

## **The legacy of US intervention and the Tunisian revolution: promises and challenges one year on**

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### **Abstract**

*Tunisia is distinguished not only as the spark that ignited the “Arab spring” uprisings, but also as the first of these to successfully institutionalise the “revolution” through what have been hailed as the country’s first “free and fair” elections in October 2011. This comes after several decades in which Tunisians endured, though also resisted, an often brutal, dictatorial regime. The elections, along with the recently commemorated January anniversary of the Tunisian revolution provide an opportunity to reflect on the incredible achievements made over the past year as well as the obstacles that remain to realising and consolidating the goals of the revolution.*

*This article will assess these achievements and obstacles, in light of the legacy of domestic despotism and western interventionism, focusing on the “war on terror” decade. In particular, it will consider the possibility that the rush towards a western backed process of democratic consolidation may lead to a clash of imperatives in post-revolution Tunisia. This could entail increasing tensions between some elements of the state, business elite and their western backers, on the one hand, preoccupied with restoring “order” and “stability”, and several sectors of society, including various labour, youth and religious activists, on the other, demanding more radical structural change, which could entail a measure of “disorder”, at least initially.*

*The article will end by considering the state of the revolution one year on, focusing on some of the key challenges, political, economic and social, to the realisation of the revolution’s ideals, and examining those areas in particular that may be hindered or blocked as a result of the international geopolitical context and continued US intervention.*

### **Introduction**

Tunisia is distinguished not only as the spark that ignited the “Arab spring” uprisings, but also as the first of these to successfully institutionalise the “revolution” through what have been hailed as Tunisia’s first “free and fair” elections in October 2011. This comes after several decades in which Tunisians endured, though also resisted, an often brutal, dictatorial regime. Even more extraordinary, has been the electoral success of the Islamist An Nahda party, which, after decades of having been at the receiving end of some of the most repressive of the regime’s policies, managed to gain legal status, return their leadership from exile and rebuild party structures, and mount an impressive electoral campaign all within months of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali’s deposal from

office. Having won more than 42% of the vote, securing 90 seats in the 217-member constituent assembly, Nahda entered into a coalition government with the liberal, secular Congress for the Republic and the left-of-centre Ettakatol Party to form a ruling coalition, dividing up ministerial posts between them (Guardian, 2011). The elections, along with the recently commemorated January anniversary of the Tunisian revolution provide an opportunity to reflect on the impressive achievements made over the past year by as well as on the obstacles that remain to realising and consolidating the goals of the revolution.

The dramatic events of the last year, in which Tunisian society succeeded in gaining the upper-hand in the seemingly unchangeable balance of power that was tipped for so long on the side of the repressive state, have provided much cause for optimism amongst Tunisians as well as those elsewhere in the region and further abroad committed to the principles of justice, freedom and democracy. New practices and understandings of citizenship that developed in the course of the uprisings have continued to influence state-society relations until today.

The *ancien regime* was marked by all of the societal pathologies associated with authoritarianism, including excessive state violence and domination of the public sphere, pervasive fear, atomisation, and rampant corruption. Today, it feels as if the lid of a pressure cooker has been lifted. The sense of relief is palpable. People are talking politics and debating the day's contentious issues in a way that was impossible under the old order. There has been a pluralisation of the political and public spheres in which a space has been opened for a greater number of Tunisians to not only take part in the practices and processes associated with democratic governance, but also to challenge the state's monopoly on cultural production, political discourses and control over public space. This can be seen in the ubiquitous display of public art in the form of political graffiti that has spread across Tunisia's urban structures (Mejri, Kim and Ryan, 2011), through the numerous protests that one can witness on any given day and on any number of issues ranging from labour disputes to identity issues.

Other protests have taken issue with the government's foreign policy, and include demands for Tunisia to take a more independent stance vis-a-vis those western states that many feel betrayed the Tunisian people for so long by propping up an unaccountable and repressive regime, in the name of promoting social "progress", economic "liberalisation", or, in the context of the "war on terror", "security". This sentiment was on display in a recent protest held in front of the "Friends of Syria Conference" in Tunis where placards were raised that read "*Hillary Clinton dégage!*" [Hillary Clinton, go away!] alongside Syrian, Palestinian and Tunisian flags (Baeder, 2012). It could also be seen in the numerous protests in which the issue of Palestine has been raised, including at an October conference on Arab Bloggers in which 11 Palestinian participants were denied visas (Hilleary, 2011), as well as the 15 May protest in Tunis to mark the 63<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the *Nakba*, organised by the National Committee for Support of Arab Resistance and Struggle against Normalisation and Zionism

(Mhirsi, 2011). There were also the tens of thousands who welcomed Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh during his January trip to Tunisia, a visit and welcome that would have been unthinkable during the Ben Ali years. Supporters greeted his comments on the Arab spring, which he described as "a glorious revolution that will bring back the *ummah* [Islamic nation] and its glory in place of the chaos that the American administration had so desired," with chants in support of "Palestinian liberation" (Jerusalem Post, 2012).

However, it is also clear that many obstacles remain along the path to constructing a new polity capable of addressing not only Tunisians' political and individual grievances, but their socio-economic and collective grievances as well. Crucially, there is the fear that the rush towards a western backed process of democratic consolidation may lead to a clash of imperatives. This could entail some elements of the state, business elite and their western backers, on the one hand, preoccupied with restoring "order" and "stability", and many sectors of society, on the other, demanding more radical structural change, which could entail a measure of *disorder*, at least temporarily.

This is made clear in the ongoing debate over what the government should do about "*protestations anarchiques*", or unauthorised protests/strikes, which it claims have cost the national economy more than \$2.5 billion and had an especially dire effect on certain export industries, such as phosphate (Hamadi, 2012). According to Samir Dilou, Human Rights and Transitional Justice Minister, the government's struggle at the moment is to find a balance between policies that would honour the "spirit of the revolution" by protecting the protesters' human rights, and at the same time fulfil the state's duty to ensure "social order", deemed a necessary prerequisite for economic growth. Timothy Mitchell (2011) has discussed the nature of these tensions in his book *Carbon Democracy* in which he argues that though democracy is often associated in the minds of activists with its potentially emancipatory function, it can also "refer to a mode of governing populations that employs popular consent as a means of limiting claims for greater equality and justice..."

This article will assess these achievements and obstacles, in light of the legacy of domestic despotism and western interventionism, focusing on the "war on terror" decade. It will end by considering the state of the revolution one year on, focusing on some of the key challenges, political, economic and social, to the realisation of the revolution's ideals, and examining those areas in particular that may be hindered or blocked as a result of the international geopolitical context and continued US intervention.

### **The Tunisian Revolution's Collective Grievances: National Sovereignty and an end to Western Intervention**

The brave and desperate actions of Mohammed Bouazizi on 17 December 2010 sparked a wave of nationwide protests not only against the rising food prices that resulted from the latest round of IMF-mandated food subsidy eliminations but also against the longstanding structural issues that underpinned the Ben Ali

dictatorship, including high levels of unemployment and corruption as well as the near-complete absence of civil liberties and political freedoms. The protests continued until 14 January 2011, when Ben Ali was finally forced to resign and Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi announced an interim national unity government, only partly satisfying protesters' demands. On 27 February, Prime Minister Ghannouchi stepped down, responding to demonstrators' demands calling for a clean break with the past. According to a UN human rights investigation, at least 219 Tunisians were killed during the uprisings and another 510 were injured (Toronto Star, 2011).

Much of the attention on the causes of the revolution have focused on longstanding structural issues, including the government's distorted budget priorities, with a lack of balance between the funds invested in its repressive security apparatuses and those delineated for infrastructure and social goods such as healthcare, education, training, or job creation. Add to this, the restrictive labour policies, suffocated public sphere, distorting wealth concentration, and the developmental gap between coastal areas and the interior. The increasingly exploitative and unbalanced nature of Tunisian state-society relations had the effect of rupturing an earlier "social contract" implicitly agreed between the rulers of the distributive, post-independence Tunisian state, characteristic of the region at the time, and Tunisian society, in which the latter gave up rights to meaningful political participation in return for generous social provisions and the promise of national development. As such, the Tunisian government achieved and maintained hegemony through what Gramsci (1998) has referred to as a mixture of "coercion" and "consent".

As a dynamic and responsive form of power, hegemony, according to Gramsci (2000), operates according to "a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria," which "presupposes that account be taken of the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised." However, with the adoption of neoliberal "reforms", mostly at the behest of the IMF/World Bank as well as bilateral trading partners, including the US, the state became immune to the "interests" and "tendencies" of the hegemonised.

With structural adjustment policies that required a further opening of the Tunisian economy to foreign goods, investment and finance, further privatisation, reduction in food and gas subsidies, and increased focus on development strategies geared around the tourism industry and the creation of "free trade zones" (Prince, 2011) that produce goods targeted for the European market, Tunisian society received increasingly less from the social bargain. They were left instead with greater levels of economic stratification, increased numbers living in poverty and a proliferation of low skilled jobs unable to meet either the economic needs or life aspirations of a majority of university graduates. Upon breaking its end of the bargain, the Tunisian government was aware that a price would have to be paid, either through political reform or increased repression. Tunisia, like many other post-colonial states opted for the latter, making the transition from what Nazih Ayubi (1995) refers to as the

“populist” to the “bureaucratic” authoritarian state. This transition, and the sense of societal alienation and frustration it engendered, paved the way for the Tunisian revolution.

Analysis of the Tunisian revolution has understandably focused on these structural issues and the impact they have had on state-society relations. In addition, there have been numerous reports documenting the manifold ways in which the Ben Ali regime violated the human rights of Tunisian citizens. Many Tunisians, especially those on the receiving end of the country’s “justice” system, including trade unionists, leftists, and, in particular over the last ten years, and in the context of an already hyper-secularised public sphere that many felt was imposed by the West rather than organically developed, those with Islamist leanings, experienced the travesties of the denial of due process, absence of the rule of law, and widespread use of torture.

However, often overlooked in both academic and journalistic accounts of the Tunisian revolution have been the grievances expressed by the Tunisian people that touch on what Rashid Khalidi (2011) has referred to as their “collective dignity”. As he explains, these relate to the “subordination of the Arab countries to the dictates of US policy, and to the demands of Israel.” Therefore, the “demand for collective dignity is a call to end this unnatural situation”. In the Tunisian context, this has been expressed as frustration at the country’s lack of real sovereignty in a global economic order enforced by international institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank as well as powerful states and, perhaps most damaging, a global “security” order that has privileged the security and prosperity of the west at the expense of the region’s own states and peoples. It is in this context of limited sovereignty that many Tunisians feel the most egregious of the regime’s violations of their human rights, broadly conceived to entail social, political and economic rights, took place.

In light of Western governments’ tendency to turn a blind eye to, or even to support and encourage, repressive Tunisian regimes so long as their economic and geo-strategic interests were safeguarded, it is not surprising that the West’s initial response to the Tunisian revolution was mild and muted, with French Minister for Foreign Affairs Michèle Alliot-Marie even offering support to Ben Ali’s repressive security apparatuses to crush the unrest (Amnesty International, 2011). In the US, it took a full month of sustained protests menaced by state repression and violence for the Obama Administration finally to acknowledge publicly what State Department officials had been quietly stating in their Annual Human Rights Report for years and which recently had been confirmed by Wikileaks’ release of statements from the Obama-appointed US ambassador to Tunisia: That Ben Ali’s regime was patently corrupt and brutally repressive (Mullin, 2011). President Obama’s condemnation of the Tunisian government’s violence on the day that Ben Ali was finally forced to flee the country and his subsequent praise for “the courage and dignity of the Tunisian people” was seen by many Tunisians as too little and too late.

In light of the above, this article will assess the legacy of western and particular US interventionism in Tunisia. As one of the most powerful actors in this global

economic and political order, US support for the Ben Ali regime, despite knowledge of its numerous and persistent human rights violations that blatantly contradicted the US stated normative commitment to the values of democracy and human rights, is seen as particularly toxic. The methodology employed here includes the examination and analysis of primary and secondary sources related to the history of authoritarian rule in Tunisia to produce a genealogy of societal repression and resistance, focusing in particular on the “war on terror” period, from 2001 until 2010 revolution. It also includes interviews with various organizations and individuals, including those who had been on the receiving end of Ben Ali’s most brutal policies and practices as well as those who had been involved in contesting and resisting the gross human rights violations of the *ancien regime*, focusing in particular on former political prisoners and torture victims of the deposed regime.

One grievance that was expressed repeatedly by these various actors with whom we met was the perception that western governments had been complicit in the crimes committed by the Ben Ali regime, through their provision over the years of copious amounts of diplomatic, military, and economic support, in particular in the past ten years, in the context of the “war on terror”. Not only did many feel that western governments had too often turned a blind eye to the depravities of their Tunisian allies in order to secure their own economic and geo-strategic interests in the region, but, even worse, many suspected that some of Ben Ali’s most heinous crimes were committed at the behest of these governments.

### **Repression and Resistance in Tunisia: from National Independence to Revolution**

Numerous and diverse monuments and historical sites dispersed throughout Tunisia bear silent witness to its history of foreign invasions, occupations, and resistance. Home to the ancient Phoenician city of Carthage, Tunisia’s location at the center of North Africa made it attractive to the rulers of the Roman, Arab, and Ottoman empires, who all recognized the geo-strategic importance of the country. In 1883, using the excuse of Tunisian debt owed to its European creditors, French forces (as the British had done one year earlier in Egypt) occupied Tunisia; the French made Tunisia a “protectorate.” As with all forms of colonial rule, under the French, Tunisia’s land and native population were exploited for the benefit of the colonisers. Resistance to French colonial rule existed from the beginning and increased over time.

During World War II the Germans briefly occupied Tunisia, but toward the end of the war the French regained control. Following the war the Tunisian struggle for national independence intensified, headed by the nationalist leader Habib Bourguiba and his Neo-Destour (Constitution) party. In a sign of the growing appeal of the independence movement, in 1945, Ferhat Hached led Tunisian members out of the communist-dominated French General Confederation of

Workers (Confederation Générale des Travailleurs - CGT) to form the Tunisian nationalist UGTT, the Union Generale Tunisienne du Travail.

Following several years of brutal repression of the nationalist movement, in 1954, French Premier Pierre Mendès-France promised the pro-independence "Bey" - provincial governor under the suzerainty of the Ottoman Empire - internal autonomy. After long negotiations, a French-Tunisian convention was signed in Paris and on 20 March 1956 France recognized Tunisian independence. In April 1956, the French-educated Habib Bourguiba formed the first independent Tunisian government. His doctrine was defined by a French and Turkish inspired hyper-secularism, nationalist development, and a pro-West foreign policy orientation. As Larbi Sadiki has noted (2002), Bourguiba's strict ideology and "patrimonial" governing style left little room for competing visions and alternative socio-economic, political or identity projects. According to Sadiki (2002), "colonial hegemony was substituted with an indigenous hegemony," which entailed the state "banning rival centres of power".

In March 1957, Tunisia signed a bilateral agreement with the US in return for economic and technical assistance, though the country would remain firmly within France's sphere of influence for several decades to come. In July 1957, the National Assembly deposed the popular Bey and elected Bourguiba chief of state, thus establishing a republic. Bourguiba, who came to be seen by many Tunisian nationalists as "France's man," won the first presidential election in 1959 and was re-elected in 1964, 1969, and 1974, when the Assembly amended the constitution to make him president for life.

### **The Rise of Labour Activism and State Repression: Cooption and Coercion**

Though Bourguiba was initially supported by many Tunisians for his charisma, ability to connect with the "man on the street" and nationalist development programme, economic malaise and increased political repression led to student and labour unrest during the late 1970s (Salem, 1984). During this period clashes with the government increased (White, 2001). In January 1978, violence broke out when the UGTT called a general strike in protest over the arrest of a union leader, alleging that attacks against union offices in several towns had been officially inspired. Over 50 demonstrators were killed and 200 trade union officials, including UGTT Secretary-General Habib Achour, were arrested.

In April 1980, Mohamed Mzali became prime minister, leading many Tunisians to believe that political liberalization was on the horizon. Trade union leaders were released from jails and UGTT Secretary-General Achour received a full presidential pardon. New laws were passed allowing for the creation of opposition political parties and paving the way for the first multiparty elections in November 1981. Several opposition parties were legalised, including the Tunisian Communist Party which had been banned since 1963. The UGTT's highly contentious decision to enter into an electoral pact with President

Bourguiba's Parti Socialiste Destourien (PSD, formerly Neo Destour) resulted in their "national front" winning all seats in the national assembly.

Anxious to preserve its power and fearful of the increasing popularity of Islamist movements in Tunisia and elsewhere in the region, Bourguiba's government adopted a policy of intolerance and suppression of Islamists. In 1980, at least 50 members of the Islamic Tendency Movement, predecessor to the moderate Islamist Hizb Nahda (Nahda, or Renaissance Party), were arrested, including the movement's founder, Rachid al-Ghannouchi.

### **Hizb An-Nahda (Nahda) and Islamists' Repression and Resistance**

An Nahda (Renaissance) Party is the largest Islamist party in Tunisia. Its origins can be traced to 1970 with the establishment of Qur'anic Preservation Society (QPS), originally an apolitical organization dedicated to encouraging piety within Tunisian society through a bottom-up strategy of (re)Islamisation. The Society's approach to politics began to change in the late 1970s when growing social unrest, particularly among organized labour, politicized the movement's discourse and activities. Though many Islamists initially condemned the trade union UGTT's social action, they nonetheless learned from it the importance of mass mobilisation and street politics. In 1981, the Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique (MTI) was founded by Sheikh Ghannouchi, as he is known to his supporters, and other former members of the QPS as a loose coalition of Islamist groups seeking political and economic change. The MTI's political platform included calls for equitable economic reform, an end to one-party rule, and a return to the "fundamental principles of Islam" (Waltz, 1986).

During the course of the 1980s, the MTI gained a large following among the Tunisian youth and adopted a more populist platform. It eventually developed into a well-organized social and political movement and was one of the first Islamist groups in the Arab world to explicitly adopt democratic principles, with Sheikh al-Ghannouchi's writings on the theological and political basis for Islamist participation in pluralist politics positioning the movement's leader among a handful of well-known Islamist reformists (Noyon 2003, p.99). During this period, Islamists moved to enlarge their social base through activism in the UGTT and other civil society organizations (Shahin 1997, p.95 and Sfeir 1987, p.30).

In November 1987, after his bloodless coup, Ben Ali announced his plans for reform and democratization, and Sheikh al-Ghannouchi, who by then sought open participation in Tunisian political life, signed on to the president's "National Pact," which allowed him to run a list of candidates in the 1989 legislative elections. Hopes that these steps would lead to pluralisation of the political and public spheres were soon dispersed, as it became clear that Ben Ali would be following the path of "Bourguiba's brand of nationalism [leaving] no room for any free space for non-governmental or non-party actors" (Sadiki, 2002). Though Ben Ali appeared at first to present a more amenable stance



towards religious institutions and practices, for example by re-opening the al-Zaytunah university and mosque, in "Bourguiba's Atatürkist fashion, he also strictly banned veiling and the sporting of beards" (Sadiki, 2002).

Soon after the signing of the pact, Ben Ali changed course and began what would become a long and drawn out period of repression of Islamist movements, beginning with legislation prohibiting the use by any political party of the words "Islam" or "Islamic" in their names. In response, the MTI renamed itself *Hizb al-Nahda*, the Renaissance Party. However, Ben Ali still refused to allow Nahda to enter the elections as a recognized political party, although he did permit it to field "independent" candidates. By 1992, virtually all of Nahda's leadership was imprisoned or in exile and its organizational capabilities within the country destroyed (Noyon 2003, p.103).

### **The IMF: Economic Repression and Resistance**

In 1984, implementation of a structural adjustment plan signed with the IMF forced the elimination of food subsidies and resulted in a rise in bread and semolina prices. This action, in turn, sparked unrest and Tunisia's first wave of 'bread riots' over the following year. As a consequence, public sector workers, supported by the UGTT, organized strikes demanding pay increases. This stage of resistance was followed by a period of harsh repression marked by deteriorating relations between the UGTT and the government, the closure of the union's newspaper, and the arrest of many union members, including Mr. Achour. Over the next few years, the government would consolidate its control over the UGTT (Murphy, 1999).

In 1985, Israel raided the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) headquarters in Tunis, which had been the PLO base since 1982 when it was driven out of Lebanon during Israel's invasion and occupation. The raid, in which 60 people were killed, could be seen as marking a turning point in Tunisia's relations with the US, which came to see the North African state as a reliable regional ally.

In January 1986, the Tunisian Communist Workers' Party (POCT) was founded, but it was soon banned, a status that was unchanged with Ben Ali's assumption of power, despite promises of greater democratic openness and respect for human rights. Three years later, the first presidential elections since 1974 were held. President Ben Ali was the only candidate and thus his electoral triumph was no surprise. Although the Nahda party was banned from participating in the general elections held at the same time, its members ran as independents. The party did well, but because of massive fraud and manipulation of the election, no one knows exactly how well. In response, Ben Ali initiated a new campaign of repression against the party, which led to the arrest and imprisonment of thousands of its followers (Alexander, 1997). In the Chamber of Deputies election, Ben Ali's Constitutional Democratic Rally won all 141 seats. Ben-Ali went on to be "re-elected" four more times, the last time in 2009 with 89 percent of the vote.

Despite the clearly undemocratic and repressive actions of the newly installed Ben Ali regime, strategic relations between the US and Tunisia were enhanced. Those relations were cemented by increased US security assistance, including an active schedule of joint military exercises involving the two states. During this period the US-Tunisian Joint Military Commission began meeting annually to discuss military cooperation, Tunisia's defence modernisation program and other "security" matters, and a new bilateral investment treaty was signed between the two countries (US Department of State, n.d.).

### **The "War on Terror": Civil Society's Repression and Resistance**

The phrase "war on terror" was first employed by US President George W. Bush five days after the 11 September attacks on US soil, when he pronounced: "This crusade - this war on terrorism - is going to take a while" (Suskind, 2004). Bush's speech, including his deliberate use of "war" terminology along with his not-so-veiled reference to the medieval crusades launched to conquer lands under Muslim rule, was criticised by legal and international relations experts for its incendiary nature. Unlike traditionally conceived wars fought between sovereign states, the "war on terror" lacked a defined and identifiable enemy, thus increasing the likelihood of perpetual military action as well as the chance that it would be used as a pretext to pursue non-terror-related interests.

The "war on terror" soon developed into an international military campaign led by the US and the UK with the support of other North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as well as non-NATO countries, including many US allies in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Though the campaign was initially waged against al-Qaeda, it came to include as its targets a whole range of purported "terrorist" movements, the large majority of which could be broadly described as Islamist in nature.

From its inception, the Bush Administration's presentation of the enemy in the "war on terror" as somehow exceptional both in their actions and motivations provided the US Government with the necessary justification to employ equally unconventional, and in many cases illegal, methods in its attempts to capture and punish them, even if this meant violating international agreements, including the Geneva Conventions and US domestic law. The "counter-terrorism" policies associated with the "war on terror" resulted in numerous illegal and unethical practices, including torture, extraordinary rendition, detention without trial, indefinite detention and targeted assassination.

Though Afghanistan and Iraq were to become the principal battlefields in this war, President Bush made clear from its inception that the entire world would become susceptible to US intervention in its seemingly existential struggle against terror. In a speech made on 20 September 2001, Bush said: "Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbour or support terrorism will be regarded by the US as a hostile regime"

(Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2001). The majority of MENA regimes decided that it was not worth the risk of incurring the US' wrath by placing themselves on the wrong side of the "us versus them" divide. Many also saw in this Manichean construction the possibility of promoting their own narrow interests: a way to gain a new lease on life for their repressive regimes as well as a path to increased economic and military assistance.

Tunisia was among several MENA countries that declared its support for the US "war on terror" and offered substantial intelligence and strategic cooperation on this front. As a 2009 Congressional Research Service report explained, "The Bush Administration considered Tunisia to be an important ally, a moderate Arab, Muslim state, and a partner in the global 'war on terror'" (Migdalovitz, 2009). In return for its cooperation in the "war on terror", the US was willing to overlook the well-documented human rights violations of the Ben Ali regime; indeed, political repression actually increased during this period.

According to the shared US and Tunisian narrative, the Tunisian government faced a grave threat from radical Islamists seeking to overthrow the regime and build in its place a theocratic state. Though the government's repression initially focused on the moderate Islamist Nahda party, after the 11 September attacks, and in line with the increasing demands of the US for operational intelligence and evidence of thwarted Islamist conspiracies that could justify increased spending on its ever-expanding "war," the Ben Ali regime began to focus less on the threat posed by the Islamo-nationalist movement and more on "salafi-jihadi" movements (International Crisis Group, 2005).

The first Tunisian organization to be targeted in the context of the "war on terror" was the Tunisian Combatant Group (TCG), which in 2002 was added to the US State Department's Terrorist Exclusion List and was subsequently subject to an assets freeze. Though largely unheard of in Tunisia prior to its terrorist classification, the TCG was accused of being a radical offshoot of Nahda that sought to establish an Islamic state in Tunisia through violent means. The TCG was suspected of plotting, but not carrying out, attacks on US, Algerian, and Tunisian embassies in Rome in December 2001. The US Government also accused the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), now known as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), of actively recruiting Tunisians and maintaining ties with the TCG (International Crisis Group, 2005).

Between 2001 and 2003, US-Tunisian relations were further enhanced under the US-North African Economic Partnership (USNAEP), which was designed to promote US investment in, and economic integration of, the Maghreb region. In 2002, the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) was established by then-Secretary of State Colin Powell "to create educational opportunity at a grassroots level, promote economic opportunity and help foster private sector development, and to strengthen civil society and the rule of law throughout the region" (MEPI, 2002). MEPI was part of an overall strategy by the Bush Administration to promote "democracy" and "free markets" in the region as an antidote to terrorism.

## **Tunisia's 2003 Anti-Terrorism Law**

One of the many ways the US influenced partner countries in the “war on terror” was through support for the promulgation of “anti-terror” legislation. In 2003, Tunisia enacted the “Anti-Terrorism Law on Support of International Efforts against Terrorism and Money Laundering” (2003 Anti-Terrorism Law). Although Tunisia is party to many international conventions and acknowledges in Article 1 of the 2003 Anti-Terrorism Law the country's respect for international, regional, and bilateral conventions, several provisions of this same law are in fact at odds with Tunisia's international obligations. The 2003 Anti-Terrorism Law's passage and its implementation prompted expressions of serious concern by national and international human rights organizations, including the United Nations (United Nations, 2010; Amnesty International, 2003; Human Rights Watch, 2008).

In the course of our interviews, we heard numerous accounts and analyses of the implications of this shift in rhetoric on the relationship between the Ben Ali regime and the West. During this crucial time, and by virtue of the extensive securitisation of Islamist activism and even criminalisation of Muslim religious practices, Ben Ali aligned himself firmly with the West as an ally in the “war on terror”. The perceived targeting of radical Islamists enabled Ben Ali to curry favour with the West, with many former political prisoners believing that this led to direct and/or indirect financial and political benefits to the Ben Ali regime (National Lawyers Guild, 2011).

The arbitrary and unlawful nature of many of the arrests and prosecutions of political prisoners under this law has been detailed in reports by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (2005, 2009, 2010), and will not be repeated here. It is however worth noting that the evidence gathered during the course of our interviews with former political prisoners who were more prepared to speak freely after the fall of Ben Ali's regime, supports the findings of extensive procedural irregularity and impropriety resulting in grave and far-reaching human rights abuses documented in those reports.

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the “war on terror” has been a complete lack of accountability for officials who committed gross violations of human rights. As Bassam Trifi, a lawyer and member of the Organization against Torture, said, “Torture has touched everyone including political prisoners. Torture has impacted trade unionists, leftists, Islamists, and even those accused of ordinary crimes” (2011). In addition, Mr. Trifi noted that:

With regard to the West's attitude to “terrorists,” we have seen many victims tortured on the basis of the unconstitutional 2003 law, which was enacted in reaction to what happened on 9/11. The name of the act itself references the international attempt to counter terrorism. Many people have been taken to court. They were persecuted for their ideas alone.

Despite its long-lasting rhetoric of favouring democracy throughout the world, the US government has consistently chosen to support and provide aid to oppressive regimes in the Middle East so long as those regimes cooperated in the so-called “war on terror”. Although it is unclear what precise role the US played in the wording or timing of the 2003 legislation, it is clear the Bush Administration was happy with its passage. The US State Department called it “a comprehensive law” to “support the international effort to combat terrorism and money laundering” (Migdalovitz, 2009).

Yet critics, both domestic and international, claimed that the law made the exercise of fundamental freedoms an expression of terrorism (Amnesty International, 2008). According to former Tunisian Judge Mokhtar Yahyaoui, a founding member of the Association for Support of Political Prisoners who was fired for challenging the government for its judicial interference, the 2003 Anti-Terrorism Law was a direct result of US pressure for greater Tunisian cooperation in the “war on terror”. Furthermore, Judge Yahyaoui claimed that US military assistance to the Tunisian government was conditioned upon Tunisia’s counter-terror cooperation and accused the Ben Ali regime of “selling our sons to the Americans” as part of this effort (National Lawyers Guild, 2011).

Despite evidence of increased state violence and political repression, in 2004, the same year that President Ben Ali “won” a fourth term with 94 percent of the vote, the State Department’s Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) opened its Regional Office in the US Embassy in Tunis. The US State Department Annual Human Rights Report (2005) on Tunisia that year declared:

[Tunisia’s] human rights record remained poor, and the Government continued to commit serious abuses . . . [T]here were significant limitations on citizens’ right to change their government. Members of the security forces tortured and physically abused prisoners and detainees. Security forces arbitrarily arrested and detained individuals.

In October 2006, Ben Ali’s government launched a campaign to enforce more rigorously a 1981 ban on headscarves in public places such as schools and government offices; this move angered those on the receiving end of this campaign as well as human rights activists. The persecution of individuals for their political and/or religious beliefs and practices continued unabated in 2007. In January of that year, a shoot-out occurred between the police and alleged members of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat, or GSPC), a group allegedly linked to al-Qaeda, that left dozens dead and many others injured, including police officers. Over 60 of the alleged participants were arrested and, following unfair trials, were sentenced under the anti-terror laws. They were tortured while in prison. Many of the individuals arrested in this incident were released in the post-revolution amnesty.

Also in 2007, two former Guantanamo detainees, Abdallah Hajji and Lotfi Lagha, were returned to Tunisia and, despite diplomatic assurances given by the Ben Ali regime, were subsequently imprisoned and mistreated after show trials. They have both been released as a result of the post-revolution amnesty. An additional five Tunisian citizens today remain in Guantanamo (Worthington, 2011).

In October 2009, President Ben Ali “won” a fifth term in office. According to the 2009 US State Department Human Rights Report on Tunisia (2010):

There were significant limitations on citizens' right to change their government...widespread reports that it [the government] used intimidation, criminal investigations, the judicial system, arbitrary arrests, residential restrictions, and travel controls to discourage criticism. Corruption was a problem.

Despite this, Western governments continued to maintain close relations with the Ben Ali regime, which was praised for its continued security cooperation in the “war on terror” and for its so-called “economic miracle” (Applebaum, 2007). This position was reinforced when, in August 2010, the Tunisian government passed a law opening the Tunisian economy to foreign franchises in the sectors of retail/distribution, tourism, automotives, and training. Another sign of encouragement for Western supporters of neo-liberal “reforms” in Tunisia came in September 2010, when an understanding was reached between Tunis and the IMF that recommended the removal of all remaining subsidies as a means to achieving “fiscal balance” (IMF, 2010).

In a sign that Washington was also content with the application of Ben Ali's anti-terror legislation, Tunisia was praised in the State department's *Country Reports on Terrorism 2010*, in particular in the areas of “Legislation and Law Enforcement”, citing the “at least 40 separate terrorism-related cases in 2010” that the government prosecuted, “many including multiple defendants”. Tunisia's leading role on the Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force (MENAFATF) was also mentioned, as the head of Tunisia's Financial Intelligence Unit served as MENAFATF President in 2010 (US Department of State, 2011).

The common thread in our conversations with former political prisoners, lawyers, and human rights advocates was the frustration and anger directed not only towards the Ben Ali regime but also at the US Government for its perceived complicity in the abuses. As Larbi Abid of the National Council of Liberty points out, “the question of whether the US was aware of human rights abuses taking place in Tunisia should not be asked because it simply is not possible for a superpower like the US to not be aware of them” (National Lawyers Guild, 2011). This conclusion is buttressed by the annual State Department Human Rights reports discussed above as well as Wikileaks releases of cables from the

US Embassy in Tunis to the US State Department (The Guardian, 2010; Nasr, 2011).

While the State Department reports included details of the corruption and abuses of the Ben Ali regime, they conclude by stressing that none of that would affect the strategic relationship between the US and Tunisia. This point was emphasized by Hama Hammami, the head of the Tunisian Communist Party (National Lawyers Guild, 2011). From the opposite end of the spectrum, a member of Nahda, the main Islamist party, also noted that prior to 11 September, there was a campaign in France against Ben Ali and the human rights violations committed by his regime. However, after the 11 September attacks, since Ben Ali responded positively to all US Government demands to take part in the "war on terror", he received assurances from Western governments that human rights violations would be kept quiet.

### **US "Democracy Promotion"**

Often overlooked in analyses of the "hard" power policies associated with the "war on terror", including the invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, are the corresponding "soft" power components of the Bush Administration's strategy, including, most important from the perspective of the MENA region, "democracy promotion" programs. Far from aiming to radically transform the Middle East, it seems the US democratization agenda often functioned as means to maintain, rather than challenge, the status quo. For example, as Beatrice Hibou has noted in her book *The Force of Obedience: The Political Economy of Repression in Tunisia*, "democracy promotion" initiatives generally geared their funds towards NGOs that were recognised by the Ben Ali regime, referred to by Tunisians as OVGs (*organisations vraiment gouvernementales* [really governmental organisations]), and hence "really not authentic counter-powers" (2011).

Another problematic area of foreign funding, as Hibou points out, is that it was often focused on projects defined as priority areas for western governmental and/or non-governmental agencies that financed them, including women and youth groups, "which [did] not necessarily correspond with those which the organisers of the main movements would [have] liked to see subsidised, for example the struggle against torture or the denunciation of the situation in prisons" (Hibou, 2011). This position seemed to be confirmed by several of the key revolutionary actors we met, most of whom never came into contact with any of these democracy-promotion projects (National Lawyers Guild, 2011).

There are several reasons to be wary of US democracy-promotion efforts in the region in general and Tunisia in particular. To begin with, the notion that democracy can be achieved through outside intervention, as opposed to developing organically along with the requisite institutions and consciousness on the part of a state's citizens and rulers, is problematic. It was invalidated by the experience of Western foreign policy in the region over the past century, with the 2003 Iraqi invasion the case *par excellence*. Almost none of the dozens

of successful transitions to democracy in recent decades (including in the MENA region) have come from foreign intervention; rather, they have come from democratic civil society organizations and grassroots movements engaging in "strategic, largely nonviolent, action from within, and employing tactics outside the mainstream political processes of electioneering and lobbying," placing them outside the remit of the "democratization" agenda. As Middle East expert Stephen Zunes has pointed out (2011), in the one area where democracy promotion efforts could have had a real impact, in "training in strategic nonviolent action or other kinds of grassroots mobilization that proved decisive in the struggle," US democracy-promotion efforts through organizations like the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) or MEPI were absent.

The irrelevance of the US democracy-promotion projects to the movement behind the democratic revolution in Tunisia is not surprising considering the historical relationship that has existed between rhetorical support for democratization and the promotion of alternative foreign policy interests, especially in the context of the Cold War. For example, NED, the first of these democracy promotion organizations, was established in the early 1980s under President Reagan in the wake of several high-profile CIA, Cold War-related scandals and subsequent Congressional investigations. The context of its origins has led many analysts to conclude that the NED was established as a means of outsourcing the CIA's clandestine political activities to a seemingly more benign and, crucially, independent organization (Blum, 2000).

### **Democracy Promotion's Neo-Liberal Agenda**

Although ostensibly a not-for-profit organization promoting human rights and democracy, the work of the NED has often been indistinguishable from covert government activities. As Allen Weinstein, its first President, confessed in a 1991 *Washington Post* interview: "A lot of what we do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA" (Blum, 2000). The NED's stated rationale - to spread human rights and liberal (Western) democracy across the world by establishing free market principles - was readily adapted from the Cold War to the "war on terror" paradigm. As President Bush stated in January 2004, the NED budget needed to be doubled so it could "focus its new work on the development of free elections, and free markets, free press, and free labor unions in the Middle East" (Blum, 2000). Though the organization claims to support the development of independent trade unions, it is clear that its focus is on promoting civil society organizations that privilege "class cooperation and collective bargaining, minimal government intervention in the economy, and opposition to socialism in any shape or form," that these programmes are based upon a very narrow, neo-liberal understanding of growth and the function and types of rights that should be accorded to labour within society (Blum, 2000).

The US democracy promotion agenda has emphasized "economic freedom" - a neo-liberal capitalist economic model which emphasizes open markets and free trade - rather than economic and social justice for the working class. One of the



largest single recipients of NED funding for Democracy in recent years has been the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE), which has received three times as much NED funding as all human rights, development, legal, and civil society organizations in the region combined (Zunes, 2011).

MEPI, established in 2002 as an additional foreign policy tool in the US State Department's democracy-promotion arsenal, shared a similarly neo-liberal agenda, including amongst its principal aims: "to foster private-sector development" and encourage the "entrepreneurial spirit" by "work[ing] with government officials, judicial authorities, regulators, legislators and bankers in the region on removing barriers to business" and "promot[ing] a major change in the attitude of local workers -- from relying for jobs on the public sector and state-owned companies" to relying on the private sector. In its website mission statement, MEPI announces its goal to "advance US foreign policy goals by supporting citizens' efforts at economic, social, and political empowerment . . . ." (US Department of State, 2007). However, far from demonstrating the much-touted link between economic and political liberalisation, implementation of the "Washington Consensus" in MENA states has resulted in a concentration of economic and political power in the hands of elites.

### **Distorted Budgetary Priorities and Bias in Funding**

Numerous attempts were made to obtain detailed information from MEPI and NED regarding the types of projects funded during the pre-revolution period but to no avail. The information we have gleaned from their websites shows that most spending has been dedicated to training and capacity building workshops for civil society actors. Regardless of the effectiveness of these types of programs in attaining their respective objectives, or of the role (or lack thereof) played by those groups in receipt of MEPI/NED funding in the revolution, one thing is clear: The amount of US dollars spent on military support for the Tunisian government has been grossly disproportionate to that spent on democracy promotion, raising questions about the sincerity of the program's aims.

For example, out of a total of \$69.28 million of US assistance given to Tunisia from 2006-2010, only \$15.69 million, or roughly one quarter, went to democracy and human rights promotion programs, with the rest, \$53.59 million going to "military and security" assistance (McInerney, 2010). Yet even these figures do not show the whole picture. In order to understand how US military interests undermine democracy-promotion objectives despite the prominence the latter receives in US rhetorical diplomacy, one must look at the amount of military sales approved by the US Government during a similar period. For example, between 1987 and 2009, the US military signed \$349 million in military sales agreements with Ben Ali's government (Pein, 2011). Furthermore, in 2010, the Obama Administration asked Congress to approve a \$282 million sale of 12 "excess" Sirkorsky military helicopters to Tunisia (Pein, 2011).

One must question the seriousness with which the US Government took the democratization agenda considering the government was aware, as

demonstrated by the US State Department annual human rights reports, that Tunisia's "human rights record remained poor, and the Government continued to commit serious abuses" (US Department of State, 2005). Absent any external threats to the country, it was clear that this high-tech military equipment would be used for internal repression of political dissent and actions that would clearly undermine any democratization projects undertaken by MEPI and NED.

### **President Obama's "war on terror" and Democracy Promotion**

The election of Barack Obama as US President in November 2008 on a platform of "change" was welcomed by many in the MENA region and seen to herald a dramatic sea change in US relations with the Muslim world. In particular, his June 2009 speech in Cairo was taken by many to signify a conscious effort on President Obama's part to transform US-Middle East relations.

"The language we use matters," President Obama declared, and it is evident that he has made an effort to avoid the most offensive of the Bush era's discursive constructions, including the "war on terror" label (President Obama claims to view terror as a tactic, "not an enemy"), as well as polemical and poorly defined terms such as "Islamofascism" and "evildoers" (Mullin, 2011). Beyond the shift in language, President Obama has also promised to amend some of his predecessors' more odious foreign and domestic policies vis-à-vis the "war on terror", vowing "to close Guantánamo, and adhere to the Geneva Conventions" (Baker, 2010). In his Cairo speech, President Obama indicated that while adopting his predecessor's rhetorical adherence to a policy of "democracy promotion" in the region, he would distance himself from the aggressive manner in which his predecessor pursued this alleged agenda. Not only did he hold the view that democracy is a common aspiration of "all people" in the world, but Americans would promote and protect such mechanisms and institutions associated with this form of governance, as human rights, "everywhere" (Mullin, 2011).

Some, however, have questioned the actual policy significance of President Obama's rhetorical shift. Not only has President Obama been unable to carry out his firm commitment to close Guantánamo, he has also failed to address adequately the detrimental "war on terror" legacy, refusing to establish any punitive or deterrence mechanisms, and has proved incapable of investigating and holding accountable those top-level Bush administration officials responsible for implementing illegal policies (Cohn, 2011). Moreover, from the perspective of Tunisia's "war on terror", many of the civil society actors we met with shared the perception that the human rights abuses committed in the name of "counter-terrorism" actually increased, with tacit US support, in the period after President Obama came to power (National Lawyers Guild, 2011).

As with the various other areas of President Obama's Middle East agenda, where policy and practice have fallen well short of rhetoric, so too have his actions spoken louder than words when it comes to the issue of democracy in the region. Like administrations before it, President Obama refrained from

criticising the devastating effects of the neo-liberal “reforms” pushed on the country by the IMF/World Bank and other “structural adjustment” gurus, many of which have served as obstacles to meaningful and bottom-up democratisation efforts in the region. Their calls to lower tariffs, privatize, reduce food and gas subsidies, focus development strategies on the tourism industry and the creation of free trade zones that produce goods targeted for the European market - all resulted in even greater levels of economic stratification, increased numbers living in poverty and a proliferation of low-skilled jobs unable to meet either the economic needs or life aspirations of a majority of university graduates. About the only area of state funding that was not reduced as a result of these neo-liberal reforms, and which the Obama Administration did not criticise in the context of its “democracy promotion” agenda, was that of security - despite the knowledge that there was a good chance this funding could be used in the repression of the various groups deemed by the Tunisian regime as constituting national security threats.

### **Achievements and Challenges of the Tunisian Revolution: Assessing change and continuity in Tunisian-US relations**

Despite the incredible achievements of the Tunisian revolution, many obstacles still remain to the realisation of the aims of those involved for a more tolerant, equitable, just and sovereign Tunisia. This section will provide an overview of some of these key challenges, including the in the crucial areas of the national identity, economic and social justice, “security” and foreign policy, and with a focus on the role of the US in recent developments.

### **The Tunisian Revolution and Identity: “Culture wars” or “Rebalancing of the public sphere”?**

After a long and arduous decade in which, as this essay has demonstrated, the US often colluded with the state violence and political repression of the Ben Ali regime in the name of a supposedly shared concern in “fighting terrorism”, and after a slow start to recognising how dramatically the societal tides had shifted, on the surface it seems the US stance vis-a-vis Tunisia has changed dramatically. Former foes are now allies, and former friends now enemies. The abrasive discourse and blunt policy instruments of the “war on terror” seem nothing but a faint memory. Conflation and a failure to distinguish between the ideologies, political agendas, strategies and tactics of a wide-range of Islamist activists in Tunisia, only a very small minority of whom ever advocated violence, were the norm during those years. Today, US politicians that once loudly beat the “war on terror” drums speak of the ruling An Nahda party as promisingly “moderate” in its “rejection of extremism and its respect for the democratic process, individual liberties, women’s rights and the rule of law” (Lieberman, 2011). Watching the rapidity with which this political conversion seems to have taken place is enough to give observers cognitive whiplash. Whether out of a true reckoning with the mistakes of the past (of which there has yet to be a

public recognition), or less principled, realpolitik reasons, the US seems to be staying out of the very sensitive identity struggles that Tunisian society is currently undergoing.

It is not surprising that the issue of identity is coming to the fore considering the post-colonial state's attempt to suppress any challenge to Bourguiba's narrowly conceived Tunisian identity, which viewed religion as largely anathema to modernity and therefore banished it from the public as well as, to a certain extent, private, spheres. These policies were continued under the Ben Ali regime in which public piety came to be seen not only as a threat to the secular identity of the state, but also to state security. In this context, the electoral victory and actual assumption of political power by An Nahda, a party that for so long was at the receiving end of some of the most repressive of the government's policies and practices, is nothing short of incredible. Not only does it represent a tangible victory for all those individuals that were tortured, killed, wrongfully imprisoned or exiled on the basis of their political and/or religious beliefs, a victory physically embodied in the person and position of the former political prisoner and Nahda member, Samir Dilou, as Human Rights and Transitional Justice minister (Lachheb, 2011). But it also represents a symbolic victory, for those who have struggled not only for a pluralisation of the political sphere, but of the public sphere as well. They have patiently waited for the day that Tunisia's Arab, Maghrebian and Islamic identity would have the space to develop and compete for the hearts and minds of the Tunisian public on equal footing.

Yet as many of these issues are being discussed for the first time in the open it should come as no surprise that they may cause discomfort amongst some, especially those who feel their interests are best protected by maintaining Tunisia's secular and pro-western identity. As Larbi Sadiki contends, "the lack of a shared political space [in Tunisia] has meant that there are rival hegemonic political discourses to the dominant one," making polarisation and conflict more likely (Sadiki, 2002). One can see this in some of the passionate, and sometimes heated, debates that have taken place in recent months in which Tunisian identity has become a site of contestation for rival political projects. Some of the most sensitive faultlines today seem to be between the conservative and relatively small, though vocal, Salafi movement that was unable to function in the open during the Ben Ali days, and hardline secular elements which are entrenched in the media, and an elite which many on both the right and left believe are a leftover from the *ancien regime* (Al Arabiya News, 2012).

For example, recent conflicts have arisen over the broadcasting of the film "Persepolis," by the privately owned Nessma TV that offended the beliefs of many Tunisians, not only Salafis, because of the depiction of God in human form (Brooks, 2012), the publication of scantily dressed models in newspapers (Al Arabiya News, 2012), as well as questions pertaining to the limits of "freedom of religion" in a newly democratic Tunisia, with Salafis leading protests and sit-ins at Manouba University near the capital against a policy banning female students from wearing the niqab (a conservative face veil)

during classes or exams (Bouazza, 2012). There are also ongoing debates regarding Tunisia's Arab-Muslim identity in the constituent assembly, in particular regarding the first article of Tunisia's current constitution, which names the language of the country as Arabic and its religion as Islam. Nahda, on the one hand, has questioned whether this reference to Islam in the constitution's preamble is sufficient in terms of delineating the religious orientation of Tunisia's legislative framework, whereas the centrist Congress for the Republic (CPR) party and Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) suggested that it may already go too far (Lamboley, 2012).

It seems likely that debates over identity issues will continue in the foreseeable future. So long as they are conducted in a context free of violence and intimidation, these debates can continue to positively affect the pluralisation of the public sphere by prying away from the secular elite its monopoly over the ability to define what it means to be Tunisian. As the Tunisian human rights and democracy activist and London-based lawyer Intissar Kherigi has put it, this should lead to a "rebalancing of the public sphere" (Kherigi, 2011).

### **The Tunisian Revolution and Economic Justice: US Help or Hindrance?**

Though the Tunisian revolution was never solely about economic issues, of course they formed a key component of the grievances expressed by protesters. Unemployment, underemployment, low wages, restrictive labour policies, unequal distribution of wealth, unequal public expenditure (with the coastal regions receiving 65% of public investment), conspicuous consumption of the elite and flagrant corruption were prominently expressed concerns. Today, many of these issues remain unaddressed. Some of this may be attributable to the economic impact of the uprisings, combined the economic crisis in Europe, which has affected growth levels and the ability of the Tunisian government to address longstanding structural issues (African Economic Outlook, 2011).

More worrying than the declining growth rates, however, are the increasing unemployment figures, with over 700,000 Tunisians, or 19 percent of the working-age population, unemployed in 2011 (Loftus, 2011). More worrying still, are the figures of unemployment for college graduates, one of the key sectors of society to participate in the 2010-11 uprisings, especially in those regions of the country that were notoriously neglected under Ben Ali, e.g. Gafsa and Tozeur, where rates are as high as 37.5 % and in Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, where 28% of college graduates are unemployed (Lamboley, 2012). Many feel that this is due to a continued lack of focus by government authorities on the regions that are in greatest need of state investment. As an ex-miner from the Gafsa Phosphate Company (CPG) put it: "the problem is not the region, but the distribution of the federal budget" (Lamboley, 2012).

Yet there are signs that the newly elected government is seeking to confront some of these longstanding social and economic problems that are a legacy of years of corruption and unequal growth. The 23 billion dinar 2012 budget saw a

7.5% increase over last year's spending, with a large portion said to be set aside for social development. Regional Development Minister Jameleddine Gharbi has stressed the need to focus government energy on regional disparity between areas, along with unemployment (Ghanmi, 2012). Moreover, Tunisian Minister of Health Khalil Ezzaouia has recently called for the establishment of universal healthcare for all Tunisians as a means of addressing some of these structural inequalities. Though Tunisia's healthcare system has been praised by the World Health Organization (WHO), as opposed to its North African neighbours, with nearly 90% of Tunisians having access to some form of health insurance, the healthcare system is plagued by similar issues of regional disparity. According to a recent report published by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIC), "In the rich coastal areas, the services are comparable to those in Europe, whereas in the interior of Tunisia the number of specialists and doctors, the quality of equipment, and the coverage of services are all much lower" (Lamboley, 2012).

Perhaps it is unsurprising that it is in Gafsa where some of the most vocal labour unrest can be witnessed, as the strikes of 2008 which many attribute to laying the groundwork for 2010/11 uprisings took place here. Recent work stoppages and protests led by in the UGTT in this southwestern city known for its phosphate mines include participation by parents of wounded demonstrators in the 2008 strikes as well as unemployed college graduates demanding jobs (Lamboley, 2012). There have also been signs that tension may be mounting between the unions and the state, with claims from the UGTT, as well POCT and PDP that recent incidents of vandalism at UGTT headquarters across the country may have been the work of individuals and/or institutions associated with the state (Hassine, 2012).

This state of affairs has left many looking back to the oppressive labour policies of the Ben Ali regime for comparison. As Mouldi el Fahem, a member of PDP's executive bureau put it: "It is not the first time unionists are subjected to this type of exploitation" (Hassine, 2012). Many are worried that calls to restore "order" and "stability" in the name of national development could be at the expense of political rights, in particular freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and freedom of speech. As one UGTT official explained, although the union also desires stability and prosperity for the country it should not be done "at the expense of subjugating people and denying them their basic rights."

The economic policies of the newly elected government, with its overreliance on the market, seem inadequate to address the main structural issues affecting the economy. The government seems likely to follow down the path laid by Ben Ali and to continue to open Tunisian markets and economy to foreign investment, apparently without placing the aspirations of a highly educated workforce and equitable national development at the heart of considerations. The task at hand for the Tunisian government is not made easier by foreign governments, such as the US, and international financial institutions, which seem intent on pushing the same weathered policies that are now not only responsible for the economic travesties that formed a key grievance of uprisings in Tunisia and elsewhere in the region, but also for the "economic crisis" in the very heart of the metropole

itself. Attractive loans, especially for a country with real balance of deficit concerns, are yet again on offer, with the same conditions that led to unbalanced development and increased dependency on western states under Ben Ali, including "massive cuts to the public sector and privatizations" (*Russia Today*, 2011). From recent statements made by Obama, and proposals discussed by G8 leaders as well as the IMF and World Bank regarding the provision of funds to promote "economic reform" and "private sector" investment in Tunisia and Egypt, it is unclear whether any lessons have been learned about the causes of the revolutions (Vinocur and Maitre, 2011).

Revolutionaries expressed a vision of a democratic Tunisia, marked by balanced development, equality, and social justice. However, economic growth driven by foreign investment under IMF dictates is generally associated with precisely the type of unbalanced development and income disparity that generated the socio-economic collective grievances leading to the Tunisian revolution. The PCOT, whose recent name change to *Al Badil* (Revolutionary Alternative) they associate with a weak performance in the 2011 elections, feels that the government is not taking the necessary steps to reverse the damage done to the economy and society as a result of Ben Ali's neoliberal policies (Walker, 2011). In particular, they are campaigning to cancel Tunisia's debt as well as adopt a policy on foreign investment that is focused on equitable national development. As Samir Taamallah, a former political prisoner and member of the central committee of PCOT, explained, foreign investment should serve the "needs of our country...we are not against investment, but we want it to be done in a reasonable way that benefits the people" (Walker, 2011).

Those hoping that the new government will initiate a break from the past IMF/World Bank sanctioned fiscal policies will find little hope with the Ministry of Finance's "pilot project" for tax and customs regulations, which includes plans to streamline administrative, regulatory and governance structures and policies for them to become more business friendly and in line with the "organic structure" promoted by "the World Bank and adopted by a number of countries throughout the world" (Tlili, 2012).

It also seems likely that any US intervention in this regard will be to support the status quo. Recent legislation passed by US Congress demonstrates that the conflation of democracy with free market capitalism remains the underpinning logic of US policy towards Tunisia. In a telling statement, U.S. Senator Adam Schiff (D-Burbank representative) explained recently introduced legislation that would allow the federal government to provide "financial assistance, technical support and strategic advice to companies destabilized by political unrest." He explained that this "a once in a generation... opportunity to help people in the Arab world to complete their democratic transition," assuming the common sense nature of the relationship between support for private business and democratic development, not requiring further elaboration (Ayari, 2011). Recent talks between US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and President Marzouki and Prime Minister Jebali in which the enhancement of free trade agreements between the two countries was discussed also demonstrate the US desire to

ensure an outcome to the revolution in which strong political and economic alliances between the two countries are maintained (Ayari, 2011). It is interesting to note that though US exports to various parts of the MENA region fell in 2011, e.g. Lebanon by 10%, 11.5% in Qatar and 9.5% in Egypt, 50.3% in Syria, and 51.5% in Palestine, exports to Tunisia remained unaffected by the revolution, rising by 2.7% last year (Maakaroun, 2012).

### **The Tunisian Revolution and the End of the “War on Terror”? Human Rights Implications**

Many Tunisians would agree with the assessment of Anwar Kousri of the Tunisian League for Human Rights (*Ligue tunisienne des droits de l'homme*, LTDH), that since the removal of Ben Ali, there has been a marked shift in the governmental attitude towards human rights organizations in Tunisia (National Lawyers Guild, 2011). Perhaps most important, the political police - the secret section of the police that functioned as a domestic spy agency and had wide ranging power to monitor and act against anyone deemed disloyal to the regime and which was accused of torturing detainees as well as manipulating political trials - has been dissolved. However, Mr. Kousri cautioned that disbanding the political police brigade is not enough as there are other police units that have engaged in repressing dissent. In addition, many human rights advocates feel that in addition to the amnesty, it should be a priority for the government to re-open all complaints of torture that were lodged prior to 14 January 2011 as part of any transitional justice efforts.

After the fall of the Ben Ali regime, the Interim Government was quick to pass a general amnesty (19 January 2011). The amnesty purportedly resulted in the release of all prisoners detained, thought to number in the thousands, as a result of their membership in and activism for the broad range of political groups banned under the former regime. However, discussions with members of the International Association of Solidarity with Political Prisoners (AISPP) gave the impression that many individuals are still unaccounted for (National Lawyers Guild, 2011).

In addition, though political prisoners and human rights activists voiced specific demands for the Tunisian Government to rewrite or repeal the 2003 Anti-Terrorism Law, it seems the law is still in place. Martin Scheinin, the UN's expert on protecting human rights in the fight against terrorism, confirmed this in a recent report. In it, he explains how, despite being told by Tunisian officials that the law was no longer in use, he received conflicting evidence on a visit to a prison near Tunis. According to Scheinin, it was clear that judges were still citing the 2003 law in alleged terrorism cases, allowing for detention on the basis of flimsy evidence (News24, 2011).

Furthermore, according to news reports, there is evidence that the presumably unchanged law has been used to arrest accused terrorists as recently as 12 February 2012 (Shirayanagi, 2012). According the Tunisian Minister of the Interior, Ali Larayedh, 12 Tunisian suspects from an alleged Islamic extremist



group with ties to Al Qaeda were detained. Larayedh claimed that "after our interrogations we have learned that the suspects were stockpiling arms to be used when the time was ripe to impose an Islamic Emirate on Tunisia" (Shirayanagi, 2012). Coincidentally, these arrests were made only a few days before the convening of the 26<sup>th</sup> session of the Tunisian-American joint military committee. At this meeting Defense Minister Abdul Karim Zbidi, an Independent member of the cabinet who served in various government posts under Ben Ali, reiterated Tunisia's request for increased military assistance from the US, in particular "logistical support for the modernization of military equipment" (World Tribune, 2012).

It is unclear whether the new government, and the Justice and Interior Ministries in particular, are serious about addressing the human rights concerns associated with the 2003 anti-terror legislation. There is also the question of judicial reform and transitional justice, including the introduction of new policies that ensure judicial independence and freedom from interference by other branches of the government, as well accountability, namely bringing to trial those who committed abuses in the context of Tunisia's own "war on terror" and exposing the role of outside forces in aiding and abetting these crimes.

Statements made in Obama's May 24 speech to the British parliament suggest that the US will not be a helpful partner in this regard and demonstrate either a failure to comprehend, or to ignore, the collective political grievances articulated in the Tunisian revolution. Despite expressing US support for democratic change in the region, Obama claimed that Americans "must squarely acknowledge that we have enduring interests in the region: to fight terror with partners who may not always be perfect," thus overlooking the perception of many Tunisians that the repression they experienced for years at the hands of a brutal tyrant was facilitated, if not enabled, by US/western support (White House, 2011).

### **The Tunisian Revolution and the end of "Democracy Promotion"? Democracy from Below**

It also seems likely that the US government will continue, through the newly launched Middle East Funding Initiative, which has awarded the US State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) \$770 million to spend with "flexibility" in responding to developments associated with the "Arab Awakening", to use "democracy promotion" funding as a means to maintain the support of various sectors of the political elite, and even, perhaps more insidiously, as a means of imposing parameters on the ideas, agendas, policies, and discourses of as many elements of civil society that they can penetrate. The nearly \$190 million granted to Tunisia, will be geared towards the State Department's "new assistance programs aimed to shore up the country's media, civil society, political environment, and electoral process..." (Yaros, 2012). The Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) will be overseeing

more than \$23 million in “transitional support” from this budget for the non-military components of the US aid budget Tunisia (Yaros, 2012).

According to their website, MEPI has been involved in four key initiatives in Tunisia. MEPI’s Local Grant “Vision 2040 for Tunisia” program, supports various “civil society” initiatives, including in the areas of education, “women’s empowerment”, “controlling demographic growth”, encouraging “civic engagement” for Tunisia’s youth and “spreading the culture of citizenship”, focusing in particular on areas of “the rule of law, constitutions, free and fair elections, and pluralism” (US Department of State, 2011). Other programs encourage Tunisia’s youth to “have a voice in the political decision-making process by” participating in electoral politics (US Department of State, 2011). Additional projects include, work on a public opinion research and outreach initiative called The Arab Democracy Barometer (ADB), “to promote good governance and a successful democratic transition”; as well as supporting the launch of the “Tunisian General Labor Confederation” (CGTT), meant to be a rival to the UGTT, and claiming to work toward “modern trade unionism” (Ajmi, 2011).

Another likely recipient for the earmarked State Department democracy funding is the National Democratic Institute (NDI) that has run “democracy promotion” programs in Tunisia since 2000. As with MEPI, NDI’s post-revolution work also seems focused on directing revolutionary sentiment towards electoral politics, with its stated aims: “to foster a more competitive and representative multi-party environment where political parties compete effectively on behalf of citizens’ interests, and where civil society plays an active role in overseeing the political process.” Though its Political Party Development project states that it works with all political persuasions to “strengthen parties as proponents of a more open political system”, claiming that “more than 110 political parties are benefitting from newfound freedoms and competing to represent citizens in elected government,” after a search of their website, it seems only three parties are mentioned by name (and this from a 2009 statement).

All three are parties that had acquired legal status during the Ben Ali years including the centre-left, fiercely secularist political party *Ettajdid* (Renewal) Movement, and *Ettakatol*, the centre-left party, which is now part of the power-sharing government with An Nahda, and the secular liberal party, Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), which won 3.9% of the popular vote and 16 of 217 seats in the National Constituent Assembly. NDI worked with these parties to engage in election monitoring for the 2009 Tunisian elections, in which the deposed leader was “elected” to a fifth five-year term (National Democratic Institute, 2009).

It is clear from interviews with some of the recipients and subcontractors of US State Department aid that one lesson has been learned: the work of “democracy promotion” organisations in the past was too heavily dependent upon a top-down approach that overlooked the needs and aspirations of the non- “loyal”, non-elite members of civil society. Whether this realisation will truly inform future activities remains to be seen. It also is unclear if the incorporation of such

individuals and groups into the programs of these organisations will facilitate or limit the radical aspirations of many that participated in the revolution. As Mitchell has argued, though there can certainly be emancipatory elements to the democratisation agenda, it must also be seen as “an engineering project, concerned with the manufacture of new political subjects and with subjecting people to new ways of being governed,” in which the protection of entrenched interests, both domestic and international, generally take precedence over those of the majority (Mitchell 2011, p.3).

Whether it is perception or reality, there are still many who feel that US “democracy promotion” policies are little more than a fig leaf to mask more nefarious interests. According to PCOT leader Hama Hammami, the US and Europeans are “are aiming to limit the Tunisian revolution to minor reforms and modifications and want to sustain the former system, and maintain former pro-capitalist economic, political and social policies” (Walker, 2011).

## **Conclusion**

Though this article has provided plenty of evidence for skepticism in light of the various entrenched interests hovering over and seeking to contain Tunisia’s revolutionary potential, it has also, by presenting the many achievements on both the state and societal levels, provided cause for optimism. Inarguably, the most impressive achievement of last year’s uprisings was to tear down the proverbial “wall of fear” so carefully constructed over the years by Tunisia’s authoritarian regimes. This achievement will have reverberations in state-society relations for years to come. The Tunisian people remain mobilized and continue to demand that the new government live up to the ideals of the revolution, on the levels of both individual and collective dignity. As Foucault (1980) has argued, “there are no relations of power without resistances”.

As for the role of the US and other powerful states and international institutions, though it is clear that some lessons have been learned, in particular regarding the unsustainability of past policies that demonstrated a patent disregard for the rights, dignity and will of the Tunisian people, it is equally clear that efforts have been undertaken to mould the new reality in such a way that would guarantee the protection of US interests for years to come. However, the reality of power and politics is that there are never any absolutes. It is impossible, even for hegemonic powers, to prepare for and adequately respond to all contingencies and/or control the outcomes of various processes once they are set in train. We have seen this in Iraq and Afghanistan, and are seeing it now in relation to the Arab spring uprisings.

Despite their best efforts, US hegemonic control over the region is weakening. The revolutions in the region are both a symptom and cause of this fact. Various international, domestic and regional factors, including the economic crisis and several strategic and ethical failures in the various battlefields of the “war on terror”, can account for the decline in US structural and material power

vis-a-vis the region. This decline can only be a good thing from the perspective of pursuing and safeguarding the aims of the Tunisian revolution.

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