POLICY PAPER

Stabilizing Democracies in the European Neighborhood

Lessons from Lebanon and Tunisia

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Preface

More than a decade after the "Arab Spring" swept away long-established dictatorships across the MENA region, an authoritarian claustrophobia has returned to many if not all societies in the region. The effervescence of civil society, led and inspired by the energy and demographic dominance of youth, has evaporated into a stillness of disappointment, disorientation, resignation. Overwhelming international commitment to support democratic change in the region was not able to turn the odds in favour of a lasting establishment of democratic norms, institutions and processes. This discussion paper, commissioned jointly by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom and Democracy Reporting International, aims to take stock of the lessons that can be learned, from the perspective of political and civil society actors in Tunisia and Lebanon, and to develop recommendations for a critical review of concepts, methods, and strategies of international democracy support.

In the feedback from the individuals interviewed, it is not difficult to see recurring themes emerge that provide some useful lessons going forward. The first is, perhaps unsurprisingly, that political change is time-bound and contingent. Populism as a force has come to dominate political discourse, challenging democrats across the globe. It has dealt a severe blow to young MENA democracies in the process of establishing democratic norms, institutions and processes. The perhaps biggest shortcoming of these nascent systems was the failure to secure sufficient output legitimacy, leaving citizens' without concrete solutions for their daily struggles and the tangible prospect of a better economic future for the majority. The two case studies also provide operational lessons for international cooperation that is hampered by donor-induced bureaucracy, slow to react to the turning of political tides, and often does not listen to the needs of those it seeks to support.

This study was conducted before another watershed moment in the MENA region: the Hamas terrorist attacks on innocent civilians in Israel and the beginning of a new war in Gaza with yet more civilian suffering and profound repercussion for the relationship between countries in the region and the rest of the world. While examinations of democratic development may seem quaint in the face of the urgencies of war, the objective of strengthening democratic actors working to establish societies that enjoy peace within and with their neighbours is now all the more relevant. It is perhaps the most inevitable lesson from the current exercise and experience: democracies and democrats need allies and alliances to survive, and they share the same perils everywhere.

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Executive Summary

There is much to learn from the recent experiences with democracy support in countries like Tunisia and Lebanon. While their contexts largely differ, the intentions and interests of European partners were similar: help enable and foster a democratic culture that can transform power structures and their institutions into a durable democratic system based on the rule of law and good governance. However, not only have conditions been intractable in that endeavor, but similar patterns of undermining democratic principles and processes are now being displayed everywhere, including European countries.

Given the form and pattern of populist attitudes that have spread around the world in the past few years, democrats have often found themselves stuck in a reactive loop, unable to lead in public debates and to convince illiberal loyalists of joining them. This defensiveness hindered their ability to escape from this trap or coalesce around a common strategy. Moving away from traditional knowledge transfer and capacity development mechanisms in favor of agenda-setting and pragmatic engagement initiatives is thus the core of the recommendations for democracy support actors.

There were additional challenges posed by the form of engagement and synergies, between social movements, NGOs, and political parties. In multiple instances, organizations as well as the public were mobilized yet lacked the proper organizing drive to face strong backsliding and attacks on democratic processes and freedoms. Supporting non-political actors fell short of fostering sustainable political engagement and solutions and may have had a counter-productive effect of diverting the energy of activists away from the political decision-making field. Recommendations include the need for improved coherence of partnerships and focus on value-driven alliances and networks.

The sense that democracy has not delivered, or will not deliver, is widespread. Whether in terms of economic justice and opportunity, personal rights, or even functioning institutions, the disillusionment of many people conceals opportunities that were missed. Recommendations center around the necessity to safeguard freedoms, inclusive processes, and spaces, while integrating a political economy analysis lens to current and future programming. Reclaiming public narratives by improving the visibility and communication around concrete, achievable, and local endeavors, is essential.

Perceptions around operational shortcomings of cooperation actors and their partners point to a general weakness in planning, monitoring and evaluation, and accountability and learning processes. This also affected the capacity to coordinate and develop contingency plans within the larger democracy support field as the situation further deteriorated. Enhancing the resources that feed into those processes can go a long way in keeping in line with longer-term outcomes.

Lastly, European cooperation actors should be more cognizant of the perceived misalignment with their political and diplomatic leadership and the impact it has on the trust of national allies. Listening to those concerns and addressing them is important. Recommendations focus on finding more equitable forms of cooperation, which include for example parallel track advocacy to relay national partners' messaging to the European sphere.

Introduction

Scope and objectives of the paper

This paper aims at furthering the debate around the impact of democracy stabilization efforts, by identifying and busting myths around democracy building based on a comparative review of experiences in Lebanon and Tunisia. While there are multi-layered and complex reasons for the missed opportunities to establish durable pathways towards democratization, the focus here is on the specific engagement of German and other European partners in the fields of democracy, good governance, and rule of law of the last decade. In both countries, European partners have been heavily involved in democratization efforts, ranging from support to institutions, civil society, legal reform, and democratic processes. However, populist backsliding and political deadlock has all but reversed the progress towards more inclusive and participatory political systems.

As disappointing as these developments have been for those that held out hope for democratic political change and lasting improvements in the political systems in Tunisia and Lebanon, they provide an opportunity to identify lessons learned by analyzing the coherence, relevance, effectiveness, impact, and sustainability of the democracy support efforts. The paper's specific objectives are to learn from the experiences from the perspective of the Tunisian and Lebanese partners in European democracy support efforts and to inform strategic discussions, planning, decision-making, and resultant engagement of its instruments in the future.

This paper is the result of a desk review, followed by semi-structured interviews in Lebanon and Tunisia that took place in September and October 2023. In Lebanon, twelve interviews were conducted, with individuals across three political parties, two think tanks and one pressure group, one media outlet, and four civil society activists and experts. In Tunisia, nine individuals across one political party, three media outlets, four civil society activists and experts, and one former municipal representative were interviewed.

As the focus of the study is on people's perceptions and personal analysis, the methodology excluded quantitative reviews and concrete indicators[1]. The main questions revolved around the interviewees' personal assessment of missed opportunities and achievements, and their recommendations for what could be done differently in the future. The paper is therefore not pretending to be an exhaustive review. Rather, it aims to draw out universal lessons from particular experiences to inform the nascent but much-needed debate on the way forward in international democracy support.

General context

Lebanon, which had seen movements calling for democratic change even prior to the Arab Spring of 2011, faced equal difficulties as other countries in the region in transforming waves of protests into lasting political change. Despite the renewal of political energy after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in 2005, reforms remained extremely limited. Those who (re-)joined the political class fell victim to similar trends as the people they sought to replace amidst accusations of corruption and lack of accountability. Different campaigns calling for structural solutions to issues as far-reachgin as the general sectarian-political deadlock and solid waste management, for example, were powerful in their messaging and in receiving public support. Yet, they remained unsuccessful in transforming the momentum of the streets into an effective, lasting change process.

The last wave of protests, in October 2019, was able to transcend many of the divides that faced social movements in the past. For the first time, protesters not only joined forces for actual protests, but shared political manifestos and created new political groups. However, the mobilization and organization of new political forces was hampered by the growing economic struggles, further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Following the port explosion of August 4, 2020, attention turned toward dealing with the fallout of the blast and the descent into economic collapse. Momentum and opportunity to strengthen a clear vision and long-term objectives for the political future of Lebanon were lost to diverging perspectives on fundamental issues such as economic solutions and more immediate needs.

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[1] There was no review of the grant-making management procedures, capacity assessment tools, or any other instrument used to implement projects. Similarly, there were no opportunities or perceived added value in reviewing or requesting evaluations of projects or programs, which anyway seemed to be sparse. Partnership strategies were reviewed but only as a means to understand how the process was perceived by national partners.

In Tunisia, where the wave of "Arab Spring" protests had originated in 2011 and pushed Zein Al-Abidin Ben Ali to exile, the process of creating new institutions fostered a nationwide momentum to renew political engagement. The country witnessed a significant expansion of its civil society, the formation of more than one hundred political parties, and increasing engagement of citizens in the public sphere. Elections were held for a constituent assembly, a new constitution was drawn up and enacted in 2014, and successive democratic parliamentary and presidential elections were held in that year and in 2019.

However, Tunisia's successive governments were unable to redress the country's economy as urgently needed structural economic reforms continued to remain unresolved. Several transformational aspects of the constitution were not implemented, most notably with a constitutional court that was never established. Efforts to prioritize truth and reconciliation after decades of authoritarian rule lacked political will and quickly lost momentum. Increasing frustration with the governing class and often flagrant corruption, coupled with mounting economic hardship created an environment that led to the election of Kais Saied, a technocrat who promised to curb corruption. However, under his rule, Tunisia saw the suspension of its parliament, rule by decree and eventually, through a referendum on July 25, 2022, the abolition of the democratic system established by the constitution of 2014. It was replaced with a more authoritarian supreme law expressly excluding intermediary institutions that had formed the basis of the formerly vibrant civil society.

In both countries, the economic demise has lowered much of the people's enthusiasm and expectations for democracy and change. Despite the support efforts of European partners, the situation in both countries has deteriorated dramatically, with democratic endeavors under siege. The nascent democracy in Tunisia has all but fallen into autocratic rule, while sectarian leaders in Lebanon continue to hold democracy hostage and avoid accountability for their destructive actions.

What could international, especially European governmental and civil society actors have done differently to better support the achievement of a durable pathway to democracy? What can be done to prevent further backsliding, and ultimately, what are realistic options for engagement if governments in both countries continue to be unable or unwilling to respond to the needs of their people?

Populism's deep sway

The global wave of trickle-down populism today presents a core challenge to liberal democracy everywhere and Tunisia and Lebanon are no exception. Decades of attachment to authoritarian leaders make it challenging to establish a healthy political culture where democracy can grow as a serious alternative. A lack of effective strategies to confront newer and globalized methods of attacks on freedom and democracy have paralyzed and trapped democratic actors and activists who are caught in endless loops of losing ground to non-democratic actors in both countries, whether they speak out or lay low.

As in other parts of the world, populism builds on historic political currents and grievances. Across the Arab world, characteristics of Arab populism could be summarized by the following trends: opposition to the "West" (in its values, lifestyle, personal freedoms, institutions), a nationalist and sovereignty-centered discourse, a focus on a paternalistic, patriarchal organization of society and integrating various degrees of religious and conservative thought (or "Islamic populism"). The novelty in the current context has been the alignment of tactics, rhetoric and arguments of populists around the world, no matter how antagonistic their contents could be. Parallels and analysis with other countries' populism (and how they even shape tacit forms of international alliances) have been made and even analyzed.

Almost all the people interviewed agreed that stoking fears of the more vulnerable populations, scapegoating foreigners such as Sub-Saharan African migrants in Tunisia and Syrian refugees in Lebanon, as well as LGBTIQ+[2] individuals, is one of the tools used to divert people's attention from decision-makers' failures and to create a semblance of unity behind those leaders. This leads to regular attacks on the freedoms of movement and expression of these communities, such as curfews for refugees or physical attack of drag queen shows in Lebanon or dropping migrants off at the edge of the desert in Tunisia. As one expert in Tunisia noted, "there is a policy of terror aimed at forcing activists to self-censor themselves".

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[2] LGBTIQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Intersex and Queer) will be used as the main acronym to refer to all queer people identifying as LGBTIQ+, asexual, nonbinary, and other identities and orientations).

Over the years, the fight for LGBTIQ+ rights received a vast amount of civic engagement and subsequent media coverage. Activists, however, developed divergent views on whether they could have more forceful advocacy and how to increase the impact of their work based on their needs. Similar dynamics were seen and discussed with respondents around freedom of expression, women's rights, and migrant rights and best summarized with "damned if you defend them, damned if you don't" by one interviewee.

In addition to attacks on individuals and communities, there are continuous misrepresentations of economic liberalism, with some positions ostensibly stuck in time and irrelevant to the context: the anti-imperialist discourse against the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is particularly daunting as the rejection of a deal seems to be superficially based on the assumption that any deal with international financial institutions is detrimental to the economy. Despite the understanding of the economic crisis, serious propositions to find solutions remain constrained by communication styles that are oppositional and further polarizing. The irony is lost as current governmental measures appear to be harming any hope for constructive solutions in both countries[3]. In addition, loyalists have tended to systematically absolve their leaders in power from any responsibility in finding constructive and durable solutions.

In terms of addressing simplistic rhetoric, democrats have been unable to reclaim the narrative and set the agenda due to conflicting approaches. A political activist in Lebanon said, "we lost a lot by getting into smaller battles", arguing that "now is not the time to push boundaries" as society is struggling with increased poverty and instability. An advisor to a new independent MP said that their candidate won despite the backlash they received over their support for civil marriage, indicating that their constituents were not as conservative as some may think[4].

Another civil society activist insisted on the need to keep their cause as visible as possible despite the risks such as "there is never a right time to address our issues otherwise". These three different perspectives pose a continuous challenge to channel an appropriate, even if multi-pronged, communications strategy in the face of systematic demagogic campaigns that can benefit all democrats. According to one respondent "working through these multiple strategies at once should be an option" as the multitude of approaches, from open and direct work to gradual steps, and even to some extent, a low (but still present) profile, can result in various degrees of safeguarding gains and incremental progress. The key is to remain consistent with the values international cooperation partners adhere to while supporting actors who choose different methods of engagement.

There seemed to be, across respondents and countries, a diminished appetite to compose and work with illiberal or populist forces. While the lines have always moved in Lebanon, they seem to be particularly clear in the current Tunisian context. A respondent with direct experience working with the Tunisian Ennahdha party in a unity government argued that they would not, "under any circumstance, work consensually with them again".

Furthermore, a concerning element was the ease with which some national partners themselves seemed to fall into populist attitudes. In both countries, some respondents used language similar to that of non-democrats and were quick to attribute blame in a troubling manner, especially in contexts of rampant disinformation. Ironically, those respondents continue to believe that educating others was key to breaking the appeal of populist attitudes and reducing polarization, however ineffective and sometimes even counter-productive past efforts had been. This left partner organizations in a state of permanent opposition instead of finding a constructive role aimed at shaping the agenda and narrative instead of reacting to it.

Recommendations

- National partners should prioritize proactive, long-term agenda-setting over reactive attitude trends and review the positioning and methods of action that have been used so far in addressing the grievances (inequalities and injustice) that fueled populism's rise.

- International cooperation actors should help consolidate gains by safeguarding spaces, but also keep long-term vision and entry points from where to pick up from where they left off and stay conscious of the political courage required for this sine qua none condition for democracy.

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[3] Interesting recommendations for what the EU can do to address this challenge can be found here.

[4] The new MP was criticized by large parties such as the Future Movement and religious clerics, but still managed to receive the largest voting share from their constituency.

- International cooperation actors should avoid getting stuck in the education and capacity development sphere and build on "micro-achievements" to extract successful methods to extrapolate to other layers of the system. For instance, instead of a training program to municipalities on recycling, one could think of workshops to spread a working method from one municipality to another or streamlining campaigns at the provincial or national levels to join the longer-term policy or legislative aspects.

- Donors, international cooperation actors, and national organizations should engage in deeper reflections around potential scenarios and tools to address the growing illiberal landscape. For example, if populists are bound to remain at the highest levels of decision-making for the foreseeable future, are there any conditions that would make democrats' participation tolerable and limit the illiberal agenda set by the former?

Political identities, partnerships, and alliances

The fragmentation of democratic actors, as described above, becomes even more acute as the political landscape evolves in both Tunisia and Lebanon and the focus shifts from building the foundations of a democratic political system to safeguarding the hard-won freedoms of the past decade.

On identities and positioning

The plethora of new political parties and civil society organizations that sprung up in Tunisia provides a stark indication of a fragmentary drift at the expense of effectiveness and impact. The 2011 revolution in Tunisia provided the first inter-generational experience for open public space. However, in the long run, both their high number and their short lifespan proved to be detrimental to democratization efforts[5].

In 2013, as Tunisian political parties were still insufficiently effective in moving the transition forward, CSOs repeatedly and successfully intervened jointly in the political process to end the stalemate at key junctures. And while this achievement was praised by public opinion and the international community at the time (the "Quartet" even earning a Nobel peace prize), this reliance on non-political actors came to the expense of the organic development of a political ecosystem capable of solving its own problems. Other achievements worth mentioning can be limiting the role of religion in the constitution and the anchoring of women's rights. However, while civil society interventions were extremely useful in saving the spirit of the revolution on multiple occasions, transposing this momentum and energy into the political ecosystem remained largely unsuccessful.

In terms of positioning, few political parties in Tunisia, among the dozens that emerged, mustered the courage, to identify as liberal[6], and only one seems to have survived, namely, Afek Tounes. Why is that so, and what prevented others from identifying as liberals as well? One reason is historical and didactic and pertains to the biases from decades of post-colonial and post-cold war anti-imperialism rhetoric, confusing liberal thought with hawkish capitalism and neoliberalism at the international level, and with corruption and cronyism at the national level. Another is social, as the Tunisian culture, despite other currents and the desire among some for more individual opportunity, remains largely community-driven and less inclined to center around individual rights. In addition, identifying as liberal seemed to "mostly appeal to the coastal elite with preexisting businesses" according to one expert, and therefore could have been seen as a political risk in the outreach and spread of a new political party. Needless to say, this dynamic around a lack of practical communication around political positioning further accentuated a reactive form of politics that hindered the formation of sustainable alliances.

[5] Ottaway M., _Tunisia: Political Parties and Democracy in Crisis_, Wilson Center, April 2021

[6] For this study, a liberal orientation refers to center-right ideals with strong attachment to individual rights, public liberties and freedoms, independent judiciary, and private property rights and market economies.

In Lebanon, several political groups have emerged since 2019 in response to the grievances linked to decades-of political stagnation that have left the country depleted of resources and potential[7].Eager to stand out from the political status quo, they also sought to distinguish themselves from each other. While a diverse pool of opinions is always useful in the contribution towards democratization, two major divisive issues split this reformist movement.

The first is linked to economic orientations in the opposing opinions around the potential IMF negotiations and deal. The second is linked to Hezbollah, the Iran-backed group dominating political life in Lebanon, as some groups avoided discussing a political solution altogether, others favored their integration into a national defense strategy (thereby accepting their continued militarized presence), whereas others openly considered the party as a main obstacle to the country's democratic progress. These divisions in the positioning of democratic actors continue to hinder the emergence of a wider and stronger pro-democracy field.

While Tunisians have cycled in, then out of politics with a high incidence of resignations and withdrawals from public space, Lebanese seemed to rekindle interest in political organizing over the past three years. The compounded crises (financial meltdown, Beirut blast, political deadlock) forced the realization that rejecting the political landscape had to come hand in hand with more direct political engagement, even if it is to the detriment of civil society engagement. The move from civil society activism to politics was a long time coming for dozens of activists[8].

Partnerships and alliances

Interlocutors raised concerns about the methods as well as the coherence of their partners' strategic planning both for themselves and others. There were challenges for all stakeholders (national partners, international cooperation actors, and donor agencies) to appropriately assess long-term needs and consult with each other in co-designing relevant, effective, and sustainable activities. As one respondent described the dilemma at the core: "How do you get out of the dynamics of civil society and pressure groups into actual politics"?

Starting with identifying and selecting potential partners, there were weaknesses identified by respondents around the expectations for those relationships. It seemed that cooperation actors had no clear partnership strategy when engaging in the first stages of the Tunisian democratic transition, as best described by a respondent: "Funds were assigned with limited experience for all engaged parties, from donors to NGOs". Others also mentioned the lack of understanding of funding partners of the dynamics and local context, leading to incoherent and ineffective partnerships. The issue can be extended to service providers and indirect project stakeholders, risking value-based participation that can benefit all beyond the scope of the activities.

International actors need to employ clear, consistent and value-based frameworks for their engagement, thereby supporting their partners, even if they still have fluid political identities, to adopt common positions. Working together on concrete projects with joint objectives can produce more clarity and a shared sense of purpose. Discussions on terminology, political rhetoric, and civil discourse could be useful in bringing different people and perspectives together while avoiding a top-down approach with traditional trainers and facilitators.

There has been at least one instance where a historical partnership has affected the credibility and reputation of a supporting organization among other political partners. Nearly all respondents in Lebanon's liberal political community were supportive of FNF's decision to pull back from their partnership with the Future Movement (FM).

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[7] In Lebanon, political parties of all orientations, were also hindered by the heavy burden of their role in the civil war and its aftermath, as well as the growing mistrust of citizens with the deepening of multiples crises in the past few years. Communitarian considerations were juxtaposed to the political landscape and up until today, parties with formal orientation are shadows of what their initial ideology presupposes. For example, the "National Liberal Party", an early model of secular, liberal party breaking traditional divides upon its establishment, is now a gathering of mostly older generation Maronites. By contrast, another early model of secular but socialist party, the "Progressist Socialist Party" morphed into a Druze party. Both are ruled by political dynasties, as do most traditional parties in the country.

[8] In 2015, the "You stink" campaign, aimed at finding concrete solutions to the solid waste management issue, provided a much-needed avenue to address political dysfunction in the country. This form of engagement opened the way for "Beirut Madinati", a collaboration of several activists in running for the municipal elections in the capital a year later. Despite their relatively short loss against the traditional parties (an alliance of FM, Al Amal -Hezbollah allies-, and other traditional Christian parties), a model with success within reach could be perceived and built on, as the 2022 parliamentary elections led to the election of 12 independent MPs.

The partnership seemed to be a clear example of a long-lasting relationship, which occasioned credibility issues with other liberal FNF partners, especially in the aftermath of the 2019 protests[9].

Recommendations

- All stakeholders should adhere to a certain set of minimum standards for partnerships: internal democratic decision-making processes, transparent and accountable mechanisms on budgets, projects, activities (one could fairly make the case for mutual transparency and accountability), complementary sense of purpose, and commitment to joint learning.

- International cooperation actors and national partners should set periodic internal reviews of their partnerships to adjust the support to the changing needs related to the context, enable more synergies within the larger landscape and allow partners to connect and develop their own relationships, and develop exit strategies where appropriate.

- International cooperation actors should encourage the establishment and strengthening of alliances and focus on creating value-driven networks[10]. Creating coherent synergies and fostering collaboration across civil society and political groups (and understanding the rationale of being one -civil society actor- or the other -political actor-) remains important. If the point of working with civil society groups in a democratic transition is that they are the fertile ground of a nascent democratic culture and training ground for democratically minded political personnel, then international cooperation also needs to develop effective strategies, methodologies and practices that form part of a "mainstreaming" of democratic practice in its own approaches.

- While a focus on organizations remains important, international cooperation actors should also support individuals' personal journeys that can help capture lost opportunities related to turnover or weak structures[11].

Decreasing faith in democracy delivering

Throughout the interviews, there was an overwhelming sense of disappointment by respondents around democratic processes that did not deliver what was expected. Whether in terms of institutions, economy, or freedoms, challenges were numerous and complex. With the current context, it is essential to consider actions that crystallize and maintain the gains of the past years, given the continuing deterioration of the politico-economic landscape we're witnessing.

Linkages between political economy, economic rights, and democratization

In both Lebanon and Tunisia, the momentum that sparked the Arab Spring protests and subsequent movements advocating for greater democratic participation was fueled by economic frustration and injustice. Yet, this economic policy area was largely ignored by international democracy support programming and national policy priorities, in favor of a focus on political institutions and processes, thus failing to deliver tangible improvement to people where arguably it would have mattered most.

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[9] While the FM seemed genuinely attached to the partnership with FNF, other allies and partners in the liberal ecosystem questioned the rationale of that relationship. The party has operated within a political dynasty with no regard for democratic internal processes (among other criticisms), leading to a profound mismatch with the aspirations of the newer and younger political groups.

[10] For example, going beyond the "usual suspects" in conferences and capacity development activities is essential, but so is ensuring that facilitators and trainers are ideologically aligned with the desired outcome of the program, or at least are sufficiently well versed in discussing divergent perspectives while reaffirming the vision of the organizing entity.

[11] For example, regular networking opportunities can bring like-minded professionals to work together beyond the scope of civil society's efforts and even form links that may prove useful in the long term. Methodologically, by moving beyond a unidirectional knowledge-transfer towards more focus on supporting peer-to-peer learning and greater ownership between stakeholders could enable a wider range of opportunities for all.

For many respondents, the neglect of the economic justice component in democratic actors' efforts led to the continuation and degradation of the socio-economic situation in both countries. As one respondent in Tunisia mentioned, "we took our time to think about a political development model and shoved aside the discussion about an economic development model".

At least two respondents in Lebanon, getting the issue to center stage, indicated a need for less capacity building and awareness raising (components even described as "too little too late" by one interviewee and considered wasteful[12] by a couple of others) and more concertation for economic justice and reform.
It is no secret that the weight of the state in the economy of both Lebanon and Tunisia is problematic[13]. Some respondents mentioned for instance the ratio of civil servants among the labor force, the burden of State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), the risks of defaulting on debt (its prelude[14], as well as its aftermath for Lebanon). Furthermore, despite the efforts of socio-economic rights activists to root out corruption and impunity, there has just been other priorities in each country: in Tunisia, the task of developing a new political system was daunting, and in Lebanon, the entire political leadership still has a fusional connection with the private sector rendering it not only complicit, but a main driver for a state-sponsored scam that robbed the middle class of their lives' worth of savings.

Nevertheless, there is reticence in proposing solutions through the privatization (or PPP) of sectors of the state economy and/or the SOEs. The main assumption is that they would be coopted by companies owned by the traditional political elite. Besides, the precondition for favorable market-oriented policies are strong regulations and subsequent enforcement. This intersection could be seen as an opportunity to better present meaningful messages and communication around those issues and create political impetus within the system for a focus on economic justice and what a return to a regulatory state could look like for the private sector's entirety. Ironically, through the exponential growth of the informal sector, entrepreneurship and private initiative have grown outside to become a non-negligible force.

As such, this paper argues that economic reform and economic justice are intrinsic parts of democracy building and stabilization. By subsidizing the old economic model with the intention of limiting the pressure on the young democracy in Tunisia and avoid a total collapse of the state in Lebanon, donor countries were unable to prevent what turned out to be unavoidable.

Institutional challenges for a democracy that delivers

In Tunisia, the decade mark of the revolution was an opportunity to reflect on the institutional achievements made since the ousting of Ben Ali from power, with reports and studies assessing the progress in the transition and the result already grim. The aftermath of this experience left a bitter taste as expectations for more accountability and justice have not been met.

Legislation was slow to be produced in a fragmented parliament despite the presence of a unity government at the executive level. MPs were often unprepared and lacked the technical support to perform efficiently. The singular focus by some decision-makers to keep Ennahda out of as many public spaces as possible also led to restrictive legislation during the transition[15]. In terms of justice, the Truth and Dignity Commission submitted its final report in 2019. Out of more than 60,000 complaints received, only 174 were transferred to special chambers. The process related to transitional justice was instrumentalized and politicized on more than one occasion.

Decentralization, one of the main policy initiatives to address the stark disparities between north and south, the affluent coastal areas and the arid hinterland, never gained enough popular support as a tool to address the key demands of people. Besides the slow formulation of the 2018 municipal law, remnants of the hyper-concentrated and antiquated central authority made its implementation challenging.

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[12] Some interviewees said that the law on associations in Tunisia pushed NGOs to organize many events in the high-standard hotels in the capital or regional cities, with large budgets for their organization, and they realized that not only did that leave them with little budget to build the actual content, but that the reputation and perception of the public wasn't keen looking and even negative.

[13] In Tunisia, breaking away from an omnipresent State, described by one respondent as overly "nurturing" was therefore difficult to achieve. Instead of focusing on the long-apparent needs to reform, however, in attempts to quickly appease popular demands, each incoming government in the transition phase in Tunisia recruited further civil servants to satisfy their clientele. The public workforce grew from about 445,000 individuals in 2010 to 670,000 in 2021, and reaching a share of public labor compensation of 17% of the GDP. In Lebanon, the latest number from before the Covid-19 pandemic indicated a share of 19% of the GDP. In comparison, the share of public servants' wages into the GDP amount to 12% in France and a little less than 8% in Germany.

[14] Before the Beirut blast, people were still shocked by the floating rate to 9,000 LBP to the USD, as opposed to 90,000 LBP at the time of writing (mid-November 2023).

[15] For example, out of fear of a surge in Islamist support, the law on political parties banned political work in universities, an essential space for politics to be experimented around, and the terrorism law which broadened the definition of terrorism to the extent of easily misrepresenting it to further crackdown on different opinions.

The rigidity of procedures, bureaucratic slowness, and lack of accompanying implementing legislation led mayors to self-interpret articles. Respondents noted the limitations of proportional representation at the local level, as irreconcilable differences led councilpersons to resign, paralyzing local government in a few instances, and fueling attacks on local governance structures.

Inversely, working on decentralization in Lebanon has provided democrats with concrete avenues to find local solutions to national issues. When the national solid waste management strategy (or lack thereof) collapsed, several municipalities implemented their own policies and innovated through working with environmental NGOs or in Private Public Partnerships (PPP). There was visible enthusiasm from most respondents when discussing democratization pathways through local government, despite the threats and politicization of the matter[16]. Municipalities are also places where establishment parties can be held accountable in more practical terms, and where dozens of independent initiatives were able to cut across the traditional divides. International cooperation actors have worked to develop the capacities of municipalities and a few constituents (women, youth) for years. However, several experts noted that those programs could benefit from "crossbreeding". Instead of working separately on gendered budgeting, youth engagement, or municipal technical skills, by multiple actors, it would be more relevant to "break those silos" as one expert noted and create linkages across the existing programs.

As for the judiciary and the legislative powers in Lebanon, there is a generalized disillusionment in their capacity to perform their basic functions. From harassing the investigative judge overseeing the case of the Beirut port blast to the unwillingness of the speaker of parliament to organize mandatory presidential elections, Lebanese institutions continue to look like a shadow of their former selves (the latter being far from efficient and just to begin with). Respondents indicated a preference to working at the local level as it is more likely to showcase positive results to a wider audience. However, this vision was dismantled by a couple of skeptical interviewees for whom these efforts could be compared to a "drop in the ocean". There is a defeatist streak among national partners that seemed difficult to overcome, given the paralyzing paradigm of political polarization and gridlock.

Recommendations

- All stakeholders active in the field of democracy promotion should consider linkages of their current work with economic development propositions, and solutions to the financial and monetary crises (and keep it as political as possible).

- Donors should consider more holistic planning of projects, through tools such as political economy analysis, and additional consultation with relevant stakeholders in cross-cutting projects for enhanced relevance and impact[17].

- International cooperation actors should foster stronger engagement with national partners at the local governance and grassroots levels, which is likely to result in more sustainable results, while holding space for (re)connecting local and national level efforts, if opportunities present themselves.

- National partners should produce improved messaging, communication, and concertation to strengthen a common vision for a political economy that works for everyone[18].

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[16] Municipal elections in Lebanon have already been delayed twice due to the compounded crises hitting the country and the inability of current leadership to agree to hold them for fear of losing power at the local level. The current deadline for elections is May 2024.

[17] The generation of baseline data and the production of research on reliable data was repeatedly recommended by multiple respondents in both countries. Examples of empty websites and unreliable data were numerous, despite the assistance received by the governments, and respondents noted the need to have a streamlined approach to data-production programs. With advances around big data and AI, there is a technological leap to gain.

[18] For example, recommendations from respondents included bypassing components with limited added value at this point, such as trainings, to instead focus on campaigning for tangible economic solutions and alternatives which could yield the same level of networking opportunities (if not more).

Operational shortcomings

Designing, planning, monitoring and evaluation, accountability and learning

Feedback around what could have been done differently in the designing and planning of democracy-support programs in Tunisia and Lebanon indicated strong disagreements within two essential considerations: the contextual priorities (the what) and the methods of engagement (the how).

How can national partners be best supported in assessing the context and addressing the issues they believe are necessary to enable an impetus toward democratic reforms? The pathways of nascent democratic processes have often been diverse, while planning is influenced by top-to-bottom analysis, with objectives set by donors and organizations' headquarters. Socio-economic and cultural realities in the project countries, which are themselves at an inflection point due to the rapidly evolving context, have made it difficult for existing plans to stay on course.

Donor and supporting agencies followed different approaches to their prioritization of the work, with some focusing on the intricacies of the transition process, and others on capacity development of new civil society actors. In both cases, consultation with their relevant national counterparts for their strategy design was generally limited. Support was often bound by short-term considerations and project-based funding despite identifying the absence of long-term planning as a major obstacle to successful rights-based democracy support programs. These mechanisms themselves are therefore a limitation that civil society has had to overcome, in addition to the difficult context in which they operate.

Lessons learned from previous programming were rarely extracted and applied in subsequent activities. As such, closer monitoring and evaluation, and providing open access to those evaluations, would have been beneficial for all organizations working on similar topics. Lastly, institutional memory within civil society, and within each organization, is spotty at best. With a high incidence staff-turnover[19], decisions over activities and projects sometimes missed taking into consideration past lessons and remained heavily influenced by pre-identified (and sometimes already irrelevant) conditions.

As for the methods of engagement, criticism stemmed from a frustrating dynamic pitting capital-based activities and NGOs, perceived as "elitist and non-representative", with more grassroots-level engagement. Many respondents pointed out that localized, well-resourced (financially and technically) activities, had more impact and sustainability than nation-wide projects focused on numbers and indicators. A similar dynamic played out during the Covid-19 pandemic, with one respondent saying that "thanks to the pandemic, we've had to move a large percentage of the budget going for conferences in hotels for more online production and outreach materials, which ended up being more impactful and sustainable" and noted that they have cut down on the amounts spent on logistics for events in favor of more quality outputs going forward.

Coordination and contingency plans

Given the backsliding in democratic consolidation in both Lebanon and Tunisia, there is an overwhelming sense of urgency to preserve the gains of the past years and in order to keep the public sphere that was created as safe and as open as possible. "We are in survival mode" was heard in both countries and from most respondents, as the discussion focused on the assessment of the current environment. For example, some programs were brought to an abrupt end in Tunisia such as those working with municipal councils, which were unilaterally and undemocratically disbanded by the President in March 2023. There are other programs that may have to be halted soon. The draft of a new law regulating associations that was made public in October 2023 aims to further restrict civil society's work. While meetings to coordinate and discuss the draft are taking place, deeper strategic consultations with partners over program transformation and repositioning must be prioritized right now.

Whereas coordination and alliance formation within national civil society is an organic process led by national partners, respondents criticized the lack of regular communication mechanisms from supporting agencies around their own plans and programs. While a comprehensive donor coordination mechanism may be farfetched due to stretched resources and time, one respondent insisted that is "essential in light of the shrinking space". At the very least, there ought to be streamlined experience sharing regarding monitoring and evaluation practices. Arguments were made for regular meetings with all supporting agencies to ensure that their engagement is building value and not merely expanding or duplicating activities.

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[19] Turn-over of staff in NGOs is unusually high as project-based funding doesn't provide organizations with the ability to continue providing salaries beyond the scope of funded projects and organizations compete for the same skillset, limiting NGO professionals' stability.

Recommendations

- International partners should develop improved methods for integrating partners in the design, planning and regular review of activities (participatory, inclusive, intersectional, partner-led).

- European partners should exhibit stronger data transparency and accountability measures, by conducting and publishing evaluations and adding a cross-cutting component of learning into all existing programming[20].

- Along with their international partners, national NGOs should mobilize and organize around potential scenarios of program disruptions and develop contingency plans keeping in line with longer-term outcomes.

Addressing the perceived gaps in European support

The sense of general disappointment of and mistrust in European engagement has been palpable in Lebanon and Tunisia and increased starkly in parallel with a populist backlash. On the one hand, European instruments for human rights and democracy have long invested resources and technical expertise at multiple levels of governmental and non-governmental institutions. However, in terms of programming itself, governance support lacked sufficient interconnections from the donor side.

For example, while democratization/stabilization programs fell under short-term considerations of the German Federal Foreign Office, long-term economic development funding fell under the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development. The separation of their portfolios may in parts make sense, but indirectly led practitioners to neglect that essential nexus and therefore limit the reflections around comprehensive solutions to the political and economic downturn.

High-level diplomacy has been perceived as counter-productive to these efforts. Misalignment has been called out by more than six respondents across both countries. One respondent stated that Europeans prefer looking for "stability over democracy". Another person noted that ""if you're a democrat and want to support a fellow democrat, your decisions should not inhibit democracy". Examples given of the gaps abound: the help proposed by the French foreign minister to Ben Ali's regime, a conference for economic development organized a few weeks prior to legislative elections in Lebanon that helped in preserving the political status quo; the French President's "failed promises" following the port blast, managing the migrant crisis with the deal in Tunisia gone awry, and a lack of support in solutions for the durable return of Syrian refugees from Lebanon.

These inconsistencies have negatively affected the field of pro-democracy actors in both countries, as they have been criticized by anti-democratic actors for this contrast as "agents of foreign agendas", weakening the arguments in favor of democratic processes and reforms as "imported" or "imposed". While this disservice is still highly visible in Tunisia, it seemed to have run its course in Lebanon where some respondents seemed indifferent to, even emboldened by, these attacks, as their commitment to their principles remained consistent.

In terms of priorities of work (or alignment), three axes were identified and summarized by one respondent in Lebanon as a joint platform with European partners for political support: first, limiting the room for maneuver of current corrupt leaders by increasing personalized sanctions in Europe; second, pushing for economic justice with judicial proceedings around the Lebanese Central Bank's Ponzi scheme and the alleged illicit enrichment of its former governor, Riad Salameh, helping to seize and repatriate assets that left the country, especially after October 2019; and third, supporting a realistic and durable plan for Syrian refugees' return to Syria and improved management of the migrant crisis. In fact, deeper cooperation to reconcile those priorities and clarify expectations can help create a two-way vision, instead of a vision only focusing on the target country.

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[20] The general agreed standard for M&E in national budgeting is around 5-10% of the activity-related costs.

Recommendations

- International partners should consider the limits of what they can achieve, revise their theories of change, and address the growing mistrust from democratic allies in the countries they are engaged in.

- European partners in their capitals should develop parallel track advocacy to align with national partners' messaging and advocacy at the regional or macro level.

- National partners should build leverage to advocate for an improved alignment of European policy across the different layers of cooperation.

Conclusion

Democracy stabilization in Arab countries increasingly resembles building sandcastles that can be easily broken down by external forces or from within, or both simultaneously. In these dark times, the silver lining of seeing the situation clearly can be sobering and disappointing: there are foundational elements of democracy that remain missing, and actors are unable to integrate them, despite their best efforts, when they exist. These elements are also weakening or under increasing pressure in long standing democracies: civil discourse, empathy, and the willingness to find common ground despite different points of view. Safeguarding those precious qualities is a worthy endeavor not only in Lebanon and Tunisia, but elsewhere, too.

It is likely that a new status quo will take shape and continue to delay the open democratization of actors, institutions, and systems. The scale of the unfolding tragedy in Gaza has been unparalleled in recent decades. Its aftermath remains unclear and ranges from full-scale invasion and occupation to forced displacement of the population, or even the take-over of Gaza by the gerontocrats of the West Bank. The war and Europeans reactions to it have served the interests of illiberal power structures in the region. Meanwhile, public space continues to slowly shrink, and the clampdown on anyone having different perspectives is increased within civil society itself. This context makes it ever more difficult to foster more openness among national partners to cooperate with each other and the ability of European partners to promote value-driven alliances.

International democracy support actors should be cognizant of these risks, as well as those associated with the current system collapse scenarios and difficult to contain monetary and security issues. They should focus on realigning with each other and democratic allies, create and maintain spaces for consensus around "big picture" issues and economic solutions. Broader alliances should be fostered, better data and communications supported, and powerful strategic outreach opportunities strengthened. Deeper reflections around impactful messaging and action should take place in careful consultation with the relevant stakeholders and with a political economy lens. They should improve ways of working and use proactive methods of engagement that support national democratic allies in setting their own agenda and escaping the polarization that is the bread and butter of populists and autocratic loyalists.

In difficult times such as these, the words of Samir Kassir a few months before his assassination still rings true like a mantra: "frustration is not destiny". Today, 18 years later, a whole new generation is in need of uplifting as they are consumed with anxiety about the wars they're witnessing and their future in the region. If anything, Gen Z has seen what previous generations have not: that change can happen, autocrats can fall, and fall again, and when freedoms are lost, they can be recovered.