing literature on the external image of the

¹⁵ See for instance, Barkan, Joel. “Perceptions of Democracy Assistance”. *The World Movement for Democracy*. Washington, D.C. (2011), and DeBartlo, David M. “Perceptions of U.S. Democracy Promotion”. *The Project on Middle East Democracy and Henrich Boll Stiftung*. (May 2008), and Khakee, Anna, et al. “Pragmatism rather than Backlash: Moroccan Perceptions of Western Democracy Promotion”. EuroMeSCo. Paper 73. (November 2008)

¹⁶ Kausch, Kristina. “Foreign Funding in Post-Revolution Tunisia”. Working Paper. *FRIDE*. 2013.

United States as an international actor in the arena of democracy promotion.

The United States is among the key state actors in the field of democracy promotion. Democracy Promotion is conceived of as a “long-standing element of foreign policy”¹⁷, even though its appropriate place in U.S. foreign policy remains a contested issue. Peter Burnell defines democracy promotion as “an international activity engaged in by a variety of governmental, intergovernmental, commercial, and non-profit actors that aims to further political change towards more democracy in prospective, emerging, and new democracies”¹⁸. Democracy promotion comprises a wide array of means and strategies including coercive measures, the use of conditionality, economic aid, financial sanctions, and support provided for civil society. The latter is our focal point of interest.

In “Democracy Promotion: The Elusive Quest for Grand Strategies”, Peter Burnell argues that various actors are interested in assisting democracy through approaching civil society basically because they tend to be “less obviously political”, and because politically

¹⁷ Susan B. Epstein, Nina M. Serafino, and Francis T. Miko. *Democracy Promotion: Cornerstone of U.S. Foreign Policy*. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2007.

¹⁸ Peter Burnell. Democracy Promotion. In: *Encyclopaedia of Human Rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. Cited in: Anna Bilous, “A New Perspective on the Concept of Democracy in Light of Democracy Promotion Theory”. *Graduate Conference at the University of Oxford, Oxford, 24 Oct. 2012*.

speaking it is the “safest” among other means of promoting democracy.¹⁹ Support for civil society represents a bottom-up approach of endorsing democracy, instilling political change through a focus on grassroots level. The U.S. implements its democracy assistance policy through numerous governmental and quasi-governmental agencies. The major agencies for American democracy promotion include the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL), the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), and the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC). The U.S. government also acts through quasi-governmental actors notably the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) which, though operates independently, receives an annual appropriation by the U.S. Congress. These different actors, along with others, are the instruments of implementing democracy in the target countries.

3.2 *A Qualitative Methodology*

We follow an empirical approach to examine perceptions of the American donors’ presence in Tunisia. Qualitative data was collected through a series of semi-structured interviews with key representatives of Tunisian civil society that had direct contact with American-funded donors. In most of the cases, our

¹⁹ Peter Burnell. “Democracy Promotion: The Elusive Quest for Grand Strategies”. *Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft*. 2004. pp. 100-116 p. 110.

interviewees worked closely with other donors, particularly Europeans, which contributed a broader insight into other foreign donors. The interviews were conducted in June 2014 in Tunis. The interviewed activists belong to different fields of activism: political monitoring, women and youth, capacity-building, media, and culture and democracy.

Relevant stakeholders were identified by thoroughly researching American donors' websites to single out civil society organizations that have received funding from American donors. To build our sample, we strived to select civil society organizations which were particularly active and engaged in several partnerships to ensure that potential respondents are well-acquainted with American, and generally, foreign assistance. Then, the selected respondents were contacted by phone to seek their agreement to conduct the interview. The interviews were conducted in Tunisian Arabic, and translated into English for the sake of this research. The interviews lasted between 25 and 60 minutes.

Our aim, in this paper, is to provide a close scrutiny of Tunisian perception of American donors whereby we explore different elements that shape the general perception. Being more acquainted than the general public with American democracy assistance efforts and with broader foreign funding, civil society activists are the most suitable to inform such a discussion. We are particularly interested in

how changes in the domestic environment at the outset of the ouster of Ben Ali impacted the way American donors employed their resources to support the development of Tunisian civil society. We try also to examine if this assistance has met the expectations of Tunisian activists. Overall, the interview questions revolved around three central themes: American donors' presence in Tunisia before and after the revolution, broad evaluation of American donors, and the subsequent 'risks' of receiving assistance.

4. American Donors in the Post-Ben Ali Era: A Changing Role for the U.S. in Tunisia?

4.1 Prior to the Revolution: Limited American Presence

Representatives of Tunisian civil society stated that the activities of the existing American donors under the Ben Ali regime were quite curtailed for a host of reasons. In the first place, there was no substantial social activism in Tunisia before the 14th January.²⁰ Tackling controversial questions relating to human rights and democracy would not have been possible. One respondent corroborated, «before the revolution, there was no space for civil society activism notably for the themes of democracy and human rights; there was a huge control over such activities».²¹ Very few associations managed to escape the shackles of

²⁰ Interviews 3, 4, and 5 (12, 20, 18 June 2014 respectively)

²¹ Interview 4 (20 June 2014)

the authoritarian regime and to approach such issues over which the government had placed excessive control. Even in this case, such themes were usually discussed ‘by proxy’ in the context of “cultural debates”.²² They were mostly addressed from a theoretical perspective.

Another impediment that hampered the activism of American, and generally foreign, donors in Tunisia is the strict control over the flow of money. “The hardest thing was to transfer money through the central bank; few associations could handle the situation”.²³ The respondents reported additional obstacles that associations used to face in order to win a grant such as cultivating contacts with foreign donors and developing grant proposals: “Not every association could present a grant proposal, channels of communication between civil society associations and donors such as MEPI or NED would represent a problem”.²⁴ Consequently the activities of these donors mainly revolved around “economic” themes such as entrepreneurship.²⁵

Local activists indicated that the NED dealt with few associations that addressed issues of democracy and human rights in implicit and conceptual terms under the Ben Ali regime.²⁶ One respondent commented “what I know is that NED didn’t support associations which

were in favor of the previous regime, unlike others who used to canalize international aid so as to benefit only associations which worked for the regime”.²⁷

4.2 Post Ben-Ali: Rising Interests and Growing Activism

“The first quarter of the Tunisian revolution was spontaneous, out of strategy either European or American, later it shifted into a struggle between both powers to find a place in the new geography”.²⁸ This is how Tunisian civil society activists conceive of the reactions of international actors to the rapidly-escalating changes that the country has witnessed. This struggle was illustrated in the proliferation of foreign actors that set up new offices in Tunisia. “After the revolution, various donors sought a place in Tunisia, especially with the absence of government control over the flow of money and quick successive changes in government that weakened its role”.²⁹ One interviewee expounded that there was a conspicuous competition between France and the USA after the ouster of Ben Ali; “France wanted to override its mistake, and the US wanted to contain this change”.³⁰

There has been an intense interest in civil society regarding the leading role that this

²² Ibid.

²³ Interview 4 (20 June 2014)

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Interview 3 (12 June 2014)

²⁶ Interviews 4, 2, and 6 (20, 10, and 13 June 2014)

²⁷ Interview 6 (13 June 2014)

²⁸ Interview 2 (10 June 2014)

²⁹ Interview 3 (12 June 2014)

³⁰ Interview 2 (10 June 2014)

segment plays in democratic transitions.³¹ One respondent maintained that the U.S. seeks to implement its policy and perspective through active associations. As a matter of fact, civil society associations have ‘an increasing influence on political decision making...civil society played an essential role in drafting the new Tunisian constitution’.³²

The respondents consented that American efforts to promote democracy in Tunisia are interest-driven. Traditionally, the stakes are not high in Tunisia, especially compared to more influential countries like Egypt. The mounting international interest in Tunisia, shown in the influx of foreign organizations, can be traced back to a slew of factors. In terms of geography, Tunisia is ‘a door to Europe and a stakeholder in the Mediterranean region’ which urges particularly European countries ‘to protect stability in this country’, to ‘preserve their interests’ and to ‘protect their geography’ by restricting ‘illegal immigration’.³³ With respect to the United States, Tunisia is more particularly important because ‘they are betting on the success of the Tunisian revolution to market smooth democracy which the American government endorsed as a model’.³⁴ Tunisia stands as a potential successful model of democratic

transition.³⁵ It is currently a “laboratory where different actors are being active”.³⁶

According to some Tunisian civil society representatives, through supporting civil activism in Tunisia, the United States seeks also to improve its image. “Another thing is improving the image...this was restricted to the US and the EU, but now Japan also tries to create a new image in Tunisia.”³⁷ Other reasons were cited such as “to curtail religious extremism”³⁸ that may endanger the donors’ countries. One activist elucidated that the United States tried to back autocratic regimes, but these regimes “failed to protect themselves let alone to protect the interests of foreign countries”.³⁹ The interviewees for this study recognize the existence of various interests in Tunisia, but they reject the existence of any hidden conspiracies. “These countries certainly have intentions and interests, it depends on the country, but there are no conspiracies”.⁴⁰

The respondents reported observing an evident change in the activism of American donors in the post-revolution period. The change that occurred within the activities of these donors in Tunisia is concomitant to the rise of social activism during the transition. “Development in the work of these donors is relevant to the

³¹ Interviews 5 and 1 (18 and 10 June 2014)

³² Interview 1(10 June 2014)

³³ Interview 2 (10 June 2014)

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Interview 5 (18 June 2014)

³⁷ Interview 4 (20 June 2014)

³⁸ Interview 2 (10 June 2014)

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Interview 3 (12 June 2014)

change that happened in civil society”.⁴¹ The 14th January social upheaval instigated a breakthrough in civil activism in the country. Former barriers that once impeded any attempt to engage in serious discussions about political reform no longer existed. As the old regulations were being dismantled, “There ‘was’ no more things like ‘this funding isn’t going to our allies’”.⁴² With the widening number of associations, there was a parallel growing need for more funds to assist these nascent groups in establishing themselves amidst a wide array of other non-profit associations. One interviewee explained “Today after the revolution, things changed, the perspective changed, once you have a clear project in mind with a clear plan, you can present a proposal to the donor, even when it comes to the central bank; things changed”.⁴³

4.3 *Assessing the Performance of American Donors*

4.3.1 *General Appreciation*

Perceptions of the role that American donors, namely the NED, are playing during the transition are rather positive. Most of the interviewees observed that the NED is investing huge efforts to reinforce burgeoning associations. Tunisian civil society activists tend to appreciate the support offered by American donors, “we wouldn’t

have survived for three years if it were not thanks to the NED”.⁴⁴ One respondent claimed that the NED particularly has supported few associations that embrace democratic ideals under the previous regime and that “it is to the credit of this donor that they do not interfere or impose directions or a strategy that contradicts the will or the orientation of the granted association”.⁴⁵ The respondents reported that not imposing directions on the grantees is of critical importance regarding the doubts revolving around foreign funding.

4.3.2 *Coordination and Cohesion*

On the question about the cohesion of the activities of different American donors, the interviewees mostly noted the existence of coordination between different American donors operating in Tunisia. Two respondents commented that the existence of coordination is quite normal as several donors receive funding from the same source. “The MEPI, NED, USAID receive money from the same donors, so there must be coordination at the level of the Department of State.”⁴⁶ Basically, there is coordination at the level of dividing the fields of activities. “There is coordination on certain levels, which means that some donors receive money from other donors, and some donors receive money from the same source, so the first coordination starts at this level by dividing fields of activities

⁴¹ Interview 2 (10 June 2014)

⁴² Interview 4 (20 June 2014)

⁴³ Interview 4 (20 June 2014)

⁴⁴ Interview 1 (10 June 2014)

⁴⁵ Interview 2 (10 June 2014)

⁴⁶ Interview 3 (12 June 2014)

sometimes.”⁴⁷ One civil society leader even asserted that there is coordination between American and European donors; “if you receive a grant for one project from a certain donor then you can’t expect to receive funding for the same project from another donor”.⁴⁸

4.3.3 *Obstacles to Receiving a Grant*

As Tunisian civil society has been mostly built from scratch, writing project proposals seems to be a daunting challenge. Adhering to the specificities of each donor while drafting proposals, particularly proposals for long-term projects, was repeatedly mentioned as a major hardship, which is mainly due to the lack of experience and capacity building issues.⁴⁹ American donors seem to have realized this issue, and developed adequate measures to facilitate the task of nascent associations. “The NED understood this situation, and they distributed fewer amounts of money to several associations”.⁵⁰ According to the interviewed activists, American funders are rather understanding, more flexible and easier to deal with.

As a matter of fact, the question on the obstacles to receive funding has mostly invoked a comparison between American and European donors.⁵¹ “There is more

bureaucracy within European donors; it is more flexible and easier to work with American donors”.⁵² The respondents tended to resort to such a comparison to highlight differences between both foreign donors and to stress the simplicity of dealing with American ones. The respondents praised specifically the NED’s efforts to reduce the requirements to receive funding and to simplify procedures so as to encourage young associations to apply for foreign grants. The interviewees complimented the simple procedures and plausible requirements set by American donors as compared to European actors, mainly the European Union. One respondent added that another convenience of working with American donors is a shorter waiting period to receive a reply after submitting the project.⁵³ American donors emerge as “less bureaucratic”⁵⁴ and more “understanding”⁵⁵ of the limited capacities of nascent associations through simplifying procedures and being more open to local civil society’s concerns and needs. The interviewees warned against the imposition of tough conditions as the latter may lead to a monopoly of the grants by the few experienced associations.

⁴⁷ Interview 4 (20 June 2014)

⁴⁸ Interview 6 (13 June 2014)

⁴⁹ Interviews 6, 5, 1 and 2 (13, 18, 10, and 10 June respectively)

⁵⁰ Interview 6 (13 June 2014)

⁵¹ Interviews 6, 5, 4 et 1 (13, 18, 20, and 10 June respectively)

⁵² Interview 5 (18 June 2014)

⁵³ Interview 4 (20 June 2014)

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Interview 5 (18 June 2014)

4.3.4 *Follow Up and Monitoring*

The respondents cheered the steady monitoring and follow up by American donors. “They always send emails to inquire about our questions, and any difficulties that we may face”.⁵⁶ One respondent however explained that associations shun asking for help for fear of withdrawing the grant.⁵⁷ Another contended that seeking help from the donor raises risks of interfering.⁵⁸ One interviewee noted that donors provide assistance to well-planned project proposals without further investigating into the association’s capability to implement such a project effectively. Consequently, at times, there is very little impact compared to the huge amount of money spent on the project.⁵⁹ Two respondents brought up the oxymoron between huge spending and limited impact, and recommended that the focus should be placed on quality rather than quantity of projects.⁶⁰ Donors should ‘work with a clear vision’; they should have “parameters as how to distribute their grants”.⁶¹

4.3.5 *Distribution of Funds*

Tunisian civil society representatives detected that while the MEPI focused on themes like entrepreneurship and development, the NED targeted mostly women

organizations.⁶² Thus, the fields of activities vary across donors even if they overlap at times. As a general observation, some fields received more attention than others mainly because such a transitory period posited urgent themes which were “immediately relevant to the democratic transition”⁶³ and that needed to be addressed by Tunisian civil society such as transitional Justice, the constitution, the electoral process, the transition to democracy and youth participation.

American donors additionally emphasized the issue of women leadership because “they saw a potential in Tunisian women” according to some activists.⁶⁴ Others thought that the focus on women was essentially due to the threats that they received at the wake of the revolution; “I feel that the focus was more on fragile and weak segments of society such as women and youth. Women, particularly, have received serious threats to undermine their status as we witnessed”.⁶⁵ Some respondents criticized however the extreme focus on the gender issue which, they believe, received more attention than required while there was no generous funding for crucial themes like controlling the media during the elections. One repercussion of such a focus is the fact that some associations tried to “invest in the issue” for the sake of winning a grant.⁶⁶

⁵⁶ Interview 5 (18 June 2014)

⁵⁷ Interview 3 (12 June 2014)

⁵⁸ Interview 2 (10 June 2014)

⁵⁹ Interview 3 (12 June 2014)

⁶⁰ Interviews 3 and 2 (12 and 10 June 2014 respectively)

⁶¹ Interview 2 (10 June 2014)

⁶² Interview 1 (10 June 2014)

⁶³ Interview 2 (10 June 2014)

⁶⁴ Interview 5 (18 June 2014)

⁶⁵ Interview 1 (10 June 2014)

⁶⁶ Interview 6 (13 June 2014)

Some respondents also lamented that other critical themes like culture and education have not attracted much generous funding. Even when the theme of citizenship was addressed, it was frequently “framed within the constitutional or electoral process”. Tunisians now need to focus more on “the culture of citizenship”.⁶⁷ Employability is another theme which received a limited funding though “it is one of the feathers of the revolution”.⁶⁸ One interviewee recommended that donors should foster associations which define “strategic goals” for their projects and plan to build “a lasting culture of democracy”.⁶⁹

4.4 The Risks of Receiving Assistance: Criticism, Foreign Influence, and Dependence

All of the respondents reported being subject to criticism for relying on foreign, particularly American, funding. Some interviewees mentioned that they had been discouraged from approaching American donors so as “to work free of doubts”.⁷⁰ Others stated that seeking foreign funding was divisive in the boards of their associations.

We had criticism from inside our board...and the idea of receiving funding from American donors was totally rejected especially at the wake of the revolution, because each aid can turn into an involvement in internal affairs and for fear of foreign agendas,

so we shunned the idea and we didn't propose any project until later.⁷¹

Generally, the observers noted that such criticism has diminished, “it is not as harsh as it used to be”.⁷² Some respondents clarified that they usually dismiss such criticism basically because the argument of serving a foreign agenda has been misused to tarnish the reputation of some successful associations.⁷³ One interviewee also argued that there are few concerns about foreign influence because “Tunisian civil society proved to be mature” and would counter such attempts to meddle with domestic affairs.⁷⁴

In the meantime, some worries about foreign interference persist. Foreign assistance remains a sensitive issue which is inextricably linked to the question on “the independence of national decision-making”.⁷⁵ Therefore, some civil society activists still look cautiously at American funding while others still adamantly refuse to apply for such a funding. One respondent explained that what influences such an attitude is the contradiction which underpins U.S. foreign policy in the MENA region; it is “a contradiction between endorsing democracy in certain regions and fighting it in other regions”.⁷⁶

⁶⁷ Interview 4 (20 June 2014)

⁶⁸ Interview 3 (12 June 2014)

⁶⁹ Interview 2 (10 June 2014)

⁷⁰ Interview 1 (10 June 2014)

⁷¹ Interview 6 (13 June 2014)

⁷² Interview 4 (20 June 2014)

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Interview 1 (10 June 2014)

⁷⁵ Interview 2 (10 June 2014)

⁷⁶ Ibid.

Others, however, undermined the existence of such worries or their viability as there is a plethora of donors in Tunisia today. In case one actor proves to have “bad intentions”, there must be other sources for funding. “Fortunately, there are several donors in Tunisia, so if one stakeholder tries to impose directions, there are other alternatives”.⁷⁷ Still, American donors should maintain their legitimacy and credibility by targeting the issues which ail this country. They might lose their credibility if they “get too much into politics, take sides, publicly endorse a particular political party, or fund activities that influence the stability of this country”.⁷⁸

“We would like the international community to assist us and contribute to this transition but there are some red lines that should be respected”.⁷⁹ This summarizes how civil society looks at foreign funding. It is needed and required, not unconditionally though. Funding is welcomed, but the donor should not interfere with “setting the values, strategies, orientations and policies of the association”.⁸⁰ In other terms, the association’s activities should not be framed within a foreign agenda. Tunisian civil society seems to tackle the question of American funding pragmatically. Realistically, local associations cannot survive without foreign assistance especially that local funding is still

unavailable. Even in case the government allocates some public funding, it would be too limited that it cannot cover the needs of associations which are heading towards professionalism.⁸¹ “If you want to be visible and have an impact, then you need money”.⁸² One respondent argued that civil activism cannot rely solely on volunteerism. In the meantime, in Tunisia, there is no tradition of fund-raising to help collect money to implement developmental projects.⁸³ As a result, foreign donors are required to fill his gap. If international aid is suspended, “most associations will perish or return to amateur civil work” as one respondent put it.⁸⁴

5. Conclusion

This work studies perception of American democracy promotion in Tunisia among one of its main target groups, civil society. In this study, we tried to provide a rather nuanced image of perceptions of American democracy assistance for Tunisia. Considering that there has always existed a resentment of American policy in the Arab world for a slew of reasons, mainly U.S. support for Israel, the war on Iraq, and support for autocratic regimes, this enquiry seeks to detect change or continuity in Tunisian perceptions of the U.S. in the post Ben Ali era. At first greeted with a lot of suspicion for

⁷⁷ Interview 6 (13 June 2014)

⁷⁸ Interview 4 (20 June 2014)

⁷⁹ Interview 2 (10 June 2014)

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Interviews 3 and 4 (12 and 20 June 2014)

⁸² Interview 3 (12 June 2014)

⁸³ Interview 6 (13 June 2014)

⁸⁴ Ibid.

historical reasons that were not easy to overlook, American support quickly gained prominence.

The growing activism of the U.S. in Tunisia seems visible as a multitude of American-funded donors have initiated projects in Tunisia. The respondents observed that while American governmental and quasi-governmental organizations did very little to unveil the atrocities of the old regime before the revolution, they did not either finance associations affiliated with the regime. As a matter of fact, these donors cannot be blamed for their little interest in Tunisia before the ouster of the old regime because in the first place there was no substantial activism in Tunisia and the regime placed severe restrictions on both internal and external actors. Still, the NED particularly, as reported by the respondents, tried to cultivate ties with associations that challenged the regime in a subtle way.

This study has revealed that representatives of Tunisian civil society seem to appreciate the support provided by American-funded donors during the transitional period. Unlike democracy assistance performance under the Ben-Ali regime, the new activism of U.S. donors seems to match the rhetoric of the U.S. on the issue. As promised, American donors are playing an important role in strengthening Tunisian civil society, a cornerstone of transition in new democracies. Though the

strategic importance of Tunisia is minimal compared to more influential countries like Egypt, being the pioneer of Arab uprisings has driven much attention and somewhat increased its political importance. Despite being aware of the interests underpinning the American approach to democracy promotion in Tunisia, civil society activists contend that they welcome American funding as long as their associations remain independent and free of foreign influence. This implies that Tunisian associations utterly refuse directing, guiding, or altering their goals and objectives by an external actor.

The interviewees stressed that while Tunisians should remain watchful so as to deter foreign attempts to influence particularly the political scene, they assert that conspiracy narratives should be discarded. Watchfulness is crucial, but harboring unfounded misgivings about these donors should be avoided. Realistically, these donors are needed to succeed the democratic transition, and as long as they prove their credibility, the focus should rather be on how to profit from their presence in the country. This pragmatic attitude emanates from a deep-seated conviction that foreign funding is essential to the continuity of civil activism as the latter needs generous funding that cannot be obtained locally. Therefore, foreign aid remains the sole source of funding for local civil society, even though this raises the problem of dependence on external support.

As a wide range of external donors are being active in Tunisia, questioning the intents and interests should be directed to other actors besides the U.S. The respondents agreed that threat might be lurking in a different spot. Overall, only one interviewee reported having had a negative experience with an American donor. As for the rest, dealing with American donors seems to be very convenient for numerous reasons. American donors are hailed for their easy-to-understand procedures and relatively simple requirements. The easiness of approaching American funding bodies is highlighted through a comparison with the relatively-complicated procedures and regulations imposed by the Europeans. The interviews reveal that the NED particularly enjoys a wide appreciation, basically because it accommodates the needs of nascent associations. Considering the limited capacities and experience of new civil society groups, the NED started allocating fewer amounts of grants to a larger number of grantees so as to guarantee the fair distribution of funds. Though being widely-appreciated at

the outset, this approach started driving some criticism as some activists noted that the ultimate focus was placed on guaranteeing access to the grants to the detriment of the quality of projects which were funded. Such an approach may undermine the effectiveness of democracy promotion. Therefore, the respondents called for the necessity of valuing quality over quantity.

At last, it must be noted that favorable perception of American democracy assistance is an essential pre-requisite for a positive impact of American initiatives and projects in Tunisia. Therefore, U.S. donors should retain their credibility by setting clear goals and objectives, not meddling with political parties, and committing to core values of the Tunisian society. It would be important to add, however, that it remains to be explored whether this favorable perception applies to American actorness in other issues such as commercial relations, security relations, and diplomacy.

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