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International democracy promoters and transitional elites: favourable conditions for successful partnership. Evidence from Tunisia's democratization

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Abstract Building on empirical qualitative material, this article argues that the international promotion of democracy is crucial to account for Tunisia's positive transitional outcome. Specifically, the study sheds new light on the capacity of international democracy promoters (IDPs) to enhance competitive politics and contribute to the professionalization of political parties and civil society groups during Tunisia's post-revolutionary path. The article also offers two research avenues for reviewing the negative standing on international democratic promotion in the MENA region. First it argues that promotion of democracy in transitions away from authoritarianism is more likely to succeed when a wide spectrum of transitional elites agrees upon the political system to establish and they do not enter into conflicts on how to collaborate with the IDPs. Second, it emphasizes that during a transitional period, structured and strategic partnerships between IDPs and transitional elites enable fragile societies to sustain their democratic process if internal and external anti-systemic interventions do not place obstacles in the path of this interplay.

Introduction

Beginning in December 2010, a wave of uprisings spread across the Arab world. From Morocco to Bahrain, a number of authoritarian regimes faced domestic revolts that challenged their long-standing hold on power. Some of the leaders were deposed, others granted political concessions to the protesting crowds, and others still employed violence and/or financial inducements to counter the unrest. In any case, for a time, enthusiasm about a potentially inevitable democratic outcome of the Arab uprisings criss-crossed the region (Kaldor 2011). The excitement, however, did not last long and complex political challenges characterized post-revolutionary trajectories, with most transitions away from authoritarian rule quickly derailing. As of 2019, the region presents a gloomy picture: a return to or retrenchment of authoritarianism prevails in some countries, while others have fallen into civil war.

In contrast, Tunisia has achieved a transition to democracy and its success remains a beacon of hope amidst regional chaos. Furthermore, the country has also become an international showcase to challenge the narrative of the

inevitability of Arab authoritarianism, as Tunisians managed to build liberal-democratic institutions in a short period of time. While the country faces significant security and economic challenges, it was able to hold two rounds of fair and competitive elections in 2011 and 2014 and it adopted a liberal Constitution in 2014. In 2018, Tunisia also held the first municipal elections since the revolution and the first free local elections in Tunisia's history. The country is slowly strengthening its institutional framework, enforcing the rule of law and improving the democratic practices of national actors. There is, of course, a degree of popular scepticism about the new political system (Yardimci-Geyikçi and Tür 2018; Teti et al 2019), but from an institutional perspective the country is consolidating its democracy. Surveys conducted in Tunisia after the revolution show that despite concerns about the economic and political implications of democracy, 'Tunisians continue to say that democracy, whatever its problems, is the best system of government for their country' (Robbins 2015, 81). Furthermore, following the 2018 local elections, a Freedom House's report noted: 'despite the relatively low turnout, a decisive victory by independent candidates reflected a dynamic political culture in which citizens are taking democracy into their own hands and running for political office'.[1]

Scholars have pointed to a number of domestic factors to explain how the country avoided backsliding and a return to authoritarianism (Bellin 2018). The apolitical role of the armed forces (Anderson 2011), the moderation of political parties (Cavatorta and Merone 2013; Boubekeur 2018), the strength of labour unions (Ly Netterstrøm 2016) and the oversight role of civil society (Murphy 2013; M'rad 2015) are all components that contribute to explaining Tunisia's successful transition. Rival political parties have narrowed their distance on policies and civil society has played a crucial role in supporting the transition by holding governments to account. In short, Tunisian civil and political actors deserve credit for their capacity to achieve, in a short period of time, considerable democratic gains amid enormous financial and security troubles.

Yet, in the aftermath of the 2010 revolution, transitional elites lacked technical and financial skills to cope with the challenges of democratic transitions. Thus, most of the Tunisian transitional elites warmly welcomed foreign economic and technical aid, showing particular 'eagerness' to collaborate with international democracy promoters (IDPs). In this respect, the structural conditions for IDPs penetrating transitional Tunisia and delivering assistance dramatically changed. During Ben Ali's regime (1986–2011) IDPs, with some exceptions (Marzo 2019), lacked opportunities to impact Tunisia's politics, as the incumbent power hampered their activities or tamed their capacity (Bush 2015). The regime's demise though opened wide the door for IDPs to rethink their strategy of assistance. As soon as the barriers hampering a direct and fair partnership between international and national actors crumbled, IDPs massively intervened in Tunisia, tailoring their actions according to the new political scenario. The expanding interactions between IDPs and national partners, however, occurred in a power vacuum, wherein Tunisian transitional elites had to figure out the support parties had in society and they had to build post-revolutionary democratic institutions.

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[1] See the Freedom House report: <https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/policybrief_democratic_backsliding_in_tunisia.pdf>

What favourable conditions have allowed IDPs to assist Tunisian transitional elites in managing the challenges of democratization? How did such interplay foster the success of the democratic transition and the beginning of consolidation?

Building on empirical qualitative material, the article argues that international promotion of democracy is crucial to account for Tunisia's positive transitional outcome. Specifically, the study sheds new light on the ability of IDPs to enhance competitive politics and to help the professionalization of political parties and civil society groups during Tunisia's post-revolutionary path. Tunisia's transition to democracy offers two research avenues for reviewing the negative standing on international democracy promotion in the MENA region the majority of the literature highlights. First, this article argues that promotion of democracy in transitions away from authoritarianism is more likely to succeed when a wide range of transitional elites agrees upon the political system to establish and they do not enter in conflict on how to collaborate with IDPs partners. Second, it emphasizes that, during a transitional period, structured and strategic partnerships between IDPs and transitional elites—political parties, civil society groups and national institutions—enable fragile societies to sustain their democratic process if internal and external anti-systemic interventions do not place obstacles in the path of this interplay. When these two structural conditions are on place, IDPs have higher ability to assist their national parties because their action does not enter into conflict with other Western foreign policy's objectives such security and stability.

In this respect, employing the Tunisia's case, this study highlights favourable internal and external conditions paving the way for fruitful interplays between IDPs and national partners. From a domestic point of view, this article concurs with the literature suggesting that the elites' willingness to collaborate with IDPs increases the latter's ability to deliver effective actions (Jamal 2012; Börzel 2015; Freyburg and Ricther 2015; Hackenesch 2015). Freyburg and Ricther (2015, 499) argue that the effectiveness of IDPs strongly depends on 'the decision of local elites to cooperate, or to refrain from doing so, and to either react neutrally or side with the regional authoritarian power'. Börzel (2015, 526), for her part, claims that 'domestic conditions severely limit the effectiveness of Western democracy promotion'. In Tunisia, the absence of sectarian polarization and ethnic divides, the presence of a Western-oriented society with a moderate Islamic party (*al-Nahda*) with linkages to the West and, most importantly, a general agreement among transitional elites upon the democratic political system to be established[2], allowed Western IDPs to collaborate strategically with a large range of political and civil actors.

From an external perspective, Tunisia's post-revolutionary path has proceeded without relevant geopolitical conflicts as international and regional rival actors are showing low interest—and have limited opportunities—in penetrating the country and destabilizing its democratization (Hinnebusch 2018). In this regard, a number of factors avoided external rival forces entering Tunisia, unleashing domestic conflicts and political chaos. First, the absence of the regional sectarian divide (Sunni/Shiite) has reduced both the claims of internal factions and the capacity of regional sponsors—Iran and Saudi

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[2] With the exception of Salafists who, however, were outlawed in 2013.

Arabia—to intervene in lobbying domestic elites. Second, Tunisia has been a marginal player in the Arab-Israeli conflict, which has been a long-standing burden for countries such as Egypt and Syria, affecting their domestic politics. Third, Tunisia's relatively scarce natural resources have liberated it from the traditional geopolitical and economic appetites of foreign countries and multi-national companies.[3]

Against this background, this study argues that the 'geopolitical neutrality' and Tunisia transitional elites' agreement over the political direction Tunisia transition had to take reduced the Western tension between promoting democracy and preserving security and economic objectives, ultimately permitting IDPs to deliver reasonably smooth and uninterrupted democratic assistance. IDPs enhanced two crucial transformative processes in their national Tunisian partners. First IDPs bolstered the autonomous capacity of civil society groups and independent national institutions to manage the challenges of the democratic transition, including monitoring rounds of competitive, fair and free elections. Second, IDPs' technical training with political parties, progressively tailored on their needs, improved the understanding of the boundaries of competitive politics, narrowing the distance on policies and fostering political compromises. IDPs helped political actors to evolve from political consensus over democracy to competitiveness within democracy.

After a brief description of the methodology employed, this article is then organized in four sections. The first reviews the literature on international democracy promotion in the Arab World. The second charts the evolution of IDPs' capacity to impact national groups in Tunisia before and after the Ben Ali's regime. It also provides empirical data highlighting the willingness of a wide range of actors to collaborate with IDPs in the immediate aftermath of the revolution. The third section investigates how IDPs' assistance enhanced the skills of political parties' members, boosting their ability to handle competitive politics in the transitional period. The fourth section charts the way international assistance provided extensive technical skills and financial means to leading Tunisian NGOs—and independent national institutions—which eventually transformed into solid 'intermediary structures', serving as watchdogs for governmental responsiveness. The article ends with a conclusion describing what is theoretically and empirically new about international democracy promotion in Tunisia.

Data and Method

This article relies on qualitative analysis. The author collected and analyzed data by triangulating 20 semi-structured interviews, documents published by IDPs and their Tunisian partners and the authors' informal talks with international officers and Tunisian elites. Interviews were conducted in Tunisia 2017 and 2018 and in Washington (DC) in 2018.

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[3] For more information on this topic see Marzo 2018, *Foreign Actors in Post-revolutionary Tunisia: Enhancing Democratization and Lowering Political Tensions,* Middle Eastern Institute <https://www.mei.edu/publications/foreign-actors-post-revolutionary-tunisia-enhancing-democratization-and-lowering>

A few caveats deserve mention. Qualitative research investigating the impact of global actors on domestic level encounters inevitable methodological pitfalls. First, interviews with domestic actors could generate a bias in the way the respondents frame their subjective view of the transitional process. On the one hand, some political parties tend to downgrade the importance of international assistance and play up their exclusive role in the success of the transitional process (Katzenstein and Keohane 2007, 32). Schmitter (1996, 26) remarks that transitional elites 'have an incentive to play down the role of external actors and the impact of international forces'. Other national actors, especially civil society groups, receiving foreign aid may come up with rhetorical and biased messages about the quality of the assistance of their international partners as they aim to retain economic benefits. Interviews with IDPs might also produce bias in the interactions. Some IDPs have little interest to appear as enhancers of political transition, as this profile can put their work in jeopardy elsewhere. Others may overestimate their contribution in bolstering the skills and capacity of national partners.

This research employs a few techniques to reduce the bias arising from interactions both with international and national respondents. Initially, the author analyzed the relevant material the international and domestic groups published and unpublished, including final reports, oral speeches and project drafts. This overview was helpful in figuring out general trends and shared goals in delivering assistance. More importantly, it allowed for tracing the evolution of the different forms of international assistance, highlighting breakthroughs and changing priorities throughout Tunisia's democratization journey. The author then led a first round of informal conversations with a number of IDPs working in Tunisia (German political foundations, European Union, Freedom House, National Democratic Institute, International Republican Institute) and with Tunisian elites (academics, politicians, association leaders, institutional leaders) during a six-month fieldwork in Tunisia 2017. The perceptions of an array of different actors allowed to filter general information that the documentary sources contained, often merely descriptive and one-sided.

With this background in mind, in early 2018 the author prepared two similar templates for leading semi-structured interviews with members of Tunisia's political parties and members of Tunisia's civil society groups. The selection of the political parties offers a representative range of actors. It includes four parties with different positions in the legislature (ruling party—opposition party), different ideologies (national/secularist—Islamists—leftist–) and size (small parties—large parties). For civil society groups, the author selected three leading Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)—*ATIDE, I-Watch*, *Mourakiboun* and a smaller NGO, *Jeunesse Sans Frontieres*. Both for political parties and civil societies, semi-structured interviews with the Tunisian respondents were strategically built to lower the above-mentioned bias. Indeed, the interviews alternated questions on the overall respondents' opinion on the Tunisia transition—and the role of his/her organization—and questions which, instead, addressed the crucial purpose of the research such as the interplay his/her organization or political party had with IDPs. Such technique helped to lower the perception that the research was trying to downgrade the contribution of the national groups to the democratization process. The author used

counterfactual reasoning in addressing some questions in order to increase the validity of the answers. Finally, the author led an additional round of semi-structured interviews with respondents from IDPs to triangulate the data and confirm findings. These interviews were held both in Tunisia and in Washington.

Rethinking the international democracy promotion in mena democratization studies

Scholars have long debated the role of international factors in regime change and transitions to democracy. The main divide in the democratization literature is about the actual significance of such factors in shaping national outcomes. Some have assigned a secondary role to the international dimension (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Diamond and Linz 1989), although they recognize its potential growing importance with the intensification of globalization (Schmitter 1996; Hurrell 1996). Other scholars suggest instead that international factors are as important as domestic ones for understanding regime change (Pridham 1991; Whitehead 1996; Pevehouse 2005; Levitsky and Way 2010; Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2013). Others still argue that the international dimension should be the starting point for investigating regime change (Yilmaz 2002; Cavatorta 2009) mostly considering the contemporary global era of interdependence.

Recent literature shows that global factors significantly impact national politics in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) mostly when it comes to regime survival (Yom and Al-Momami 2008; Brownlee 2012; D'Ambrosio 2014; Yom 2015; Bellin 2018). In contrast, aside from the case where foreign actors overturn regimes through military invasion (Beetham 2009), the scholarly debate focuses less on the international dimension of regime change and liberalization in the Arab world—particularly when the political transition turns into democratization. This lack of academic attention limits the knowledge on the role IDPs have in impacting domestic policy in the MENA's democratic transitions. Intuitively, the shortage of democratization processes in the region contributes to reducing the opportunities for the progress of the scholarly debate on international democracy promotion. In particular settings, however, some scholars have argued that Western states and Western organizations (often the donors also funding the IDPs) show a degree of 'conflicting interests' in democracy promotion, which may lower the IDPs ability to further democratization (Grimm and Leininger 2012). Realists scholars argued that, particularly in transitional or post-conflict settings, Western promotion of democracy can clash with the Western quest for stability and security (Grävingholt et al. 2009; Richter 2012). This potential tension is particularly visible in the MENA region, where Western states and Western organizations prefer stability and security and are often reluctant to put real pressure on incumbent authoritarian regimes to further democratization process (Brownlee 2012). Moreover, the academic debate believes the mechanism of democracy promotion in the MENA is flawed. There is a burgeoning literature on the shortcomings of IDPs in triggering and/or sustaining processes of democratic transition in the region. In fact, a number of studies highlight transnational actors promoting liberal values and democratic practices as inconsistent, counterproductive (Van Hüllen 2015; Jamal 2012), or ending up simply reinforcing illiberal regimes

(Durac and Cavatorta 2009; Börzel 2015; Khakee 2017). Moreover, MENA deeply divided and sectarian political settings lowered the IDPs capacity to assist the domestic partners. Indeed, IDPs assistance often 'emphasizes this polarization by supporting some groups rather than - and over – others' (Jamal 2012). National elites who fear losing benefits employ mechanisms to disempower the potential impact of democratic entrepreneurs, eventually taming democratic promotion capacity (Bush 2015). In short, when it comes specifically to the MENA region, the academic literature holds that the impact of international promotion of democracy programs has actually contributed to the resilience of authoritarianism (Ghalioun and Costopoulos 2004; Ayoob 2005; Hinnebusch 2006).

Against this background, there is widespread scepticism about the positive contribution IDPs may have when transitional processes start. In a recent article, Abbott (2018) argues that in MENA 'how international democracy promotion relates to democratization outcomes appears to be assumed rather than explicitly grounded in any conceptual literature'. Indeed, academic knowledge lacks theoretical framework to analyse cases in the MENA where in fact IDPs actions contribute to enhancing processes of liberalization and democratization. Likewise, there is a shortage of empirical findings on what outcomes structured and programmatic interplay between IDPs and national partners can generate.

As outlined earlier, the transition away from authoritarianism in Tunisia confirms this tendency, with numerous studies focusing on domestic processes as the crucial drivers in determining the success of Tunisian's democratization. With some exceptions (Hill 2016; Abderrahim et al 2017), scholarly debate largely neglects the interactions between international actors and domestic groups. Hill (2016) applies Levitzky and Way's model to the Maghreb countries that experienced uprising in 2010–2011 in order to demonstrate that Tunisia had stronger linkages with the West, but he does not engage much with post-revolutionary dynamics in Tunisia. Most importantly, his book on Tunisia does not explore the interplay between IDPs and national partners in Tunisia's democratization process. Abderrahim and his colleagues (2017) edited a volume exploring the international relations of Tunisia since the 2010 revolution. Although the book provides interesting insights on the role of the EU, United States NGOs and Germany in fostering democratization, it is short in theoretical frameworks and the resulting knowledge is not systematized. Some of the authors are NGOs officials or journalists who fail to connect theoretical reasoning with their arguments. Although the authors lay down arguments on international democratic promotion in Tunisia, this is analyzed within broader packages of international assistance, which also includes security and economic cooperation.

The low scholarly investigation on the international context of Tunisia's democratization risks limiting its understanding. In the Tunisian case—the outlier in the region—it is important to examine how international democracy promotion impacted domestic processes in the transitional period, because a thorough analysis may highlight what structural conditions changed in the post-revolutionary period and how they favoured for the successful interplay between IDPs and national partners. From a theoretical point of view, Tunisia's democratization can offer new insights for reconsidering the negative

standing on the IDPs in the MENA region. Tunisian successful transitional processes can indeed highlight some domestic and external variables that reduced the Western 'conflicting interest' (Grimm and Leininger 2012) in democracy promotion, ultimately making the IDPs' assistance more effective. The Tunisian success may in fact undermine in part the generalization of realist theories about the Western foreign policy and international democracy promoters for a return, albeit limited, of liberal internationalist approaches (Diamond 1999; McFaul 2004), showing that under particular conditions 'all good things can go together' (Packenham 1973) and democratization can complement stabilization and security (Bouchet 2013).

The influence of international democracy promoters in the Tunisian democratization process has then considerable theoretical implications for the democracy promotion literature in so far as Tunisia represents a case where the often-mentioned hypocrisy of the Western international community *vis-à-vis* the Arab world is not on display. In this regard, Tunisia's democratization may highlight similarities with previous waves of transition away from authoritarianism—Southern Europe, Latin America and Eastern Europe— wherein international democratic assistance contributed both economically and technically to support the political and social development of democratizing countries (Whitehead 1996; Dimitrova and Pridham 2004; Bunce and Wolchik 2006).

The next three sections investigate and conceptualize the significance of the interplay between international democracy promoters and Tunisian partners in the democratic transition and early consolidation.

From electoral monitoring to democratic promotion: the international assistance shift in Tunisia

Following Huntington (1991), since the onset of the 'third wave' of democratization, many scholars have considered elections as the 'hallmark of democracy', emphasizing the idea that holding elections routinely is 'the essence of democracy'. Huntington's argument has encountered strong criticism (Carothers 2002; Whitehead 2002), but some scholars have presented new evidence about the positive role of the routinization of elections, even in authoritarian settings, making them central to proto-democratic and democratic politics (Lindberg 2006; Sadiki 2009). In analyzing processes of liberalization in the Arab world, Sadiki (2009, 67) notes that *routinization* of elections is a relevant achievement because it highlights the 'solidification of elections as an irreversible *modus operandi* in the cluster of Arab 'semidemocratizers''". The theory of routinization of elections, however, has obvious limitations when it comes to Arab regimes like Ben Ali's, which, despite holding elections regularly, relied on authoritarian practises and undemocratic social organizations (Brumberg 2002). In the MENA region fraudulent results, coercive mechanisms, irregularities and bureaucratic practices loom large (Kraetzschmar and Cavatorta 2010) and elections assume the form of confrontation over groups' access to resources rather than debate over policies (Lust-Okar 2006, 468). National institutions, then, serve as instruments for authoritarian power, holding control and altering electoral dynamics, whilst elections take place in a 'façade' multiparty system (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009). These dynamics

allowed incumbent powers to establish electoral autocracies, wherein routin-ization of elections does not generate any democratic achievement.

Ben Ali's regime was an 'electoral autocracy' and from his arrival in power, Ben Ali used liberalization and de-liberalization practises to ensure his own survival (Sadiki 2002). For instance, the 1988 National Pact was an attempt to liberal-ize the country. It promised to widen political participation, even including Islamist groups. Yet, reconciliation did not last long and did not have any real impact on democracy (Murphy 2013), as Ben Ali used this brief liberalizing period to entrench his grip on power. Likewise, in the mid 2000s, pressured by internal criticism and Western allies, Ben Ali promised fairer multiparty elections for the 2009 Presidential round. Shortly before the 2009 Presidential elections, however, the regime issued an electoral law de facto ruling out those candidates who could represent even a small threat to the uncontested reaffirmation of his party. The capacity of the regime to secure routinized multiparty, yet fraudulent, elections allowed Ben Ali to manage his stay on power in an illiberal democracy. His regime's tricky electoral practices, while pleasing some international allies, did not create the conditions for competitive politics and liberal reforms.

Most importantly, the ability of the Ben Ali's regime to routinize multiparty elections, although rigged and unfair, placed constraints on Western democratic assistance in Tunisia. Indeed, Western powers, including the European Union (EU), limited their 'democratic' assistance to regular rounds of electoral monitor-ing, failing, however, to ensure their fairness and/or to promote political plural-ism and liberal values. In Ben Ali's Tunisia, Western state actors sent small delegations to monitor elections days, thereby ignoring what happens before and after the electoral round. When Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs) or International Non-governmental organizations (INGOs) raised concerns about unfair procedures, low turnout and widespread patronage, Western states largely ignored their warnings and usually congratulated Ben Ali on his re-election.

Against this backdrop, IDPs had a very limited room to manoeuvre inside Tunisia. United States groups such as National Democratic Institute (NDI), International Republican Institute (IRI) or Freedom House did not have opera-tive offices in the country. German political foundations—along with few other IDPs established in Tunisia—kept a low profile and promoted activities and programs that did not overtly challenge the regime (Marzo 2019). Moreover, the bulk of external 'democratic assistance', as in the case of the EU, was deliv-ered through the Tunisia central government, failing to bypass authoritarian control and, ultimately, ending up being ineffective in promoting political pluralism and liberal values (Durac and Cavatorta 2009). The only time the EU employed its instruments to directly reach civil society without state control—through the European Instrument of Human Rights and Democracy—was in 2009.[4] In short IDPs had severe limitations for promoting democracy, political pluralism and liberal values in Tunisia.

The transition away from authoritarianism in Tunisia opened opportunities for IDPs to rethink their engagement, tailoring the assistance agenda on the domestic partners' needs. Indeed, when the Ben Ali's regime crumbled, its

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[4] The European Union used the European Instrument for Human Rights and Democracy (EIHRD) in Tunisia for the first time in 2009. This instrument allowed to assist foreign civil partners bypassing the state control.

collapse triggered a dispersion of power wherein IDPs increased their chances to influence national actors from the very early stages of democratization. IDPs delivered a multifaceted assistance to political parties, civil society and national institutions, eventually spurring transformative processes for their partners. According to Carapico (2013), the democratic promoters in the post-revolutionary period had several objectives, including assisting pre-electoral arrangements, providing extensive training to political actors, supporting the logistic organization of electoral rounds, reinforcing the technical capacity of national institutions and enhancing the ability of civil society organizations to lead activities in the post-election period.

Interestingly, a wide range of transitional elites, including moderate Islamists, welcomed international democratic promoters and their agenda more than other political and actors across the region. The two *ad-interim* cabinets ruling Tunisia in the aftermath of the revolution and the political elites running for the 2011 election—including Islamist, nationalist/secularist and leftist forces—worked together on establishing a democratic system in Tunisia, while in other countries across the region experiencing political transition, ruling elites were quite divided on the political system to be established. For instance, in Egypt, transitional elites were more divided 'over elementary questions regarding who should assume power and how transition should occur' (Landolt and Kubicek 2014, 998). In the aftermath of the Tunisian revolution, the consensus on the direction the country's political transition had to take increased the capacity of IDPs and transitional elites to build goals-oriented partnerships. This is a crucial factor in understanding the results of democratic promotion in Tunisia, as it confirms Freyburg and Ricther's (2015) thesis mentioned in the introduction. According to them, indeed, the IDPs ability to impact national partners varies according to the degree of willingness that the domestic elites show to engage in the partnership.

Empirical data back up such statements. In an interview with the author, an NDI official said that he had repeated talks with leading Tunisian politicians in the transitional period, including Nejiib Chebbi and Mustapha Ben Jafar and members of the Islamic Party al-Nahda, who urged IDPs to assist technically on the democratic steps to undertake. Likewise, an IRI official said that his team had extensive talks with the main political actors in Tunisia, who were eager to share suggestions on how to proceed.[5] In an interview with the author, a Freedom House's official also stated that his team connected world-leading experts of democratization with Tunisia political leaders who were dealing with the complexity of building a democracy.[6] German political foundations received assistance requests from old partners they had had before the revolution and new emerging groups. Therefore, since 2011 German assistance skyrocketed and the country's offices—already operating in Tunisia—widened their networks and increased their assistance budget.[7] The former Tunisian President of the Republic, Moncef Marzouki, in 2013 described the Germans as Tunisia's best friends in Europe. The German foreign minister Westerwelle, for

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[5] Interview with an International Republic Institute official, Washington, DC 2018.
[6] Interview with a Freedom House official, Washington, DC 2018.
[7] Despite the foundations not releasing details on the budget, most of the officials interviewed have stated that the allocation of money was three times bigger after 2011.

his part, was one of the first visitors to post-revolutionary Tunisia in February 2011.[8] The EU immediately shifted its approach toward Tunisia. Especially in the assistance to civil society, the EU new agenda targeted, selected and assisted non-state actors, bypassing the control of the central government. In several internal reports, the EU recognized the shift in the approach and the goals of democratic assistance, especially widening the partnership to non-state actors.

In this regard, despite the post-revolutionary challenging political and social obstacles, the October 2011 legislative elections were held peacefully and a large number of international actors, ranging from Western states to International Organizations (IO) to INGOs, deemed them free and fair (Murphy 2013). Political parties accepted the result of the elections, showing satisfaction with the democratic system. Furthermore, the establishment of the *Instance Supérieure Indépendante pour les Élections* (ISIE) and the *Haute Autorité Indépendante de la Communication Audiovisuelle* (HAICA) marked two important breakthroughs in the post-revolutionary period. By setting up independent institutions accountable for organizing elections and monitoring fair participation and pluralism, Tunisia achieved a crucial objective in its transitional period. The blossoming of civil society also represented an asset for democratization, particularly the emergence of many 'watchdog groups' monitoring institutions and political parties.

However, all these national groups—political parties, nascent independent institutions and civic associations—faced several challenges. First, they did not have the financial means to deal with these enormous tasks. Second, the small number of skilled personnel and the overall lack of technical expertise disempowered them in coping with the upcoming elections. Third, political parties needed assistance on how to compete within the new institutional framework, handling ideological reconciliation after decades of polarization. In short, although there was a broad consensus over democracy among transitional elites, they needed external assistance to manage the challenge of democratic transition. The story of the interplay between international democratic entrepreneurs and their national partners helps to understand how such processes unfolded.[9] As early as late February 2011, international experts began training members of national groups to make them more autonomous and technically prepared in organizing and monitoring elections, including the practices that precede and follow electoral rounds. The journey from the 2011 to the 2014 elections highlights a countless number of partnerships between international groups and national civil society groups and national institutions. Reports from IDPs highlighted

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[8] The Tunisian President of the League of the Human Right confirmed this, by saying Westerwelle was the 'first visitor of the revolution' (Abderrahim et al 2017, 136).

[9] The United States, the European Union, and the World Bank are the largest donors supporting Tunisia's democratic development. As soon as the Constituent Assembly passed the 2014 constitution, US democracy funding for Tunisia peaked the $20.89 million in FY 2016. The EU's democracy funding to Tunisia was non-existent before the revolution, but by 2015, it accounted for 18 percent of the bloc's €356 million aid package to the country. The World Bank has allocated $430 million to its 'Urban Development and Local Governance' project to support Tunisia's decentralization.

how Tunisian domestic partners achieved several objectives and showed steady progress in their democratic practices.[10] Specifically, the interplay between IDPs and their national partners enhanced two crucial transformative processes for the success of the democratic transition.

From consensus over democracy to competition within democracy: lowering tensions among political parties

In a transition to democracy, where the dispersion of power creates a political vacuum, national elections may become a battleground for international competitors backing their respective allies. Most of countries across MENA region that lived through political change or challenges to incumbents attracted rival external forces into domestic politics (D'Ambrosio 2014; Al-Muslimi 2015; Phillips 2015). This 'porosity' to external influences in regime transition has characterized the politics of the region for decades, as the international context of cases such as Algeria's failed democratization between 1989 and 1992 (Cavatorta 2009), and Egypt post 2011 revolution (Brown 2013) for instance, demonstrate. Tunisia, in contrast, shows the absence of strong anti-systemic forces fostering national polarization with the purpose of shutting down democratic progress. Tunisia lacks antagonistic regional and international powers locked in confrontation about the direction national politics should take.

As mentioned in the introduction, the level of external antisystem intervention in Tunisia was low because of the country's marginal position in regional issues, the shortage of oil resources and the homogenous non-sectarian society. Such variable created a kind of 'geopolitical neutrality' over the direction of national politics and deterred foreign power's rivalries in Tunisia's politics. Western international democratic assistance in Tunisia, therefore, worked because it was relieved of the 'conflicting interests' that often surrounded the promotion of democracy elsewhere (Grimm and Leininger 2012).

The results on the ground are remarkable and it is, therefore, important to investigate the role IDPs played in assisting political parties during the transitional period. Indeed, making democracy work requires a solid expertise on how to carry out elections that respect the rule of law, the principle of transparency and political responsiveness. These include the setting up of electoral lists, a capacity to communicate effectively and to sustain competitive political debates. Likewise, national actors have to build functioning and responsive

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[10] IRI and NDI applauded the capacity of the new-born ISIE to successfully registered nearly one million new voters, approved tens of thousands of candidates, hired over 50,000 poll workers, prepared and distributed election material for nearly 11,000 polling stations. Likewise, they hailed the HAICA's role in ensuring equal coverage of all candidates in the media and warned all contents to avoid personal attack and to lower negative rhetoric during the run-off. Carter Centre concluded that the 2014 'elections were particularly important in consolidating the country's democratic gains since the 2011 revolution including registration procedure, transparency and election day. Indeed, figures from 2011 highlighted high abstention rates among the younger generations. International foundation for electoral system (IFES) stated that "the three rounds of elections were credible and highlight considerable progress from the 2011 elections, particularly in capacity of ISIE to collaborate both with domestic NGOs and international partners in the deliverance of more transparent and accurate process". European Union for its part also remarks relevant improvement. The United Nations through his agency UNDAF acknowledged the internal capacity of Tunisian authorities to organize elections and civil society ensuring its fairness, planning new measures of assistance in years ahead.

institutions that include marginalized people. Finally, a successful transition needs national parties to compete for power through regular elections, using national institutions and public space. Indeed, political parties are indispensable actors in politics (Lipset 2000) and crucial agents of democratization (Storm 2014), but they are often unprepared and poorly equipped to deal with the complexity and the challenges arising from transitional periods.

IDPs contributed to bolstering the technical skills of Tunisian national parties, helping them to better handle the challenges of competitive politics. In an interview with the author, an IRI's official stated that his team conducted the first national opinion survey after the revolution and regularly repeated this procedure to help political parties understand the demands of ordinary citizens and, most importantly, what voters expect from political parties.[11] IRI shared the results with all the parties with the objective of helping them to build an electoral offer tailored to the real needs of citizens. This activity was designed to help political parties frame an issue-based political offer, thereby making the electoral campaign more appealing and competitive and, in turn, reaching out to citizens. Most importantly IDPs worked on increasing their partners' ability to operate within the boundaries of competitive politics. IDPs from United States (Freedom House, NDI and IRI) and Germany (German Political Foundations such as *Friedrich Ebert, Friedrich Neumann, Konrad Adenauer, Hanns Seidel*) led training for Tunisian political parties in the form of multiparty training and single-party training, tailoring the assistance on the needs of their Tunisians and considering the political challenge of the transition.

The IDPs first focus was on multiparty training in order to increase the consensus over pluralistic practices and competitive politics. Such programs enhanced the skills of party members, including accurately comprehending electoral laws, political communication, negotiation skills and political debate. Moreover, multiparty training also allows members of different parties to share ideas and refine their political understanding out of constrained and highly politicized environments such as parliament or the party's *bureau*. More specifically, multiparty training encourages attendees to brainstorm alternative ideas that might improve their understanding of competitive politics and democratic pluralism. The *Hanns Seidel* Foundation (HSS) was particularly active in this respect. Relying on patterns of trust with domestic partners created during their stay in Tunisia (1989–2018), the foundation was immediately reactive to the challenges arising from the transition (Marzo 2019). HSS organized multiparty training with members of all political parties. The foundation invited all the political parties operating within the Constitution's rules and arranged a number of different 'rooms' for delivering technical training on law redaction, political debate, political communication, and conflict resolution.[12] The members of the parties attending rotated around the building to get greater and more extensive training. This activity was repeated several times in Tunis, but also in other governorates. United States IDPs delivered similar multiparty

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[11] Eighteen national public opinion polls are available online. <https://www.iri.org/country/tunisia>

[12] Interview with Hanns Seidel officials, Tunis 2017. To have an idea of the activities HSS led in Tunisia see for instance <http://www.hssma.org/activities.cfm>

assistance, especially from 2011 to 2014. According to an NDI official, this training helped political parties realize that reducing sterile and ideological confrontation on issues facilitate the way political parties build their response to people's needs. Most importantly, it made them realize that moderation and competitive politics are the only means through which they remain in the political arena. Moreover, political parties' members just sitting with each other and doing joint exercises on political affairs might end up sitting in Parliament and benefit the collaborative attitude they had learned during the training.[13] IRI also organized multiparty activities that assisted young political leaders to improve public speaking, doors-to doors campaign. These techniques belong to the field of international political diplomacy and contribute to driving political parties towards consensus on democracy as the only game in town.[14]

There is still a significant demand from Tunisian political parties to get training with IDPs in improving political communication skills. Over the time, however, the more the political parties become accustomed to the democratic game, the more they perceive that competitive politics is the only way to obtain political influence, implement policies they care about and ultimately survive on the political stage. In this regard, international groups began arranging single parties training. NDI and IRI, for instance, adjusted their strategy and they are now offering mostly single party's training to all political parties interested in receiving their support.[15] *Konrad Adenauer* and *Friedrich Neumann* foundations reinforced the collaboration with their Tunisian political party partners and mostly deliver single-party training.[16] All the officials interviewed agree on the idea that this transformation in assistance reflects the challenge political parties—and the Tunisia transition—experienced since the 2014 elections. They needed to evolve from consensus on issues to competition over issues. The underlying logic of such shift is that after having achieved consensus over democracy, international assistance should support national actors through specific training tailored on their needs to encourage competition in the political arena.

Interviews with members of political parties confirm the validity of this. A *Nida Tounes*'s respondent, for instance, underlines that the Konrad Adenauer foundation and the NDI provided high-level training to many party members that profoundly improved their skills. Interestingly, he stated that some IDPs contributed to professionalize a new generation of *Nida Tounes*' members in politics. In this regard, the Prime Minister *Youssef Chahed* and the former Cabinet President *Slim Azzabi* are outstanding representations of Tunisian modern politicians who benefited from international training.[17] Members of *al-Nahda* believe that international training increases the capacity of the party's MPs to bargain with other parties in order to compromise on policies. It also bolsters the competences of the parties in a number of activities related to

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[13] Interview with a National Democratic Institute Official, Washington, DC, 2018.

[14] Interview with an International Republican Institute Official, Washington, DC, 2018.

[15] Although US NGOs are now delivering mostly single party training, in 2018 IRI has collaborated with several political parties on how to talk in front of a camera and convey your messages.

[16] Interviews with Konrad Adenauer director and with Friedrich Neumann Director, Tunis 2017.

[17] Interview with a member of Nida Tounes, Tunis 2018.

elections. A member of al-Nahda said to the author "*The assistance of "friendly states" was crucial. We have learnt a lot from the political training they promoted across the country. Some members of my party have improved their ability to negotiate relevant political and economic issues within the institutional framework. Other programs helped political parties' members to improve their technical skills. For instance, they trained political parties on how to redact electoral legislation*".[18] Political parties that stand at the opposition such as the *Front Populaire* or smaller parties such as the centrist party *al-Johmouri*—former PDP—also shared this point of view, although *al-Johmouri* is more sceptical about the international partnership. According to some members, an international group might indeed provide high-skill training to national members but fails to understand the specificity of the Tunisian case. Yet, when it comes to assessing what skills international training improves among the party's members, they come up with many domains. For instance, they improved communication techniques and management of the electoral process, conflict management and law enforcement. In this respect, A respondent from *al-Johmouri* stated: "*democracy promoters have employed sophisticated techniques to assist us, but they lack a deep understanding of the Tunisian case. Therefore, the assistance sometimes loses effectiveness because it is not tailored on the specific needs of Tunisians*".[19]

Moreover, respondents suggested that international partners holding multi-party training encouraged a '*polyvalence politique*' (political versatility) that lowered tensions and confrontations between political militants of different parties after the revolution. By gathering members from different parties in the same room, international partners encourage a common understanding of the boundaries of competitive politics in democracies. International partnerships with political parties have consisted in financial, technical and logistical support, which then contributes to their modernization and professionalization, therefore enhancing the skills of its members.

Enhancing the autonomy of civil society and empowering independent national institutions

In the aftermath of the revolution, Tunisian civil society blossomed. A vibrant and multifaceted range of associations, NGOs, unions and advocacy groups entered the social space with an estimated 15.000 associations registered in 2013 and 18.000 civil organization by the end of 2015.[20] Initially, international financial assistance rewarded all attempts from the bottom-up to engage in the transitional processes and allocation of resources was widespread. The number of registered civil society organization has kept increasing since then,[21] even though a Freedom House's official suggests the number of civil society groups is expected to shrink as some groups are struggling and a new restrictive adopted in July 2018 requires civil society organizations to register with a new

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[18] Interview with a member of al-Nahda, Tunis 2018. Author's translation by French.
[19] Interview with a member of Front Populaire and a member of al-Johmouri, Tunis, March 2018. Author's translation by French.
[20] For more information see: <https://nawaat.org/portail/2016/02/01/tunisia-a-booming-civil-society-a-fragile-democracy-and-endless-challenges-ahead/>
[21] For an updated chart of the number of civic associations in Tunisia, see <http://www.ifeda.org.tn/stats/francais.pdf>

entity or face legal problems. Many international officers working in Tunisia recognize the problem of 'NGOfication', but argue that a solid network of professional, competent and quite effective civil actors has emerged. In other words, in the aftermath of the revolution Western donors financed a large number of national NGOs, in part creating national associations that were more concerned to obtain external funding than effectively focus on to respond domestic issues. Yet, although some initial drawbacks in the allocation of money to NGOs, the overall results of external assistance remain highly positive among our respondents.

In general, democratic promotion has focused on advising civil society organizations on how to transform ideas into missions through the definition of a set of realistic targets. German political foundations encouraged coalition of civil society to co-operate for achieving common goals for instance (Marzo 2019). According to Holthaus (2018), German foundations' support for civil society is directed towards at least two aims: furthering citizen participation, contestation and social pluralism on the one side, and stabilizing the Tunisia transition and consolidation of democracy on the other side. United States IDPs such as IRI and NDI and Freedom House, for their part, delivered extensive training on how to coordinate the monitoring of elections. Likewise, they empowered national NGOs in leading advocacy for citizens and how to engage with decision makers and elected representatives. Freedom House has also worked with civil society partners to increase their capacity to push the government to perform better. In this respect, Freedom House directly spoke out in November 2017 because the National Assembly was not responsive and showed traces of authoritarian backsliding in 2016 and 2017.[22] Indeed, Freedom House officials, which in 2017 had already downgraded the Tunisian outlook in the authoritative annual report Freedom in the World, informally warned the Tunisian government that the Tunisia's outlook in could further deteriorate to partially free in 2018, pushing the government to be more responsive, especially to the civil society.

Coordination among IDPs bolstered the feeling of a positive and genuine engagement with their partners' goals and suggests that cooperation contributes to lower tensions and achieving common objectives. NDI and IRI have largely collaborated with the goal of demonstrating that groups with different visions can cooperate.[23] The German foundations also have regular meetings among them to cooperate and avoid overlapping their assistance.

The European Union (EU) was particularly engaged in empowering civil society and strengthening nascent independent institutions. In 2012 EU launched the PASC—*Programme d'appui à la société civile*—the main program of democratic assistance that the EU led with hundreds of Tunisian partners. The EU created PASC with two main goals in mind: empowering the capacity of civil society and improving the legal framework wherein these civil organizations work and operate. The EU renewed its engagement with an additional

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[22] Interview with an official of Freedom House, Washington, DC, April 2018. For more information in 2017 report of Freedom House see <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2017/tunisia>

[23] During interviews with the German Political Foundations Directors and with officers from NDI and IRI, it came out that offices in Tunisia hold regular meetings to cooperate and deliver a more effective strategy.

three years of PASC funding (2014–2017) in order to keep bolstering demo-cratic participation, creating an intermediary structure to connect the central government with the regions, and preventing radicalization.[24] Interestingly, in 2017, at the end of the PASC program, the EU organized focus groups with national partners in several cities across the countries, including Bizerte, Tozeur, Gafsa, Sousse, Djerba, Nabuel, Tataouine, and Le Kef in order to meas-ure the impact of its actions. The analysis of the reports is interesting. The focus group held in Bizerte, for instance, asked 26 partners from civil society groups to share a list of the goals EU assistance helped to achieve, along with the weakness of the partnership and the expectations ahead for further collab-oration.[25] Although some focus identified a few weaknesses in the EU assist-ance (short-term of assistance, the centralization of management that complicated the inter-administration communication, or the lack of adequate for addressing the need of specific context). In the 2017 report, all of the 26-focus groups[26] showed that EU assistance was crucial for the national partners, who produced a longer list of '*points fort*' than '*point faibles*' in their final remarks.

While the EU was hesitant to work with political parties during the transi-tional period because it did not want to interfere in the country's political affairs, the amount of money EU allocated to Tunisia's civil society and national institutions was larger compared to other IDPs have such as NDI, Freedom House, IRI or the German Foundations.[27] This allowed the EU to col-laborate—and empower—most of the nascent Independent Constitutional Instances (ICI), including *L'Instance Supérieure indépendante pour les élections* (ISIE) *La Haute Autorité Indépendante de la Communication Audiovisuelle (HAICA) L'Instance du développement durable et des droits des générations Le Comité Supérieur des droits de l'homme et des libertés fondamentales (CSDHLF) L'Instance Nationale de Lutte contre la Corruption (INLUCC) L'Instance de la Vérité et de la Dignité (IVD),* among others.[28]

In an interview with the author, a member of HAICA stated that technical and economical assistance EU delivered bolstered HAICA's operative skills, especially during 2014 Presidential and Legislative elections. Other Tunisian respondents backed up the argument suggesting that IDPs enhanced the cap-acity building of civil society group. For instance, a Tunisia NGO like I-Watch represents a prominent national organization with a strong ability to identify

[24] Floridi M, Costantini, G, Evaluation du Programme d'appui à la société civil, Rapport final Demande de prestation: 2016/380-154 V1, Avril 2016, accessed by the author with the permission of EU officials in Tunisia Avril 2017.

Smaller and more specific program had also been launched to bridge EU and Tunisia partners such as the Reseau Euro-Mediterranean des Droits de l'Homme (REMDH).

[25] Floridi M., Constantini G., Weiss P, Pozo J.O, Programme de L'Union européenne pour la Tunisie, *Rapport sur le focus group et les ateliers*, Demande de prestation: 2016/380-154 V1, juin 2017. Accessed by the author with the permission of EU officials in Tunisia.

[26] European Union consulted 202 national partners, located in 23 of the 24 country governorates asking for feedback on the partnership through semi-structured interviews.

[27] Although the author was unable to obtain precise data of funding, this assumption is confirmed by an interview with an EU official.

[28] Other Institution targeted by EU assistance are *L'Instance Nationale de Prévention contre la Torture (INPT) , L'Instance Nationale de lutte contre la traite des personnes (ILCTP), L'Instance Nationale de protection des données personnelles (INPDP).* For more information see Weiss Pierre, Evaluation du Programme d'appui à la société civil, Rapport instance Constitutionnelles independantes Rapport Lettre de contrat N°2016/380154 Avril 2017.

domestic irregularities and unaccountable institutions. It receives financial aid to lead projects bolstering the capacity of smaller and local associations to deal with the electoral process, including citizens' participation, political parties' responsiveness and fair political debate among candidates.[29] In this regard, the European Union has recently endowed I-Watch with a grant to empower smaller NGOs in local monitoring and accountability in the aftermath of municipal elections.[30]

The Tunisian Association for Integrity and Democracy of Elections (ATIDE), for its part, has upgraded its profile as an autonomous NGO with a countrywide outreach that empowers local associations and marginalized groups in fulfilling their electoral rights. First, it informs citizens about elections, the meaning of participation and the understanding of the electoral law. Second, it puts pressure on the government to respect electoral laws. Third, ATIDE has already launched an internal academy that trains smaller NGO partners on a number of issues related to elections and electoral culture. The sustained collaboration between ATIDE and its international partners has contributed to increase the capacity of the NGO to deal with the challenge of democratization and electoral monitoring. A respondent from ATIDE gives credit to international partners for encouraging and respecting its autonomy, only demanding a transparent portrait of how the NGO employs financial aid.[31]

Another leading NGO, *Mourakiboun*, believes that international assistance has been indispensable to improve its domestic outreach. Its members took advantage of the technical expertise provided international partners offered. They noted that while financial assistance remains an essential asset to empower the organization in conducting its activities, internal technical skills have improved to the extent that it relies less on international partners' expertise now. Over the time, they have developed an autonomous capacity to set objectives and achieve targets without relying on external consultation when it comes to resolving technical issues. One respondent said to the author '*We have welcomed technical assistance, but we are now more independent and we are developing our agenda. We still need economic aid, but we refuse economic assistance when it challenges our independence. We have our own vision on what we want to do at the national level*'.[32] Mouraikboun has also delivered assistance to other NGOs at the local level and in neighbouring countries and has monitored elections in foreign countries.

Jeunesse Sans Frontiers gives credits to international groups for having delivered extensive training to its members, including technical competences for a long-time monitoring (LTO) and a short-time monitoring (STO). A respondent from the group stated that without the financial assistance of international actors many groups of Tunisian civil society would disappear. Moreover, the influence of leading NGOs would decrease and the domains of assistance would be reduced leaving rural areas and marginalized people practically out of reach.[33]

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29 Interview with a member of I-Watch, Tunis 2018.
30 Interview with a European Union officer, Tunis, 2017.
31 Interview with a member of ATIDE, Tunis 2018.
32 Interview with a member of Mouraikboun, Tunis 2018. Author's translation by French.
33 Interview with a member of Jeunesse Sans Frontiers, Tunis 2018.

National NGOs have benefitted greatly from international training. They have transformed into 'intermediary structures', standing between international donors and local-level associations, with whom they share concerns, visions and closer relations compared to the delegations of international groups. Such intermediary structures are not in place in electoral autocracies, leaving large segments of the population unable to tackle unfair electoral practices. Likewise, these intermediary structures are also not ready in the early phase of the transitions, where international actors lack interlocutors to properly deliver their agenda. Tunisian civil society members interviewed agree on three general points. First, they acknowledge that the journey leading to elections in 2014 would have been less successful if the international expertise had not been delivered. Many of them realize that in 2011, 2012 and 2013 a programmatic and strategic interactions between international and domestic experts supported the understanding of the competitive electoral mechanism. Second, international actors often served as a solution to confrontations between political parties and civil society, specifically when they reached a deadlock or a breaking point. Third, civil society members stated that the steady and strong collaboration with INGOs groups deterred the risk of electoral fraud. This is because political parties' members fear that being discovered rigging electoral processes would damage their image both at the national and international level.

Conclusion: what is new about democracy promotion in Tunisia?

International promotion of democracy in Tunisia was an essential asset for the transitional process and it is contributing to the beginning of democratic consolidation. The Tunisian success story of interactions between IDPs and national parties demonstrates that democracy promotion may have an impact even in MENA countries, furthering democratization processes by bolstering the financial and technical skills of the transitional elites. By buttressing the formal institutions as the only space to resolve political conflicts, international partners contribute to drive Tunisian transitional political parties from consensus over democracy to competition within democracy, reducing the risk of regression to authoritarian practices. Likewise, IDPs assistance can foster the professionalization of civic leaders and can strengthen the capacity of national independent institutions to operate with a more solid legal framework.

Tunisia's case shows that two conditions are indispensable for a fruitful partnership between IDPs and domestic groups in a democratic transition. First, when the transition away from authoritarianism highlights elites' broad agreement on the political system to establish, IDPs have a more effective capacity to enhance the achievements of their partners. Indeed, the interplay between IDPs and Tunisian partners spurred positive results precisely because a wide range of transitional elites accepted to compete for powers within a common democratic framework. The general agreement on the direction the country's transition was about to take facilitated IDPs in assisting transitional elites to achieve relevant goals such as building democratic institutions, holding competitive elections, monitoring the fairness of the democratic process. Second, the IDPs' ability to work more effectively also depended on the foreign antisystem forces' reaction to the power vacuum in the transitional period. Indeed, IDPs in Tunisia had been successful in

enhancing national democratic accomplishment because their assistance was not disrupted by external conflict penetrating the country, which, instead worsened the confrontation among domestic groups and left international democratic assistance in disarray in other countries of the region (Valbjørn and Hinnebusch 2018) such as Egypt (Brown 2013) Yemen (Al-Muslimi 2015) and Syria (Philips 2015). In Tunisia, external and internal favourable conditions removed the potential tension in democracy promotion resulting from the Western clash of interests between promoting democratization and pursuing other crucial goals in foreign policy.

The study of international democratic assistance in Tunisia suggests that the theories of neoliberal institutionalism may have—under particular conditions—some validity to measure the impact that external actors had on political and social change at the national level in a region where structural realism theories have overwhelmingly dominated the study of international relations.

Eight years on, political and civil groups present a different picture, very different from the one they had in the immediate aftermath of the revolution. They have overcome psychological and ideological barriers inherited from the past and they have transformed into forces competing within a democratic framework. In this regard, despite Tunisia's continuing reliance on assistance from IDPs, especially to bolster the capacity of local associations to survive and operate in the framework of democratizing Tunisia, political parties, national institutions and civil society leading groups have acquired a level of competence and a system of balances which do not suggest that imminent democratic regression. Although the economic crisis looms large, the political transition seems solid and political parties and civil society groups are capable of reproducing democratic practices and avoiding authoritarian backsliding. External antisystem forces seem still uninterested in and incapable of interfering with the course of events. In contrast, the perils of a democratic backslide comes from the economic stagnation and low social satisfaction, whose resulting social instability could ignite major internal or external shocks affecting the democratic consolidation process.

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