



Ester Sigillò

Rethinking Civil Society in Transition

International Donors,
Associations and Politics in Tunisia

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Rethinking Civil Society in Transition

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Rethinking Civil Society in Transition

*International Donors, Associations and
Politics in Tunisia*

Ester Sigillò

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To my father

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List of abbreviations

AECID	Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation
AFD/FDA	Agence Française de Développement (French development agency)
AKP	Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Turkey's Justice and Development party)
ANETI	Agence Nationale pour l'emploi et le travail indépendant (National Agency for Employment and Independent Work)
BTS	Banque Tunisienne de Solidarité (Tunisian Solidarity Bank)
CPR	Congrès pour la République (Congress for the Republic)
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
EPD	European Partnership for Democracy
EU	European Union
FTDES	Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GIZ	German Agency for International Cooperation
IFEDA	Centre d'Information de Formation d'Etudes et de Documentation sur les Associations (Center for Information, Training, Studies and Documentation on Associations)
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
LAB'ESS	Laboratoire d'Economie Sociale et Solidaire (Social and Solidarity Economy Laboratory)
LTDH	Ligue Tunisienne de droits de l'homme (Tunisian League of Human Rights)
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MEPI	Middle East Partnership Initiative
MIT	Movement of Islamic Tendency
NCA	National Constituent Assembly
NGO	Non-governmental organization
ODA	Official Development Assistance
ODNO	Office du développement du Nord-Ouest (North-West development authority)
ODS	Office du développement du Sud (South development office)
ONAT	Ordre national des Avocats de Tunisie (National association of lawyers in Tunisia)
OTDS	Organisation Tunisien de Développement Social (Tunisian Organization for Social Development)

PASC	Plan d'appui à la Société Civile (Civil Society Support Plan)
PB	Participatory Budget
PCT	Parti Comuniste Tunisien (Tunisian Communist Party)
PDSP	Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean
POS	Political opportunity structure
PSD	Parti Socialiste Destourien (Destourian Socialist Party)
RCD/DCR	Rassemblement constitutionnel démocratique (Democratic Constitutional Rally)
RTES	Réseau tunisien de l'économie sociale (Tunisian Network of the Social Economy)
SAP	Structural Adjustment Programs
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SMO	Social Movement Organization
SSE	Social Solidarity Economy
TIKA	Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency
UDC	Union des Diplômés Chômeurs (Association of Unemployed Graduates)
UGTT	Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (Tunisian General Labor Union)
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
UTICA	Union Tunisienne de l'Industrie, du Commerce et de l'Artisanat (Tunisian Union of Industry, Commerce and Handicrafts)
UTSS	Union Tunisienne de Solidarité Sociale (Tunisian Union of Social Solidarity)

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Preface

When I arrived for the first time in Tunisia in September 2015, I quickly realized that civil society was a hot topic in this tiny country undergoing a profound political transformation that started at the end of 2010. On December 17, 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor, set himself on fire in front of the governorate building in Sidi Bouzid, a rural town two hundred miles south of Tunis. This desperate act became the catalyst for demonstrations and riots that spread throughout the country based on pre-existing social and political grievances against the authoritarian regime of Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali. The wave of protests triggered a revolutionary movement, better known at the international level as the Jasmine Revolution, which led President Ben Ali to step down on January 14, 2011, after 23 years in power.

After the fall of Ben Ali's regime, thousands of associations blossomed in a public space that had been co-opted under authoritarian rule for decades. As a result, the idea of a renewed civil society burst onto a rapidly changing socio-political scene. Associations became pivotal actors engaging in virtually every topic that emerged in the post-revolutionary debate in the country, including human rights, gender equality, democracy and citizenship, social development and solidarity, humanitarian action, environment and sustainable development, transparency, the fight against corruption, and good governance. Against this backdrop of vibrant associational life, it became clear that Tunisia could prove a vital laboratory to explore and test the notion of civil society in a post-authoritarian setting.

After a few short weeks in Tunis, I realized that the two months I had planned for my field research would be insufficient to understand the complex dynamics of a Tunisian civil society undergoing such a significant transition. The post-authoritarian landscape is an inherently changeable space, as newly emerged actors and associations are testing boundaries and experimenting with strategies, and outcomes are uncertain. Indeed, under such conditions, civil society actors are neither fully institutionalized nor genuinely independent. For this reason, they bank on many actors who have acquired relevance in post-revolutionary Tunisia as 'civil society supporters.' Notably, actors such as state's local authorities and international donors handling relations, when interviewed about their activities, depict newly emerged associations like new chicks hatched in the nest, which must somehow learn to fly and move boldly out into the world of 'civil society' with all its promise and peril. This is the post-revolutionary environment

in Tunisia that I witnessed as I began the research that resulted in the book you are now reading.

This book is the result of ethnographical research designed to uncover the impact of civil society promotion in Tunisia, understood as the diffusion of an idea of 'civil society' packaged by various actors in asymmetrical power relations with local associations. Civil society promotion is not only the concern of external actors. It can also occur *within countries*, among a wide range of public and private actors, and spread all kinds of practices, institutions, and ideas—from specific instruments, standards, and norms—to broad policy models, ideational frameworks, and organizational structures.

Moreover, actors can diffuse norms directly or indirectly by creating incentives and constraints. The most relevant actors in post-authoritarian Tunisia have been Western and non-Western foreign donors, a Tunisian state in transformation, and the Islamist party Ennahda, which emerged as the first mass party in Tunisia's first post-transition elections, held in October 2011. Thus, since 2011, Tunisian associations have been embedded in a space of multiple, complex interactions. With less rigid structures and hierarchies than other local organizations, such as trade unions and political parties, which arguably form part of the extended notion of civil society, these associations have been confronted with multiple adaptive pressures in the new dynamic environment, from expectations regarding professional best practice to the mandates of funding agencies.

Against this background, the goal of this book is twofold: first, to contribute to the debate on the impact of *civil society promotion* in specific local contexts; second, to rethink the notion of civil society *itself* after the Tunisian Revolution. Post-authoritarian settings are changeable spaces characterized by the reconfiguration of power relations involving claims for inclusion on the part of previously repressed socio-political groups. As one such setting, post-2011 Tunisia has been a highly contentious environment. Moreover, the Tunisian case underscores the competitiveness of post-revolutionary settings, where old and new actors struggle to find and consolidate a place within it according to their specific social, economic, and political ideas. In this scenario, some actors try to assert their hegemony over the civil society sphere: international donors wish to diffuse their idea of civil society to local associations; the state struggles to abandon specific control mechanisms inherited from the old regime; the Islamist political party Ennahda puts much emphasis on newly emerged religious associations.

Contrary to most of the academic works on civil society in the Arab world, where the role of hegemonic actors is treated separately or through the binary logic of 'dominant vs. dominated,' this study questions the interpretation

of *power* in concrete terms as something to be 'seized' or 'held.' Instead, it adopts a *relational approach*, studying civic activism by observing how the various actors interact with one another. This requires rethinking civil society from a dynamic perspective. Moreover, a relational approach allows us to bring the agency of social actors back into the frame, something that the civil society promotion and democratization literature often fail to do. Furthermore, it allows us to put forward hypotheses about the strategic dilemmas faced by associations and their members embedded in a political game. Put differently, analyzing the relational dynamics of associations allows us to disentangle the reasons motivating different socio-political groups to engage with a public sphere newly liberalized after decades of authoritarian crystallization, with all the promise and peril such a space entails.

Finally, a relational approach to studying civil society actors allows us to sidestep the top-down interpretation of relations between associations and hegemonic actors (international donors, the state, and political parties), showcasing the cross-cutting and multiple linkages associations share. These connections are not univocal, as top-down approaches assume, given that activists have agency in their interactions with hegemonic actors and can exploit opportunities in the political landscape to connect with other agents in multiple ways as they pursue their goals and objectives.

This book focuses on associations mobilizing for social solidarity and development, the most vibrant and visible sector of civic activism in Tunisia after the fall of the authoritarian regime. The 2011 uprisings were primarily driven by socioeconomic grievances against the old regime's clientelist networks. It is, therefore, no coincidence that most associations that emerged after the revolution focused on addressing the deep socioeconomic divides of the country through the novel, grassroots proposals generated in an explicitly participatory and decentralized way. 'Developmental issues' were defined quite broadly within the newly expanding sphere of civil society, incorporating not just socioeconomic concerns but also educational and cultural ones. Thus, mobilization for development was closely linked to broad-based citizen participation and constituted a significant driver of the reconfiguration of power relations and the reallocation of symbolic and material resources in a changing political landscape.

Findings trace two main phenomena that in the literature are usually considered mutually exclusive: a standardized process of *professionalization* and the *politicization* of local associations. In this book, these processes are regarded as two sides of the same coin, whereby associational members professionalize as a strategy to achieve the political goals of newly emerging

localized networks. Notably, the book highlights how associations have served as a launching pad for different groups aspiring to participate in the post-authoritarian political reconfiguration: urban, secular elites, young experts of internationalized NGOs, and the Islamist network partially disenfranchised by the Ennahda party. Overall, these networks will likely shape Tunisian politics for decades to come.

Introduction: leveling the playing field

Civil society is one of the most enduring and confusing concepts in social sciences, and for that reason, it is an excellent candidate for analytic explorations. (Edwards 2011: 3)

This book scrutinizes the *roles assigned* to the Tunisian associations by those actors promoting *civil society* after the collapse of Ben Ali's authoritarian regime in 2011 and *local associations' internalization of these roles*. The first part of this introductory chapter casts light on the normative evolution of the notion of civil society across time and space. Since the early 1990s, the role of civil society in circumstances of political change has been a vibrant topic of debate. Indeed, after the fall of the Soviet Union, 'civil society promotion' became the principal objective of international programs supporting democratization in Eastern Europe.

After the Arab Uprisings in 2010–2011, which saw one authoritarian regime after the other toppled across the region, questions about the causes and consequences of civil society in transitional settings have acquired a new salience. Especially in the Arab world, the role of *Muslim civil societies* in fostering the democratization process has focused on the minds of scholars (Bozzo and Luizard 2011; Esposito, Sonn, and Voll 2015; Grinin, Korotayev, and Tausch 2018). Others have instead focused on the *role of international donors* in supporting civil society during the transition, often portraying the impact of such actors on their beneficiaries in a less than flattering light (Durac and Cavatorta 2009; Cavatorta and Durac 2010; Teti 2012, 2015; Teti et al. 2020). These important studies have a *substantialist* perspective of 'civil society,' defining it in binary terms as either *present or absent*, as either *dynamic or quiescent*.

By applying a *relational approach* to the study of newly emerged associations in a post-authoritarian setting, the present book eschews this substantialist interpretation of civil society. Concretely, it shows that civil society is *not a given*, an object with defined properties and boundaries, but rather a complex system of relations that changes over time. Post-revolutionary

Tunisia is an excellent place to bring such mutability to light. Thanks to the post-revolutionary liberalization, thousands of associations have flourished under the impulse of ‘civil society promotion.’ Thus, since 2011, ‘civil society’ in Tunisia has emerged as essentially uncharted territory waiting to be ‘occupied’ by new ideas contributed by many actors.

Against this background, the second part of this introductory chapter is devoted to introducing the book’s argument, based on the interpretation of newly emerged associations as pivotal players participating in the reconfiguration of power relations in post-authoritarian Tunisia. The third part focuses on the methods used to develop this argument. The research is based on a cross-case analysis that draws on a grounded theory approach. After collecting rich data through immersive fieldwork, I was able to compare different types of local associations (Islamic and secular associations mobilizing for development and social solidarity) in diverse localities in Tunisia (Grand Tunis, Sfax, Siliana, and Medenine) from alternative perspectives (socioeconomic, cultural, and political).

Despite this evident heterogeneity, I observed a puzzling tendency toward *standardization* in the practices of local associations. This puzzle motivated the decision to carry out the analysis on two levels. Meso-level analysis explores associations’ institutional relations with the various actors in the post-authoritarian landscape. Research at the micro-level explores the evolution of associations over time and in their localized networks. This two-level analysis allows me to cast light on the changing shape of civil society and the power dynamics that embed the actors within it against a backdrop of profound political change.

In the very last section of this introductory chapter, I outline the book’s overall structure.

1 Unpacking the notion of civil society

It is hardly new to point to the ambiguity in the notion of ‘civil society.’ This ambiguity arises because the term is *inherently relational*; ‘civil society’ has always been (and continues to be) defined as *some opposite*. Indeed, over time, its meaning has inverted. Initially referring to the politically organized segment of the social order (i.e., the state), today, civil society has come to mean the opposite—that part of the society that organizes *outside* the state and, indeed, in opposition to it. According to the general understanding of the concept, which has its roots in modern liberal history, the institutions, associations, and networks of European and North American civil society

operate in a pluralistic, continuously contested public space, a zone between the public and private realms. Indeed, civil society is generally understood as comprising voluntary associations that operate in the area between those of the individual and the state but outside the family or tribal linkages.

Distinct from the coercive and bureaucratic functions of the state and the profit-seeking private sectors, civil society represents a third autonomous sector of modern society. It seems to contain the moral residue of a primordial, premodern civic realm, for many of its organizations and activities enhance ethical responsibilities, communalism, charity, and so-called traditional values. Yet civil society is conceived as a modern, bourgeois, post-enlightenment phenomenon, characteristic of liberal policies and economies centered on the individual and not the ascribed primordial community (Carapico 1998: 2).

This dominant interpretation of civil society emerged in the Western world through the Enlightenment philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Up until then, the concept was regarded as coterminous with the state. However, between 1750 and 1850, ideas about civil society took a new and fundamental turn in response to a perceived crisis of the ruling social order, motivated by the rise of the market economy and the increased differentiation of interests it provoked (Edwards 2009: 6). In *An Essay on The History of Civil Society*, initially published in 1767, Adam Ferguson (1980) posited that civil society is intricately intertwined with the institutions of the modern commercial economy. Indeed, it represents a by-product of the modern division of labor and worries that the modern division of labor will produce a loss of public spirit. Through the division of labor, society becomes a complex machine where everyone has an increasingly specialized role. Given this, individuals become detached from the communal spirit, and public-spiritedness is replaced with self-serving goals (Ketola 2013: 11). Personal advancement becomes a priority, superseding the concern for others and the public spirit. Therefore, “the separation of professions, while seeming to promise improvement of skills...serves, in some measure, to break the bonds of society” (Oz-Salzberger 1995: 12). As these links are broken, and collective interests wither away, public life is corrupted, paving the way for political despotism. It is looked at this way, a dense web of social interactions can protect modern societies from the adverse consequences of modern capitalist development.

Mainstream variants of the idea of civil society are generally articulated around the view of associational life in the early-nineteenth century. In his *Democracy in America* (1981), Tocqueville argued that high levels of associationism provide citizens with the means to resist the state’s power.

Given this, Tocqueville advanced the notion of a *separation of state and civil society*, first sketched by Hegel (1952). Tocqueville wrote in the period following the French Revolution when the Jacobin myth that the intermediate bodies of society (i.e., the aristocracy, which had limited the king's abuses of power) needed to be smashed for democracy to succeed provoked fear of tyranny. He was, therefore, preoccupied with the potential tyranny of the majority (or the organized minority) and the contradictions between the principles of freedom and equality. Indeed, suppose the progress of civilization expands the degree of autonomy of civil society vis-à-vis the state. In that case, equality pushes for the reinforcement of a tutelary state capable of imposing itself on civil society. Thus, by civil society, Tocqueville meant all those autonomous associations acting as a rampart against despotism. In other words, he emphasized the capacity of civil society to check the excesses of state power and, in so doing, act as a counterweight.

In this sense, civil society can be considered a critical ingredient of democracy. Moreover, this Tocquevillian conception of civil society came to the fore in democratization processes and accorded policymaking relevance through the democracy promotion strategies that Western countries and international organizations pursue. This conception of civil society is also reflected in neoliberal approaches that treat civil society as a hedge against the authoritarian state. In foregrounding the Tocquevillian understanding of civil society, international efforts to encourage democratization in developing countries tend to home in on a *particular subset* of civil society actors—namely, groups advocating human rights, women's emancipation, civil rights, and the environment or else trade unions and umbrella organizations of the business community. Indeed, since the 1990s, it is precisely these groups that have benefited from international support. Notwithstanding the importance of the issues that the groups so targeted promote, they have often overshadowed urgent social and economic questions. More broadly, it is crucial to keep in mind that international support for a given society in transition to democracy is far from neutral, as it is aimed primarily at diffusing the logic of neoliberalism.

After Tocqueville, Marx, and Gramsci advanced critical conceptualization of civil society in contrast to the normative interpretations that had prevailed among the early Enlightenment thinkers. Marx (1859) famously developed his criticism of political economy through a critique of Hegelian philosophy. In particular, he found no correspondence in the real world to the notions of civil society and the state described by Hegel. Marx, instead, saw civil society as rooted in the *reality of social relations*. He elaborated his work against a backdrop of a struggle between two social classes, the bourgeoisie

(which Marx defined as the owners of the means of production) and the progressively developing working class. According to Marx, civil society was a bourgeois society detached from traditional collective forms. In this view, civil society is the space of individuals' material conditions where capitalist production is organized. According to Marx, only capitalist society gives rise to civil society as a social space that has progressively detached itself from family ties and the formal domain of the bureaucratic state in favor of capitalist relations of production. Marx essentially posed an *economic conception* of bourgeois civil society, yet he ultimately emancipated civil society from the state by overturning the Hegelian arrangement. In Marx's view, the state was no longer the basis for civil society; on the contrary, *civil society was now the ground of the bourgeois state*. From this perspective, the state is just the guarantor of (bourgeois) social relations. All told, Marx grants importance to the idea of civil society yet simultaneously identifies it entirely within the economic sphere (which determines the structure of social classes). Indeed, in Marxist movements and theory, the term 'civil society' is often used as a synonym for 'economic sphere,' the economic base of capitalist society.

In his *Prison Notebooks* (penned between 1929 and 1935), Gramsci (2011 [1975]) challenged this conception, renewing the idea of civil society as an autonomous domain. As a leading light in the Italian Communist Party in the interwar period, Gramsci developed his ideas against the backdrop of economic and social strife following the First World War and the political struggle against the cultural hegemony of the church and the rising fascist movement. Gramsci realized that class struggle needed an ideological dimension if the hegemony of the leading forces was to be overcome. For him, civil society was the arena in which the crucial struggle for cultural hegemony played out. Gramsci's foregrounding of civil society as the nexus of hegemonic struggle would prove very influential throughout the twentieth century and not only among Marxists. In the Gramscian view, civil society is neither reducible to economic society nor is it merely a place where the ruling class exercises domination. It is, in fact, an *arena of contestation and conflict*. From this perspective, civil society is a political sphere, a space in which the ideologies that cement society are contested and constituted. According to Gramsci, there is no inherent relationship between the strength of civil society and the health of democracy. Civil society is thus neither a domain of freedom nor a source of democracy but a *sphere of hegemony*. As mentioned by Yousfi, "it represents the totality of social institutions wherein cultural and political hegemony is achieved, and for this reason, must become an area of militant activity" (Yousfi 2017).

Indeed, according to Gramsci's theory of hegemony, civil society is the primary space in which the ruling class seeks to maintain its domination over society through the production of cultural hegemony (Gramsci 2011 [1975]). By controlling the production of ideas within civil society, the ruling elite, with the support of the bourgeoisie, can manufacture consent for the prevailing political and social order. Thus, while civil society can serve as a space for social activities outside the state, it could just as easily serve as a space to reinforce the hegemony and power of an authoritarian state. In constructing his theory, Gramsci identified an intricate web of relations between civil society and the state. For him, civil society exists in an 'organic' relationship with the state: the interplay between civil and political society forms the tentacles of power in society.

Civil society and democracy

The fall of the Soviet Union and the tremendous changes that followed gave rise to a new field of literature dealing with the role of civil society in transition (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Schmitter 1993; Lewis 1992; Diamond 1994, 1999; Linz and Stepan 1996; Pridham, 1995; 2001; Arato 2000; Gill 2000). Since then, the *liberal-democratic* model—which emphasizes the separation of an autonomous civil society from the state and the links between civil society and democratization—has dominated the subject's political, policy, and academic discourses (Ketola 2013).

Many scholars since Tocqueville have paid particular attention to the distinct contribution of associations and associational life to the dynamism of civil society (Maloney and Rossteutscher 2007). Indeed, the global rise of voluntary associations during the 1990s fueled vast literature on the contribution of civil society to political development. Most democratization studies are based on the theoretical assumption that civil society activism is conducive to democratization and consolidation. According to the dominant normative understanding of the concept, "without a well-developed civil society, it is difficult, if not impossible, to have an atmosphere supportive of democracy" (Entelis 1996: 45).

The historical experience of the so-called 'Third Wave of democratization' proved the assumption correct. The cases of Eastern Europe and Latin America are very rarely analyzed without mentioning the importance of civil society in negotiating the transition and consolidating democracy. Even before the fall of the Soviet Union, part of the literature was already focused on agency-based explanations of civic and political engagement. Organizational theories, for example, foregrounded the role of social networks in engaging

citizens, especially mass political parties and unions, churches, voluntary associations, and even the press (Verba, Nie, and Kim 1987). Moreover, as mentioned by Norris, pluralist theories attribute an equally important role to intermediary groups that compete to provide checks and balances in a democratic system and articulate public demands by providing channels of political participation linking citizens to the state (Norris 2002). In his pioneering work on polyarchy, Robert A. Dahl also mentioned trade unions, businesses and professional associations, welfare and charity associations, and educational and cultural clubs (Dahl 1971).

Since the early 1990s, however, we have witnessed a renewed academic interest in the role of civil society organizations in democracies. Putnam greatly stimulated this interest and colleagues' seminal volume, *Making Democracy Work* (1994). According to their social capital theory, all kinds of voluntary organizations in which face-to-face meetings are the norm contribute to a rich and dense civic network, strengthening community bonds and social trust (Putnam et al. 1994). While some organizations may be explicitly political, "others are recreational clubs, ethnic or religious groups, neighborhood organizations, work-related associations such as professional, business, cooperative, union groups" (Norris 2002: 27). In any case, all may contribute to fostering the political process. The core argument is that "the denser the linkages promoted by these organizations, the more bridging social trust will be generated that facilitates cooperative actions in matters of common concern, acting as a public good that affects even those who do not participate directly in the networks" (Norris 2002: 27).

However, the assumption that a simple expansion in the number of civil society organizations will, by itself, engender democratic political change has been progressively challenged. Indeed, according to some studies, associations can also stimulate insular views, and not all scholars find that social capital produced through associations is necessarily a universally valuable resource (Berman 1997; Edwards and Foley 1997; Fiorina 1999; Foley and Edwards 1996; Jamal 2007; Kamarava and Mora 1998; Levi 1996; Maloney et al. 2000; Orr 1999; Portes 1998; Robteutscher 2002). For instance, Kamarava and Mora underline that voluntary associations are not automatically vehicles of democracy. Instead, to become agents of democratization, they must operate democratically and complement their respective agendas with demands for democracy. Moreover, they must either be sufficiently powerful or work with other organizations to promote change.

Berman adds another cautionary note, pointing out that a robust civil society might even *weaken* a democratic regime under certain circumstances. Using the example of interwar Germany, where voluntary organizations

flourished, she argues that civil society can fragment as much as unite a society, accentuating and deepening existing cleavages if pre-existing political institutions are weak (Berman 1997: 565). Also, drawing on the case of the Weimar Republic, Robteutscher has observed that skills acquired in voluntary associations can also be used for undemocratic ends. Emphasizing “the other side of social capital” in Palestine, which acts as a barrier to democratization there, Jamal (2007) argues that there is no reason to believe that an inevitable connection exists between civic activism and democracy.

In sum, there are many views regarding the relationship between *civil society* and *democratization*, and the dominant view—which assumes a positive correlation between the two—is increasingly being challenged (Durac and Cavatorta 2015).

An outside-in perspective on civil society promotion

From the 1990s, democracy promotion emerged as a principal objective of international donors (Robinson 1996; Pridham 1991; Carothers 1999; Burnell 2000; Ottoway and Carothers 2000; Liverani 2008). In the Arab world, policymakers saw promoting civil society as the best means to democratize authoritarian regimes, following the success of civil society in Eastern Europe and Latin America in achieving similar ends (Cavatorta and Durac 2011). The underlying assumption was that strengthening perceived liberals within civil society would lead to democratic change.

Democracy assistance, loosely defined as “aid designed to foster opening in a non-democratic country or to further a democratic transition in a country that has experienced a democratic opening” (Carothers 1999: 6), covers a wide variety of aid packages targeting different elements of the political system. Civil society support has been considered an instrument to foster democratization from below. Notably, donors such as the European Union (EU) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) have increasingly framed their civil society promotion as part of the broader objective of promoting democracy (Liverani 2008). For this reason, once a quintessential internal phenomenon, civil society acquired an international dimension through ‘civil society promotion’ (Whitehead 2004). However, external actors’ promotion of local civil society presents a challenge, if not a paradox. While the ostensible aim is to promote *the autonomy* of civil society actors and associations, international donors often promote norms tied to external conceptions that may contradict local circumstances.

Several scholars doubt how well the Western concept of civil society translates into non-Western societies. For example, Van Rooy (1998) points

to the historical circumstances that gave the idea. According to this argument, civil society was born out of the historical specificities of eighteenth-century Europe and cannot be easily transferred. Similarly, Olivier Roy has highlighted the danger of importing values and institutions from a Western model that is likely less universal (and less democratic) than is often claimed (Roy 2002). In such cases, the concept must be adjusted to reflect local traditions. This may include widening the idea of civil society to include certain *involuntary relations* that play a vital cohering role in some countries. Indeed, some authors have noted that the Middle East boasts a long tradition of associational life, albeit in forms that do not necessarily fit neatly into Western categories (Challand 2009; Norton 1995; Pace 2009).

In other words, civil society as it has evolved in the West differs from the associational life observed in the Arab Mediterranean region. For this reason, Arab writers have questioned the appropriateness of imposing Western frameworks for thinking about civil society on Muslim societies, arguing that the former exclude or discount the religious, tribal, and other communal groupings that form the bedrock of associational life in many non-Western countries (Al-Sayyid 1995; Howell and Pearce 2001). Arab sociologists, in turn, have explored the rich tapestry of Arab Muslim organizations based on voluntary participation, many of which are inspired by religious beliefs (Gahlioun 2000; Norton 1995). Indeed, civil society activism in the Arab Mediterranean region cannot be understood if the contribution of Islamism is excluded (Browsers 2006; Cavatorta 2005). However, as Challand (2009) notes, Western donors have looked askance at Islamic religious fraternities that appear not to fit the liberal template of Western civil society promotion. However, labeling Islamism as inherently illiberal does not give justice to the variety of movements that operate within the sphere of civil society and does not reflect the diverse approaches to civil society that Arab political thought presents (Cavatorta and Durac 2010; Ottoway and Carothers 2000).

Interestingly, civil society promotion has almost exclusively been the theoretical prerogative of International Relations Theory (IR). The leading schools of thought within IR formulate hypotheses about the reasons and intentions behind the interaction between international donors and recipient NGOs and the expected outcomes from this support for civil society (Challand 2009). These top-down theories on civil society promotion foreground the role of states' strategic interests in promoting certain norms and values beyond their borders (Peceny 1999; Schweller 2000; Youngs 2004). From this point of view, democracy promotion can be interpreted as a form of soft power (Nye 2004). Especially after the September 11's terror attacks, international donors such as the United States have increased

their share of financial support to civil society, bypassing governments. The same happened after the Arab Uprisings, where civil society actors moved to center stage as agents of stabilization in international programs of democracy promotion (Chiriatti and Sigillò 2019).

Relatedly, the world-systems theory and dependency theory, embraced by post-colonial scholars, adopt a similar top-down approach in theorizing democracy promotion as an outgrowth of attempts at hegemonic domination (Wallerstein 1979). Viewed through this lens, the 'Westernization' of Tunisian civil society has entailed the diffusion of a neoliberal agenda through support for highly internationalized local NGOs, which then function as a transmission belt between world centers (Western countries) and the semi-periphery (Tunisia). The hypotheses developed within the dependency approaches overlap partly with some constructivist studies because they are concerned with mechanisms linking power to knowledge production (Challand 2009). From this point of view, behind the promotion of liberal democracy lies a discourse advancing Western globalization that serves as a fig leaf for a barely concealed capitalist logic (Amin 1999). Such a discursive approach borrows liberally from the Gramscian perspective, which sees civil society as the primary site for contests over political hegemony (Chiodi 2007).

Building on these existing approaches, the present book brings the bottom-up perspective into the frame. Concretely, it offers an in-depth analysis of interactive dynamics among civil society promoters and local associations at the micro- and meso-levels through detailed process tracing and analysis of a specific case study, Tunisia, since 2011. Moreover, by focusing the theoretical lens on *all the actors* involved in the process of civil society promotion (not merely the external actors), the agency of civil society actors so often obscured by top-down and univocal interpretations is brought back into the picture. In so doing, I conceptualize civil society broadly as a socio-political construct encompassing a wide range of actors and objectives. Indeed, as the preceding discussion on the evolution of the term makes clear, civil society is something of an 'empty vessel,' analytically speaking, and civil society actors can pursue a range of ends that are both noble and malevolent (Behr and Siitonen 2013).

Constructivist theories offer much in support of this approach, stressing the *role of ideas* at the transnational level. This research claims that different frames of this multidimensional concept are likely to impact the societal level. Social movements theory, in turn, explains these implications well. Thus, this research is built on the attempt to merge the constructivist approach to international relations and social movement theories. Indeed, suppose theories such as 'Normative Power Europe,' on

the one hand, describe relatively well the diffusion of EU's norms outside its borders on the other hand. In that case, it is weak in assessing the nature of recipients' domestic change. Moreover, theories on diffusion have succeeded in including the relational mechanisms between actors embedded in the diffusion process (Börzel and Risse 2009), focusing on the internalization process of ideas. However, these also theories cannot analyze the impact of ideational diffusion generated upon the context absorbing the transfer of norms and beliefs.

Associations and civil society in the Arab world

Associational life has a long and storied history in the Arab world (Ben Néfissa 1992). The first modern associations were born at the end of the nineteenth century, when charitable associations focused primarily on education and building schools and hospitals flourished. Moreover, the struggle for decolonization triggered a new wave of associational flourishing. However, the associations and movement organizations formed to push for independence tended to be dominated by a privileged local elite. Moreover, the authoritarian regimes that emerged in Arab countries after independence quickly sought to circumscribe the public sphere, severely limiting the scope of action that associations could exercise. The oppressive nature of the authoritarian state restricted political participation and the development of robust, autonomous civil society organizations (Bayat 2000). Indeed, the state was central to creating many such groups, while others were either beholden to the state or thoroughly co-opted by it. Thus, as Wiktorowicz (2000) has noted, in the Arab world, civil society organizations have remained embedded in a web of bureaucratic practices and legal codes that have allowed those in power to monitor and regulate their activities.

Regardless of how the relationship between civil society and democracy is conceptualized, it seems clear that there has been a significant upsurge in civic activism in the Arab world in recent decades. According to Yom, the number of civil society organizations in the region grew from around 20,000 in the 1970s to 70,000 by the 1990s, rising further still during the 2000s (Yom 2005: 18). Naturally, growth in numbers varies significantly from country to country. Analysts have proffered several explanations for the increase in civic activism in recent years, including the suppression or co-optation of political parties, which has displaced activism to the civil sphere. It may also reflect the state's retreat from the public sphere, most obviously its declining role in the provision of public goods.

Despite this increased civil society activity, theoretical debate continues regarding how relevant the concept is in the Arab world. It is a unique expression of Western political development and, therefore, scarcely 'travels' beyond the West. However, Browsers (2006) argues that it is precisely because of the myriad ways the concept has been translated, integrated, and subsumed into non-Western political theories that scholars can utilize it about the Arab world. To be sure, the notion of civil society entered the lexicon of Arab social and political actors a long time ago. Thus, the debate in the region about the conceptualization of civil society should not be seen merely in terms of a reaction to debate originating from outside. After all, Arab countries are not simply passive recipients of ideas from other cultural and political settings. Indeed, if some approaches adopt a normative conceptualization of civic activism, different approaches rely on a neutral definition of activism, thus de-linking it from democracy.

Cavatorta and Durac (2011) have identified three different approaches in the literature on civil society in the Arab world. The first approach conceives it in classic liberal terms. This conception focuses on the numerical paucity and limited influence of civil organizations that are secular in ideology, civil in their behavior, legally recognized, and supportive of democratic reform (Yom 2005). Rather than examining what groups and associations *do or demand* in practice or how they *interact with each other and other actors* in the same environment, the liberal approach treats a religious ethos as disqualifying. In this somewhat limited view, 'true' (read 'secular') civil society confronts multiple challenges in societies deemed illiberal and shackled by religious conservatism. Therefore, civil activism remains the preserve of the very few, usually enlightened, urban middle-class members who have close contact with Western societies (Durac and Cavatorta 2015).

Moreover, the classic approach reflects the hierarchism foregrounded in liberal-democratic models. Hierarchism is reflected in the notion of civil society as consisting of groups that arise functionally out of the division of labor. Civil society is therefore defined as relatively insignificant or apolitical beyond its role in mediating between society and the state. Consequently, it implies an instrumental approach to civil society.

The second approach, underlined by Cavatorta and Durac, takes a neutral stance on the notion of civil society. Consider the theoretical work of Encarnacion (2006), who rejects any automatic link between civil society and liberal-democratic theory. Whereas the first approach discards the possibility that Islamism might be part of civil society, the neutral view takes a more open stance. What matters in this approach is the *nature and ethos* of the associations that make up civil society and the values they subscribe

to, together with the demands they make vis-à-vis the state. This focus on values means that civil society can be—in principle—simultaneously strong and ‘uncivil’ (Kopecký and Mudde 2003; 2005). Thus, the ‘civility’ of civil society does not necessarily mean it adopts liberal and democratic values. Still, it is simply an indication that citizens are mobilizing, intending to shape the public sphere. Therefore, in some ways, the neutral approach rediscovers the original definition of civil society, stripped of its normative content, namely as the space between the state and the individual, in which voluntary groups form to pursue specific goals (Durac and Cavatorta 2015).

From this understanding, civic activism in the Arab world is robust because associational life is dynamic and vibrant. For example, Berman’s (2003) study of Egyptian civil activism showed it to be quite powerful. Indeed, she found that the Egyptian state’s retreat from the public sphere (especially the delivery of public services) left a vacuum that could only be filled through self-organized groups. The problem with this second approach is that the groups it defines do not necessarily produce democratic change since Islamist groups and associations—which do not prioritize liberal-democratic values—dominate the field. According to Berman, demands for change *do exist*, but they are not couched in the familiar language of liberalism and liberal democracy. Indeed, as Singerman claims, Islamism poses a particular challenge to the Western approach since “Islamists want to re-articulate the boundary between the public and the private itself to propose a less secular and autonomous vision of life and governance” (Singerman 2004: 150). A complex picture emerges where a priori labeling offers little analytical purchase in explaining social and political dynamics. Differences between secular and religious are not that stark, especially in a country like Tunisia. Indeed, as they have evolved, many Islamist associations have come to defend fundamental liberal values, such as social development.

The third approach considers civil society as a ‘regime’s tool.’ The Middle East and North African (MENA) countries have often been characterized as having passive societies, heavily policed by a strong state that is only willing to tolerate social mobilizations when the state itself can direct or control them (Durac and Cavatorta 2015). After independence from the colonial hegemony, several MENA states took control of society by unifying different sectorial demands behind the goal of the modernization of the nation-state. Political scientists coined the term ‘corporatism’ to describe state domination of economic and civic participation, drawing on a model first observed in Latina America. According to the literature on civic activism, incumbent authoritarian regimes often create a web of civil society organizations to deflect attention from political repression, please the

international community, extract financial benefits, or glean insight from society to 'upgrade' the authoritarian system (Heydemann 2007).

Thus, the explosion of civic activism does not necessarily imply that Arab states are ceding control over society. Instead, by enacting liberal legislation that promotes freedom of association, states simply enable the number of organizations to proliferate without expanding their scope for autonomy or independence. The state's repressive apparatus closely monitors them and, when necessary, infiltrates them or restrains their activities. For instance, in the mid-2000s, members of the intelligence services took over the Tunisian Union of Journalists after the association elected a controversial anti-regime figure as its head. The union continued to operate but loyally towed the regime line.

Moreover, civil society actors in authoritarian regimes know that the authorities can make their lives very difficult on a whim and are careful to avoid confronting them at all costs. Finally, members of the ruling elite can blur the lines by establishing associations that cannot easily be distinguished from state-sponsored institutions and are not autonomous (Liverani 2008). Civil society, viewed in this light, is an artificial creation with limited autonomy of action, acting as an instrument of the ruling elites.

Alongside these interpretations, some authors have provided a more complex analysis of the hegemonic power of the Tunisian state that foregrounds the role of performance legitimacy and implied consent. For instance, Hibou (2006) has described state-society relations in Tunisia under the authoritarian regime through the lens of an implied social contract. Here, the state's hegemony over society was achieved through clientelist policies that sought to craft a grateful, willing, and submissive social base in which 'potentially dangerous' populations were quieted with economic and social concessions. In turn, at least part of the population accepted and even appreciated these practices of social control as a tolerable, if not welcome, exchange.

Since the 1990s, Western-educated Arab intellectuals have sought to translate and adapt the Western notion of civil society to local circumstances. As a result, in academic exchanges and the broader public debate, the term *al-mujtama' al-madani* has come to the fore, which draws on the tripartite structure of 'civil-civilization-city' (*madani-tamaddun-madina*) (Challand 2018: 297). In his detailed review of the debate on civil society in the Arab world, Challand (2009) has identified three ways of viewing, defining, and operationalizing civil society among Arab intellectuals that correspond to interpretations of the idea of civil society in the Arab world.

The first interpretation argues that civil society is based on the autonomy of individuals from the private and the public sphere. The second view rejects

such a negative interpretation and contends that an Arab civil society does exist, albeit to the exclusion of militant actors, such as Islamist groups. The third opinion is more open and considers excluding certain groups as an anathema. Instead, all sorts of associations and organizations should be included under the ‘civil society’ label. Carapico (1998) and Challand (2009) highlight that some Arab scholars adopt a more inclusive understanding of the notion of civil society by adopting the term *al-mujtama’ al-ahali* (civic society, civic work), which is wide enough to include Islamists. However, the use differs from one country to the other. In Tunisia, for instance, the term *al-mujtama’ al-madani* has become part of the daily language and has also been adopted by Islamic organizations (such as charitable associations). However, in Syria and Palestine, the term is seen as an unwelcome import introduced by foreign actors “and is thus eclipsed by the term *al-mujtama’ al-ahli*” (Challand 2009: 297).

2 Studying civil society in transition through a (strategic) relational approach

The interpretations encountered in the previous pages all view civil society through a *substantialist* lens. Put differently, they define the concept in static terms, as something that *is* or *is not* or something that *does* or *does not*. In his *Manifesto for a Relational Sociology* (1997), Mustafa Emirbayer calls for a new perspective that moves beyond seeing the social world in terms of static essences with their logic of functioning and acting. This book takes up Emirbayer’s call and adopts a relational perspective. In so doing, it seeks to advance an understanding of civil society in post-authoritarian settings as a composite of heterogeneous relations embedded in a web of shifting power configurations.

Looking specifically at the Tunisian case, this volume puts forward a new interpretation of the notion of ‘civil society in transition’ based on the hypothesis that the latter is the by-product of heterogeneous power relations between newly emerged associations and hegemonic actors seeking to shape the post-authoritarian setting in their respective interests. In the Tunisian case, this means international donors, a state under transformation, and a newly emerged mass Islamist party. The findings presented in this book show that a more dynamic approach—based on the analysis of power relations dynamics—allows us to follow still unexplored paths of inquiry, which in turn allows rethinking the theoretical apparatus of the very notion of civil society.

The relational approach does not repudiate the insights provided by substantialist theories. Instead, it seeks to build on them by focusing on interactive processes rather than static entities with an assumed fixed logic of action. For instance, the interplay between international donors and local associations has often been conceived as a game with two outcomes for the latter; either the hegemonic actors subjugate them (Challand 2009), or they are emancipated (Chiodi 2007). Instead, the relational approach opens the analysis to the *heterogeneous micro-interaction* between associations and hegemonic actors, which can lay bare unexplored dynamic logics of interaction.

As a dynamic space in which power relations undergo reconfiguration, the post-authoritarian space can be defined as an *arena*. Various scholars from different disciplines and theoretical perspectives have applied the arena concept to indicate a space of interaction with specific issues at stake (de Sardan 1995; Linz and Stepan 1996; Fioramonti 2012; Jasper and Duyvendak 2015). The concept has been deployed, among other things, to underscore the importance of the public sphere, which in turn implies different dynamics of power relationships. Yet, the notion of *arena* adds something more to the concept of the public sphere, as it means “a set of resources and rules that channel contention in certain kinds of action and offer rewards and outcomes” (Jasper 2004: 5). In other words, an arena is a space of contestation or even conflict, where *different players* compete over outcomes by acting *strategically*. The post-revolutionary space in Tunisia is not outright conflictual (at least not always), but it is characterized by a novel set of incentives and rewards that stimulate and structure competition; and, because of the sheer range of actors seeking to shape the post-authoritarian space, competition is a given.

Moreover, leveraging the arena category allows me to overcome a theoretical gap and a methodological concern—to integrate actors often situated on different scales in the literature at one scale. For instance, ‘civil society promotion’ is usually observed as something external or foreign to the local context that is disconnected from the social fabric. Eschewing this logic, this book places the ‘promoting actors’ into the same interaction space as their potential targets, the associations. The same rationale is followed concerning the state–society relationship. This is particularly relevant because social movement studies often treat the state as a fixed ‘political opportunity structure’ that tightly frames and channels the behavior of social actors.

Instead, the present volume treats the state as a *player* in the political arena. *Players* in this view can be individuals, informal groups, formal organizations, or institutions that “engage in strategic action with some

goal in mind” (Jasper and Duyvendak 2015: 10). Moreover, a set of questions naturally arises when actors are defined as players in this way, namely “what do they want, what means do they have at their disposal, what constraints do they face?” (Jasper and Duyvendak 2015: 14). Moreover, players may launch action within a particular arena, but they also think about other possible arenas. ‘Switching arenas’ might be part of a strategy to surprise opponents, avoid defeats and increase the value of the skills and resources that players control (Jasper 2004).

This book combines the notion of the arena with a view of *power relations* in which the post-revolutionary associational system is embedded. Analyzing strategic interactions from a social movement perspective (Jasper and Duyvendak 2015; McGarry et al. 2016) brings agency back into the picture and allows the study to incorporate a wide range of actors beyond associations within the larger context of power as a relationship. This approach will enable me to cast the duality of classical paradigms (i.e., challengers vs. incumbents or dominant vs. dominated) in a critical light and to highlight the complexity of roles and behaviors under conditions when power relations are being reconfigured. This is important, since, unlike the revolutionary phase, whereby the lines of conflict are drawn, asymmetrical power relationships in the post-revolutionary arena notwithstanding, there are no clear ‘incumbents’ or ‘challengers’ because rules and norms are in flux, being negotiated among a range of actors.

In sum, the relational approach allows the interactions of all players to be incorporated into the same level of analysis instead of treating the ‘environment’ of the former—a structural trick that reduces the agency of all players except associations: “all players confront dilemmas, make choices, react to others, and so on” (Jasper 2004: 5). Obviously, this does not mean that all the players are equal, as they hold different resources, but that power relations emerge as *heterogeneous*.

Social movement theory has rarely focused on movement-like phenomena or the civil society sphere beyond revolutions and protests. This book extends the empirical lens by analyzing actors’ interactions in a post-contention setting, which is not necessarily less conflictual. The theoretical framework of the *players* and *arenas* approach (Jasper and Duyvendak 2015) is a good starting point for the analysis of associational actors’ strategic interactions, as it allows us to put the spotlight on the conditions which frame the action of different groups wishing to engage in civil society after the fall of the regime. The following pages scrutinize the theoretical perspectives underpinning this approach in further detail and introduce new theoretical elements to interpret *power relations* in a post-authoritarian setting. Indeed, as a flexible

analysis instrument, this approach allows us to focus on the empirical evidence of actors' interactions and inductively complements the theoretical framework by developing different levels of abstraction from data.

Beyond the civil society/democratization nexus

Adopting a relational approach means eschewing mechanistic and teleological approaches in analyzing social phenomena. Studies on democratization processes often highlight the vital link between the growth in civil society activism and democratic transformations, pointing to the role of independent civil society organizations that demand increased governmental accountability through their ability to mobilize citizens. In this regard, the independence of civil society actors from the state is perceived as crucial. This is because a sphere free from state intervention develops and becomes an embryonic space from which to make political demands on the authoritarian political system. Thus, the link between civil society and democratization implies solid theoretical assumptions on the independent nature and the positive role of civil society.

However, some scholars have also advanced other interpretations. For example, Schmitter (1993) warned against assuming that civil society is an "unmitigated blessing for democracy" as in a post-authoritarian setting, it operates in a space characterized by power struggles, political allegiances, and rivalries that might exacerbate (rather than mitigate) political divisions. Moreover, civil society's activism might make it more difficult for political elites to find a middle ground and compromises across the political spectrum, further dividing citizens into factions. As Schmitter noted, the result may be "not one but several civil societies—all occupying the same territory and polity—but organizing interests and passions into communities that are ethnically, linguistically or culturally distinct, even exclusive" (Schmitter 1993: 14–15).

Additionally, the democratization process presents new opportunities and challenges to civil society actors, reshaping its balances and roles and the interplay of civil society with the political sphere. In light of this, the consolidation period is *intrinsically conflictual* (Schmitter 1993). Fioramonti and Fiori have posited that the democratization process is arguably "the most convulsive and radical experience for civil society, as it requires a general reassessment of the latter's role, priorities, *modus operandi*, and strategies" (Fioramonti and Fiori 2010: 1). Therefore, the democratization process should be understood as a dynamic and interactive setting rather than a fixed one.

Some scholars have begun to reconsider many assumptions of the transition paradigm. The reevaluation of the transition paradigm in terms of the sequences that supposedly characterize transitions to democracy has an impact not only in terms of how we conceptualize the stages and outcomes of the democratization process but also on how we think of actors central to such processes, including civil society actors (Cavartorta and Durac 2011: 18). More recent literature has provided new theoretical insights. Arguably the most significant contribution has come from those scholars who question the positive normative traits of civil society activism (Berman 2003, Encarnacion 2006; Kopecký and Mudde 2005). These analyses, which cover the gamut from authoritarian regimes to newly democratizing ones, focus on the *nature and objectives* of civil society actors and not on civil society as a normative concept. The premise of these new studies is that it is methodologically unsound to attach normative value to concepts and notions utilized as causal mechanisms to explain political phenomena. In other words, while civil society undoubtedly prospers when the laws governing the creation and operation of autonomous associations are relaxed, this does not automatically translate into the emergence of groups “working for democracy” (Cavarorta and Durac 2011: 18). From this, it follows that the concept of civil society should be shorn of all positive normative traits lest the scholar bias the application of the concept as an explanatory variable. In other words, research that assumes a normative link between civil society and democratization offers an overly deterministic view of the concept, potentially overlooking complex dynamics that could help explain behaviors and roles.

Instead, adopting an approach that dissolves the *civil society–democratization* nexus allows us to challenge teleological interpretations by observing groups’ ethos and activities *as they are* rather than assuming an inherent commitment to democratic practices. Moreover, this approach allows us to observe how established (Western) concepts of ‘civil society’ fare when imported into and internalized in non-Western contexts (Browsers 2006). From this perspective, it is worth analyzing how the fall of the authoritarian regime and the opening of socio-political opportunities set in motion processes that shape the motives, dynamics, and objectives of groups wishing to engage in civil society. This perspective explicitly rejects *structuralist* assumptions. Instead, the post-authoritarian phase is conceived as a *fluid space* characterized by contestation and negotiation among established actors and the new ones emerging from the revolutionary process.

In sum, the relational approach merits the consideration of post-authoritarian space as an *arena* characterized by the reconfiguration of power

relations. Newly emerged associations join the established players in this fluid political game. Their internal roles, dynamics, and power balances are significantly altered by the fall of the authoritarian regime due to shifting resources, political opportunities, and a general reframing of goals and objectives. Therefore, by taking distance from civil society as an independent or dependent variable concerning democracy, this book advances an interpretation of the notion of civil society as a *system of interdependence* that does not reduce to democracy or a by-product of the democratization process.

Civil society as a system of interdependence

By analyzing the interactive dynamics composing the civic sphere, we can inductively understand the mechanisms informing these relationships and, in turn, explain the collective processes. If, after Gramsci, the notion of civil society was retrieved mainly by international organizations and politicians who emphasized the output of associations rather than their mobilization, we have, more recently, witnessed a renewed conceptualization of civil society based on the relational dynamics of its components. Ehrenberg, for instance, highlights the multifaceted “geometry of human relations” that the notion of civil society implies (Ehrenberg 2011: 15).

Additionally, a systematic look at network structures might generate meaningful insights into collective processes. In his *Cement of Civil Society* (2015), Mario Diani analyzes the civic sphere as a system of interdependence by emphasizing the role of *networks*: “this conceptual and methodological shift leads to reframing some basic questions about the features of political activism, participation, and civil society” (Diani 2015: 1). Notably, he argues that it is not possible to capture the distinctive traits of collective processes by looking at only properties of their components: “instead, we also have to take into account the patterned interactions between such components” (Diani 2015: 4). Moreover, he highlights that “at the theoretical level, analysts of collective action and political participation widely agree on the relational and interactive nature of collective action processes, however, at an empirical level we observe rather an aggregative conception of social structure, namely a reductionist view of social structure as the sum of the properties of its discrete components.” (Diani 2015: 4). Indeed, the amount of systematic empirical research conducted from a relational perspective is still relatively limited. One of the main reasons lies in the difficulty of securing data. For example, it is less problematic to collect information on a person’s participation in several types of associations than to get to

know the names of the specific social groups in which the same person has been involved.

This information is essential if one wants to use, for instance, the multiple memberships of associational members across various spheres of engagement. As highlighted by Edwards,

what is important about these organizations is less their existence, identity, or functioning than how they interact with each other and with the institutions of the state and other actors in complex civil society assemblages, ecologies, or ecosystems....As in natural, biological ecosystems, each element is related to the others and gains strength from the system's diversity and organic growth so that all members of society can activate their interests and intents through associational life (Edwards 2011: 5).

Therefore, analyzing interactions at the informal level allows us to break through the monolithic conception of associations and, in turn, static and normative concepts of civil society.

If civil society ought to be analyzed as a *system of interdependence*, it is essential to lay bare the multiplicity of relationships in which associations are embedded. To achieve this goal, this book extends the analytical lens beyond the 'usual suspects' to bring into view the broader array of actors that associations engage with, sometimes in conflict and at others collaboratively (and even sharing core personnel). In so doing, I shed light on the broad range of interactions within the Tunisian associational system at both the meso-level (institutional ties) and the individual-micro-level (activists' trajectories), thereby revealing the *multi-positionality* of individual activists. The analysis of interactions, formed through exchanges at different levels, brings into view the dynamics informing the sphere of civic activism concerning specific actors claiming and promoting the development of civil society after 2011: international donors, the Tunisian state, and the Islamist political party.

An analysis mainly situated at a single point in time and space may help to identify functional analytic categories that can guide the investigation of civic networks over time. It is not a coincidence that the few studies exploring such a link have primarily focused on specific local communities (Ansell 2003; Diani 1995; Diani 2015). A focus on the local level is advisable for various reasons. First, regional settings enable a more fine-grained reconstruction of the relations between grassroots components of the civic sector than studies conducted at the national level (Diani 1995). Furthermore, the most relevant interactions between social actors occur within territoriality delimited

communities. Finally, a reference to specific local settings enables us to address fundamental questions concerning the link between political context and grassroots networks. The most established indicators of opportunities, such as institutional opportunities for access and the salience of long-standing political cleavages, may affect civic network structures in several ways. Therefore, this volume shows how associations scattered in different regions of Tunisia, rather than a sum of their components, constitute complex bundles of relations emerging from integrating several networks within the post-revolutionary political context.

The institutionalization of associations as a strategy

From its origins, the social movements literature has emphasized the variety of political opportunity structures shaping social movements' modes of action (Kriesi 1996, 2004; Tarrow 1994). However, new approaches have challenged structuralist theories by emphasizing the dynamics of strategic interactions among the different actors involved. Ganz has argued that "surprisingly little attention is paid to examining in a given movement situation, what activists themselves believe their strategic options to be and how these get evaluated and debated within the movement" (Ganz 2009: 147). Strategic relational approaches in the social movement literature mainly centered on protesters and, in general, on the dynamics of contention; however, even in non-conflictual fields, there is always a good deal of jockeying for advantage. Thus, this book scrutinizes the strategic choices of social groups wishing to engage in the Tunisian associational system after the fall of the authoritarian regime. Therefore, it goes beyond the protest dimension by focusing on everyday mobilization practices. Notably, the findings show that associational life in Tunisia has expanded through the emergence of previously quiescent social groups jostling to participate in the post-authoritarian arena. From this perspective, the *institutionalization* of local associations can be interpreted as a strategy that groups employ to attain their goals in a time of significant political change (Suh 2011).

Scholars have acknowledged that "in some cases, contemporary movements also engage in a series of activities that do not necessarily entail a conflicting relationship with powerholders" (Giugni, McAdam, and Tilly 1998: 82). Tarrow (1994) theorizes that over time social movements move from an oppositional protest posture to a bureaucratic and institutionalized one to negotiate with, or become part of, the political establishment. Once institutionalized, social movements modify their goals to make them attainable through bureaucratic procedures, and they regularize and moderate

their collective action repertoires. Furthermore, contending that people join social movements and collective action based on a rational calculation that the benefits of protest exceed the costs, Przeworski (1991) argued that movement actors sensibly shift strategies once activists perceive that radical collective street action is less beneficial than inclusion in established processes.

Put differently, “social movements come to accept that they must choose to participate or perish” (Suh 2011: 443). Once entrenched in a formal arena and having established “organizational habitats” within institutions, activists can become “institutional activists” (Santoro and McGuire 1997) or “unobtrusive activists” (Katzenstein 1990). By taking advantage of institutional opportunities, they can contribute to producing stable and influential policies that can also correspond to movement goals. Some scholars have emphasized that the

The inclusion of social movements aiming at the co-regulation of complex societies results from both a bottom-up and a top-down process. On the one hand, movements try to expand the channels of access to the state to increase the chances of reaching their political aims.... On the other hand, states are also working to integrate social movements and their organizations (Giugni et al. 1998: 82).

In advancing claims of this nature, political opportunity theorists paid less heed to structural determinants in favor of local causal mechanisms to explain mobilization (Kurzban 1998, 2004; McAdam et al. 2003). Less focused on structures, these scholars foreground actors, and processes. Others have abandoned structural assumptions and adopted an explicitly relational approach (della Porta 2014). As a result, as political opportunity theorists have reckoned with the need to theorize the agency of social movements, ‘strategy’ rather than structures have moved to center stage in the ‘rethinking’ of social movement studies (Goodwin and Jasper 2003).

In the mid-2000s, Fillieule (2005) composed a “requiem” for the political opportunity structure concept arguing that the model’s static nature and inattention to how interactions also affect structures rendered it obsolete. Similarly, Ganz has argued that “surprisingly little attention is paid to examining in a given movement situation, what activists themselves believe their strategic options to be and how these get evaluated and debated within the movement” (Ganz 2009: 147). Goodwin and Jasper (2003) highlighted that when it comes to *contentious politics*, the political opportunity structure approach theorizes state institutions as part of the context rather than

players in themselves (Goodwin and Jasper 2003). In other words, instead of problematizing politicians' or state officials' specific intentions and ideologies, the political opportunity structure approach treats them as a given by reading such actors' interests in their structural positions. Even in the absence of evident dynamics of contention, the political scene should be analyzed in a less deterministic way by looking at political actions as a complex sequence of interactions rather than reactions to a predetermined structure.

Associations as players and arenas for the reconfiguration of power relations

Against a strict focus on the relationship between structure and agents, social movement scholars have been increasingly adopting a *strategic relational approach* and emphasizing in their analyses the dynamic arenas or fields of interaction (Jasper 2004; Fligstein and McAdam 2012; Jasper and Duyvendak 2015; McGarry et al. 2016; Volpi and Jasper 2018; Volpi and Clark 2019). However, while bringing the role of power into the analysis, most studies foreground how it *constrains* actors and concentrate less on how it *enables* individuals and collectives to take action and work toward objectives.

By adopting such a strategic relational approach, this book builds a theoretical framework that conceptualizes the civic sphere as a *surrogate political arena*, which means a field of political interaction *substituting* party politics in a phase of political transition characterized by a compromise between Islamist and secular forces. The arena concept is like Pierre Bourdieu's idea of a *field of conflict* over clearly identifiable stakes (Jasper and Duyvendak 2015). Bourdieu was interested in many of the aspects significant to social movement research (the relationship between external context and agents, relations and networks, resources, and the subjective meanings of agents) and strove to develop a theoretical framework that would enable him to grasp all of these in a systematic way (Husu 2013: 264). Moreover, Bourdieu emphasized the importance of social relations; indeed, the concept of field implies "a set of objectives, historical relations between positions" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 16). Fields are "sites of struggle between distinct agents whose power relations are determined by the volume and compositions of different resources at their disposal" (Turner 1974: 135). The 'field of struggle' is defined by the relations between players, some dominant and others subordinated but all trying to improve their position. Any formal rules are imposed by the 'field of power,' namely the political system or the state, which structures the relations among arenas.

Despite its similarity with the arena concept, fields work better than arenas for Bourdieu because of his reluctance to acknowledge that individuals make *conscious* strategic choices rather than being driven by the early socialization of *habitus* (Jenkins 1992: 87). In other words, individuals are influenced by forces emanating from the field itself rather than by self-conscious strategies arising from interactions with other players (Martin 2003). From this perspective, Husu (2013) observes that *fields* have similar strengths and weaknesses as political opportunity structures.

The 'controversy' between the notion of *field* and that of *arena* stems from the difficulty of describing and analyzing the interaction between structuring provisions and individual behaviors. To overcome this theoretical puzzle, I adopted a mixed approach that combines the micro-aspects of ethnographical research with more general processes characterizing the post-authoritarian phase, thus linking short-term opportunities to long-term structures. Besides the emphasis on agents' dilemmas and strategies, I assume that arenas, where actors play, are eventually invested by asymmetrical relations among actors dominated by power relations. However, in contrast to a Bourdieusian zero-sum game approach, I adopt a Foucauldian interpretation of the relational dimension of power, closer to Jasper's idea of a strategic relational approach.

The reference to Foucault (1977) is relevant to emphasize the *heterogeneity of power*. Power understood in this way does not settle in some specific place or environment. Still, instead, like a flow, it permeates the daily interactions of different actors at various points in the hierarchy, continuously being reconfigured according to circumstances. I posit that this interpretation of power is particularly salient in post-authoritarian cases like Tunisia, where the political terrain is relatively open, and actors foreground strategies that give them the best chance to successfully navigate the ongoing reconfiguration of power as established players compete with newer ones emerging out of the revolutionary phase.

Moreover, in contrast to a Bourdieusian interpretation, the Foucauldian view sees power not simply as constraining or enabling pre-existing projects; it also entices and creates new goals, subjects, streams of action, and types of knowledge. This interpretation is also in opposition to the theorists of political opportunity structure, who argue that a new institutional arena offers new means, not new ends or new subjects. Therefore, in line with the Foucauldian interpretation, I argue that players can also compete for various outcomes which can be different from those imposed or ascribed to a symbolic field. For instance, associations can become spaces of opportunities, depending on multiple logics that go beyond the shared idea

of civil society. Thus, the conception of civil society as an independent sphere where associations act as the watchdogs of the state's public policies eventually wears down, even if local associations formally follow its ethical and procedural rules.

This book combines different interpretations of power relations. The Weberian interpretation shows that, as "any real relation of domination involves a minimum of willingness to obey," it is essential to analyze concrete, singular, and historically situated situations to understand these "special interests in obeying" (Weber 1968: 212). Thus, Foucault and his heterogeneous conception of power, which is conceived as a series of complex relations, is a relevant theoretical contribution. Power relations, in his view, lie within conflicts, compromises, arrangements, and, in general, social relations: domination and discipline cannot be apprehended outside of their exercise. It is also worth mentioning Elias' sociology of interdependence and his notion of 'configuration': mutual dependencies that bind individuals to each other constitute the matrix of society; these interdependencies are historically situated, and so, understanding power requires that we understand concrete functions and relations (Elias 1978; 1991). Moreover, Gramsci's conception of hegemony is not only coercion. Still, it is also a form of cultural and ideological managing that emerges from power relations, social struggles, negotiations, compromise, co-option, representations, and shared beliefs (Gramsci 1975).

This book is built upon an innovative approach blending Foucault's conceptualization of power relations with that one theorized by Bourdieu. The latter's contribution is relevant to positioning the relational process in a symbolic field or arena, where actors hold different kinds and quantities of capital, adopt specific positions and play based on their historical and social background, which in turn influences their strategy of action. Therefore, in analyzing civic activism dynamics, I consciously draw on the notions of *habitus*, *field*, and *capital* (Bourdieu 1996), highlighting how they are intertwined and influence decisions and strategies of individual and collective action.

In conclusion, the adoption of Bourdieu's categories is crucial as they provide a theoretical toolkit that can be applied to convincingly explain aspects of social movements that social movement theories, such as political process theory, resource mobilization theory, and framing, acknowledge but are unable to explain within a single theoretical framework (Husu 2013). Indeed, by including these categories in the analysis, we can highlight those local associations in a transition phase function as *surrogate political arenas* where various actors compete to control power positions and symbolic and material resources.

Thus, in a framework dominated by hegemonic actors such as international donors, the state, or political parties to control the associational system under transition, activists engaged in the ‘civil society sphere’ might strategically size social, economic, and political opportunities to achieve their objectives (the exemplary case in this book is the reconfiguration of the Islamic network under international and national constraints since 2014). In other words, they mobilize for resources. According to this perspective, it is essential to note that the associational space also functions as an opportunity to build or strengthen informal networks. This is particularly interesting if we consider that we are dealing with a country in transition, where the formal opening of socio-political rights is partially attenuated by ongoing coercion, a residue of the authoritarian apparatus. Therefore, the association becomes a space of legitimation where collective action also goes beyond the logic of the dominant understanding of civil society, and civic activism can assume different forms and meanings according to the interests and strategies of activists themselves.

Table 1 Players penetrating the *associational arena*¹ in post-authoritarian Tunisia

Associational actors	Hegemonic actors promoting civil society
Social movements’ activists (leftist, Islamist); Urban elites; Unemployed youth	Political parties; National and local authorities; International and regional donors.

Source: Author’s elaboration.

3 Mobilizing for development in post-authoritarian Tunisia

Most newly emerged associations developed in the post-authoritarian phase focused on social solidarity and development activities pushed mainly by international donors and national authorities. Many voluntary associations dealing with economic issues reflected the effects of the state’s retreat from its traditional responsibilities after the neoliberal turn, which occurred with the implementation of the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Since the late 1980s, the state’s

¹ The associational arena is distinct but not isolated from other social arenas. Given the complex relationships that associational members have with hegemonic actors, the associational arena intersects with other arenas at local, national, and transnational level.

retrenchment—which some authors have dubbed ‘the privatization of the state’ (Hibou 1998)—was intended to improve economic performance but also to loosen the political grip of the state on the middle classes. As a result, NGOs emerged as alternatives to social services and welfare, providing a solution to the state’s incapacity and socioeconomic inequities (Howell and Pearce 2001). Thus, development became an NGO affair, backed by the intervention of international donors who supported this reconfiguration of public space and the pledging of associations as public policy agents (Abu-Sada and Challand 2011; Catousse and Vairel 2010).

Until the fall of Ben Ali’s regime in 2011, the ‘privatization’ of the Tunisian state took place under an authoritarian system. Thus, even as the state retreated from the provision of public services, it retained political control of the associational system (Hibou 1998). As a matter of fact, before 2011, associations were part of a system of social control of the hegemonic party RCD (Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique). The capillary construction of a system of allegiances was established by contracting development policies to co-opted associations faithful to the regime. In particular, the political economy of micro-credit associations represented the state’s primary legitimation strategy, which favored like-minded groups while excluding challengers to the ruling party. The inclusion/exclusion strategy was based on clientelist politics that resulted in a deep socioeconomic divide in the country. Therefore, the state’s development policies were unavoidably linked to political struggles as an instrument of control of the authoritarian regime. As such, it is not surprising that the revolutionary movement that erupted in December 2010 and led to the regime’s downfall in January 2011 mainly voiced the socioeconomic grievances of the Tunisian people calling for a democratic political economy.

Protests brought attention to the issues of employment, redistribution, and social justice, especially involving young people from the most marginalized areas of the country (Allal 2016; Hibou 2011). All these grievances can be included in a broad and heterogeneous conceptualization of ‘development’ by adding to this category all the practices aiming at solving the severe socioeconomic divide of the country from a bottom-up perspective through a democratic process that should be participatory and decentralized. Besides the socioeconomic requests, the revolution brought a more profound claim: the necessity of including those classes and groups that were perceived as most oppressed and disadvantaged during the authoritarian regime. Therefore, the issue of ‘development’ is strictly linked with participation in a post-authoritarian setting, unavoidably acquiring a political connotation.

After the revolution, given the inability of the state to accommodate the needs of the most marginalized strata of the population, social development policies continued but were undertaken by thousands of associations acting as subsidiary actors on behalf of the state. Turning a page on past practice, Tunisia opened its doors to international donors who intervened at scale, penetrating the country's social fabric through developmental programs. Thus, newly created associations started to be targeted as the central agents of socioeconomic change from the bottom, likely to contribute to creating a fully-fledged civil society based on a neoliberal perspective (Abu-Sada and Challand 2011; Bono et al. 2015).

All the above phenomena put local associations in a logic of collective action going beyond the pragmatic creation of socioeconomic solutions for the country. Associations engaging in development became *vehicles of political participation*, with associational life functioning as an access code to the renewed public sphere. Thus, the mobilization for *development* after 2011 acquired a novel meaning for many Tunisians, a sort of political redemption of those groups excluded from politics during the authoritarian regime. In this regard, engagement for development is an entry point to understanding more general socio-political processes. However, given the heterogeneity of groups engaging in the associational system, the meaning of 'development' has been interpreted differently depending on the nature of the associations at stake. Therefore, faith-based charitable associations, which since 2011 have been transforming their actions into 'development' activities, and advocacy associations that do not necessarily carry out development projects but reflect on local development issues, are included in this book as associations mobilizing for development.

The case study of Tunisian grassroots mobilization for development after 2011 allows us to understand how civic participation contributes to the reconfiguration of a public sphere where different actors wish to politically (re-)emerge and (re-)define their role in a context of political change. Thus, civil society *engagement for development* becomes a vehicle for reconfiguring power relations in a changing political landscape. Indeed, power relations matter in the post-authoritarian setting. From the data obtained through extensive fieldwork, I found evidence that the Tunisian associational field represents a target for exercising the hegemony of certain actors wishing to impose their influence. Still, at the same time, a space of opportunity for emerging social groups is organized as formal or informal networks. Indeed, associational actors from the revolutionary phase do not operate in a vacuum; they belong to a socio-political environment characterized by shifting and fluid configurations of opportunities and constraints that

inform the dynamics of power relations. In other words, associations are not independent entities but are *permeable arenas* hosting a plethora of strategic interactions involving old and new hegemonic actors: international donors, the state in transition, and the Islamist political party Ennahda.

First, after 2011 international donors massively penetrated the country through the ideological frame of a neoliberal political economy by setting opportunities and conditions to size them. Second, the state is still not fully democratized, even if, under more legitimate forms, local administrations have continued to exert a form of control over society.² Third, the Ennahda party, excluded from political power until 2011, after the revolution, won the first free and fair elections with 37% of the votes and emerged as the new mass party. Since then, the party has tried to balance its ambition to exert control over newly emerged faith-based associations and comply with a neoliberal agenda legitimized by the international community and national secular forces.

Against this background, individuals and groups joined associations to meet incentives and reach different goals under a neoliberal understanding of civil society, supported by state subsidies, international grants, or a new ideology of the recent mass party. In this regard, institutional positions in the association are helpful because they bring control of resources and allow their holders to make certain moves rather than others. The distinction between a person and her position can generate several strategic dilemmas. In other words, the *permeability of associations* indicates that their process of institutionalization is subject to external drives, which allow their instrumentalization from above (old and new hegemonic actors) as well as from below (social, economic, and political groups wishing to participate in the postrevolutionary reconfiguration of power relations).

Against this background, this book shows how associations emerged as arenas in which power relations are reconfigured, functioning as spaces in which external actors exercise hegemony and where social groups pursue opportunities to invest in associations as a point of access to the post-revolutionary political game. Players' struggles within the arena may be contentious but need not be. From this perspective, the standardized process of *adaptation* of local associations to the dominant neoliberal paradigm of civil society is a strategy social groups employ to exploit new opportunities.

2 As the notion of state is particularly complex, due to the heterogeneity of actors embedded, I decided to use as indicators of this macro-concept the *discourses and practices of local administrations* (governorates, delegations, and municipalities) as the most representative indicator of state action vis-à-vis the associational system. These are the state's representatives closest to the associational world.

4 Research design and methods: the challenges of grounded theory

Besides the descriptive scope of an analysis based on a cross-case comparison, this book aims to provide new inputs at an epistemological and theoretical level to analyze the dynamics of civic activism in a post-authoritarian setting. Since the early 1990s, the democratization process in Central and Eastern Europe has triggered a spirited debate on the role of civic activism in the transition phase. The Arab revolts in 2011 and the collapse of some authoritarian regimes across the region opened new research opportunities. They sparked further theoretical reflections on civic activism in a post-authoritarian context since the new 'cultural' variables related to the geographical area have further complicated the research design.

The increasing interest in civic activism in the Arab world after 2011 has contributed to renewed debates over the concept of civil society itself. However, as socio-political transformations are still ongoing, the dynamics of civic activism after 2011 remain unexplored. Indeed, the most extensive literature on civic engagement in the Arab world mainly relates to the pre-revolutionary periods. Hence the need for systematic research focused on an exemplary case, such as that of Tunisia, the only country in the Arab world so far to have attempted democratic consolidation. In light of this scenario characterized by profound political transformation, studying how local associational life has become institutionalized is a crucial object of inquiry, both from an empirical and a theoretical point of view. Indeed, the findings of the present research call into question the dominant reading of the role of civil society in a phase of transition, according to which civil society is an autonomous space functional to the process of democratization. This research ultimately helps to overcome this normative and deterministic vision, shedding light on the complex dynamics that make up the post-authoritarian arena.

This book displays the interactive dynamics in which associations are embedded in a post-authoritarian scenario by focusing on two levels of analysis. I investigate how associations, as formal institutions, and how associational members, as individuals or groups of individuals, act as players in the post-authoritarian setting. Therefore, I conduct my investigation on a meso- and micro-level analysis. First, I posit that associations, as formal organizations, transform in a certain way to emerge or survive in the post-revolutionary arena, thus concerning their interaction with other actors. Therefore, I highlight a phenomenon of professionalization of local associations to standards diffused by international actors and strongly supported by the local government and administration.

This mechanism is particularly interesting as it crosses different kinds of associations, including faith-based associations, which, as we will see, have progressively changed their frames and their repertoires of action. I assess the transformation of local associations by looking at the variation over time of three indicators often used in social movement studies: the *self-conception* of associations (how they *frame* their role and their work), their *internal organizational development* (internal organization and management of their activities), and their *external organization*, namely, their capacity to create ties with other actors (networks). The variation of these qualities forges the transformation of local associations in the post-authoritarian setting, which, according to my hypothesis, is the by-product of power relationships in which associations, and associational members, are embedded.

Drawing on a grounded theory approach, this study aspires to construct a middle-range theory starting from the field. This scope requires a broad research strategy to investigate the dynamics of civic engagement in a post-authoritarian setting. Dealing with a *how-to question* on civic engagement practices, the research strategy can be described as a grounded theory (Glaser 2014; Mattoni 2014). Grounded theory is a method or a family of methods consisting of systematic yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories from the data themselves (Bryant and Charmaz 2010). Thus, due to the focus on theory-building, immersive fieldwork conducted in four regions of Tunisia was entirely focused on collecting 'rich data' (Charmaz 2006) to understand processes, internal dynamics, and civic engagement strategies. In support of this deep investigation, the study goes beyond the simple description of Mattoni as follows:

How research questions frequently provide partial answers that also tackle *why* some social phenomena develop in a certain way within a specific context. Therefore, answering such questions through grounded theory might also lead to the development of in-depth knowledge about specific causal mechanisms that are usually linked to *why* research questions as well, providing tentative explanations and hypotheses about the causes that are behind such processes and mechanisms (Mattoni 2014: 38, italics in the original).

If the initial goal was to shed light on an empirical issue—practices of civic engagement in a post-revolutionary context—the ethnographical research let the need to re-design research questions and approaches progressively

emerge. Therefore, explorative research questions such as *what are the practices of civic engagement after 2011?* and *how do associations behave and interact with other actors around them?* progressively set up background knowledge that gave space to questions such as *why do local associations act and react in a certain way in a specific context?* or, in other words, *what is the shape and role of associations in a post-revolutionary setting?*

According to the grounded theory approach, the analysis is not based on pre-constituted hypotheses about the field under investigation. In other words, the grounded theory does not imply a priori assumptions to testify but moves inductively, starting from empirical data to construct theory (Glaser 2014). The exploratory phase of the research was mainly driven by ‘sensitizing concepts’ in contrast to ‘definitive concepts.’ The latter “provide prescriptions of what to see, [while] sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look” (Blumer 1954: 7). As Mattoni states, “rather than testing hypotheses when applying grounded theory, researchers explore concepts that function as a starting point for the analysis, since they guide it; those concepts, in turn, are filled with meaning through the careful examination of empirical data” (Mattoni 2014: 24).

To analyze civic engagement practices after the fall of the authoritarian regime, I treated ‘associational engagement practices’ as a sensitizing concept, one that provides the direction for my subsequent analysis. Moreover, I further developed the conceptualization by pinpointing four sensitizing sub-concepts: the *formulation of the self-conception of associations*, their *organizational development*, the *nature of their activities*, and their *horizontal and vertical networks*. These four qualities of ‘associational engagement practices’ imply “specific interactions with both the world of empirical data in which sensitizing concepts are rooted and the realm of theoretical reflections with which sensitizing concepts interact at some point in the research process” (Mattoni 2014: 24).

Sensitizing concepts, therefore, represented the driving force behind my immersive fieldwork. Data obtained from this pathway allowed me to progressively generate conceptual categories through the ‘open coding’ process of analysis. The recombination of different codes (axial coding) allowed me to reconstruct specific theoretical categories such as *conditions*, *interactions*, *strategies*, and *consequences* (Strauss and Corbin 1990). From these categories, I could further develop the conceptualization of associations as *arenas* per se. Thus, the added value of research based on a grounded theory strategy is that it makes a solid link between the theoretical and empirical spheres without the necessity of creating a hierarchy but iteratively brainstorming them. Indeed, practices of civic engagement in

a post-authoritarian setting go together with the increment in knowledge production at analytical, epistemological, and theoretical levels.

The mixed methods used in this research comprises a qualitative-oriented and ethnographic approach, through which I collected data. I relied on four principal investigation sources: documentary analysis, in-depth interviews, participant observation, and a focus group. These methodological instruments are different in many respects, and their specific characteristics will be illustrated in the third section of this chapter. As no method is infallible, adopting various methodological tools allowed me to mitigate the shortcomings of using a single instrument. Furthermore, combining these tools was essential to triangulate the information and look at the same empirical phenomenon from different perspectives.

A multi-sited ethnographic approach

This study is based on field research conducted from 2015 to 2019 in four Tunisian governorates (See Figure 1), which vary geographically, socioeconomically, politically, and culturally (Daoud 2011). Moreover, they vary in *power relationships*. The first is Grand Tunis (including the governorates of Tunis, Manouba, Ariana, and Ben Arous), where international opportunities are easier for local associations, as most donors' offices are located in the capital. The second governorate under investigation is Siliana, a northwestern region registering the lowest development index in the country after Kasserine and Sidi Bouzid. The region was persistently overlooked regarding welfare policies during the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes. The third is the governorate of Sfax. Also known as the 'capital of the South'—the city of Sfax—the regional capital, has always been conceived as the economic, socio-political counterweight to the capital.³ The fourth is Medenine, far from the centers of power related to the capital, in the extreme, conservative south of the country, at the border with Libya.

3 Unlike other industrial centers of the country, whose creation was initiated by the national public authorities, the industry in Sfax relies on the work of a local familistic business (Denieul 1992). The entrepreneurial spirit of the city's residents and the financial resources of market-oriented agriculture place the city in second place on the national rankings, behind Tunis. This 'endogenous development' (Bennasr 2005) contributed to forging a narrative on Sfax's 'specificity' in social, political, and economic competition with more dominant centers of power. Sfax was the first Tunisian city to mobilize for the country's independence in 1956. Then, Sfax emerged as a social, political, and economic counter-power to the Sahel region (i.e., the coastal region from Sousse to Monastir where Bourguiba was from), which has constituted the bulwark of the political strategy of domination since the independence of the country (Donker 2013).

I focused on four different territories to avoid the so-called ‘fallacy of composition,’ according to which inferences are made about the whole based on certain facts that apply only to some part of the whole (e.g., the urban minority dynamics around the central zones of Tunis are erroneously extended to the whole of Tunisia, without taking into consideration the striking variations that exist across the country). This concern for representativeness is addressed by including four areas in the analysis, which are exhaustive from a geographical, political, and social point of view.

The ethnographical research was conducted primarily in the governorates’ urban centers. However, within each governorate, I made sure to select associations located in *peripheral or rural zones*. Reaching associations in rural areas was crucial to compare their practices with those in urban areas. Moreover, the investigation of rural regions was relevant considering the politicization of these territories during the uprisings in 2010–2011 (Gana 2013). Thus, in the governorate of Grand Tunis, I also visited and interviewed members of associations in the popular northern and southern peripheries of Ettadhamen and Mégrine. In the governorate of Siliana, I carried out interviews in the rural *delegations* of Bargou and Kesra.⁴ Furthermore, I visited associations in the peripheral delegation of Aguerb in the governorate of Sfax. Finally, in the governorate of Medenine, I decided to research all the governorates’ delegations due to their striking heterogeneity. Therefore, besides the city of Medenine, I also visited associations scattered around the barren areas of Sidi Makhoul and Béni Khedache, on the island of Djerba, in the coastal area of Zarzis, and along the border of Ben Guerdane.

Thanks to this broader perspective, I could observe the intertwining of rural and urban dimensions through the urbanization of large villages and the spread of urban values to the hinterland. The progressive gentrification of certain areas could explain this phenomenon due to the massive intervention of international donors, which after 2011 have succeeded in covering the entire country. Against this background, associations in urban areas have managed to activate networks with other associations scattered in rural areas.

The multi-situated ethnography based on a most-different research design approach satisfies the methodological requirement of representativeness, which is necessary to generalize for Tunisia. As this work aims to provide a theoretical contribution to the academic debate on civil society in a post-authoritarian Arab country, such a research design allows us to verify

4 The delegations of Tunisia (*mutamadiyah*) are the second-level administrative divisions of Tunisia between the governorates and the sectors (*imadats*). The country counts 24 governorates which are divided into 264 delegations (*mutamadiyat*) and further divided into 2073 sectors.

Figure 1 Tunisia governorates and fields of investigation

Source: Author's elaboration from *d-maps.com*

whether varying contexts affect practices of local civic engagement. From this perspective, specific territorial conditions for associational engagement can be seen as a contextual layer for the analysis. Indeed, the territorial approach implies a perspective on the role of context in collective action, considered a 'container' where the interplay of different actors occurs. In other words, each 'container' has specific characteristics (culture, traditions, political socialization, socioeconomic indexes) that affect civic activism modalities. According to this perspective, once I entered the field, a preliminary hypothesis was that 'context' could influence how associations behave in a socio-political arena by affecting the opportunities of agents and their strategic approaches.

As I will show in the following chapters, this argument appeared fallacious after a first analysis of the data collected. Indeed, after 2011, there has been evidence of increasing professionalization of local associations' practices, regardless of where they are located (Chapter 4). However, going back and forth between data collection and analysis, I realized that territoriality does not matter if we consider associations only in isolation. Yet, territoriality is an important explanatory variable if we consider local associations as

permeable organizations invested by different localized networks struggling to position themselves in the post-authoritarian setting. Chapter 5 will be entirely dedicated to casting light on the notion of associations as *arenas* for reconfiguring power relations.

Which associations? What sector of action?

In Tunisia—and in other countries whose regulatory framework is modeled on or derived from the French system, such as in Algeria and Morocco (Liverani 2008)—association (*jam 'iyyat*) refers to a private, non-profit organization independent from the state, the establishment, and operations of which are nonetheless regulated by law. Islamic charities, development NGOs, and advocacy organizations fall under the broad category of associations, and all are regulated by the same law (Decree-law No. 2011–88 of September 24, 2011).

The next chapter shows that the *development sector* is a politically sensitive issue in post-authoritarian Tunisia. Indeed, once I entered the field, I observed a vast constellation of associations participating in ‘action for development,’ although each framed its work differently. The associations interviewed, even those not officially registered as development associations, present themselves as contributing to the country’s development in the transition phase.

To broaden associations working in the development sector, I first relied on the IFEDA online register of national associations.⁵ The database of the ‘Information, Training, Studies, and Documentation on Associations’ (IFEDA) is the official associations’ register in Tunisia. However, it presents several blanks and is based on an arbitrary and rigid system of classifying the associations’ activities. In fact, during the fieldwork, the notion of ‘development’ progressively emerged as a blurred concept, as several associations which have declared themselves as contributing to the development of the

5 IFEDA is a center for Information, Training, Studies, and Documentation on Associations (*Centre d'Information, Formation, Etudes et Documentation sur les Associations*), depending on the Prime Ministry, set up under Decree-law No. 2000–688 of April 5, 2000. Its functions have been defined as follows: assuming the role of an observatory of the associational activity, collecting the data, the information, and the publications concerning it and listing them in a database created for this purpose; conducting research and evaluation studies or prospecting related to associations; assisting associations in carrying out their missions, through the organization of learning or training seminars, meetings, and study days; facilitating contact between the various stakeholders in the voluntary sector; assisting in the development and implementation of policies and programs to promote associational work. See the website for further information: <http://www.ifeda.org.tn/fr/>.

country do not fall into the category of development of the IFEDA database. Indeed, boundaries are blurred between one sector and another, and it is also difficult to differentiate between advocacy and service-providing associations as these activities are often intertwined. Therefore, I have adopted an *extended definition* of action for development, including associations working on socioeconomic issues, those just advocating for development, and those focusing on ‘social development’ and ‘human development.’

The expansion of the interpretative lens allowed me to consider the construction of the notion of development and the action for developmental actions *as an arena* per se (de Sardan 1995). As such, I could observe how a universal category was conceived from different—and often conflictual—perspectives, thus acquiring a political significance. An in-depth investigation into the associational action for development allowed me to shed light on the possible variations in the different political divisions characterizing the country. The two main divisions that have historically exhibited a strong political sense in Tunisia are the cultural *Islamic–secular* divide and the socioeconomic *coastal–interior* divide. Therefore, my final sample (see Appendix for the detailed list of associations interviewed) was eventually enlarged to include associations with a religious orientation, such as charitable and preaching (*da’wa*) associations scattered throughout the country.⁶

5 Structure of the book

The book is divided into two parts. The first part, ‘Civil Society in Transition: Recasting Power Relations,’ seeks to disentangle the changing relational dynamics between the new associations that emerged after 2011 and the Tunisian state, international donors, and the broader political environment. The second part, ‘Associations as Players and Arenas,’ casts light on the ambivalent role played by associations in the post-authoritarian reconfiguration of power relations.

Chapter 1 details the continuity and change in relations between the state and associations after the fall of the authoritarian regime. The ease with which new associations could register after regulatory reforms led to the

6 Data collection occurred from September 2015 to October 2019 during my doctoral and postdoctoral research. Part of the interviews in Tunis and Sfax were carried out with my colleague Damiano De Facci. All the research participants have provided informed consent. The anonymity of research participants is maintained, upon their request, to protect their privacy. Thus, the names of associations and their members are not always explicitly mentioned in the text.

birth of thousands of social solidarity and development organizations. Yet this went hand in hand with the state's continued disengagement from the socioeconomic sphere. In this regard, the notion of civil society packaged by national authorities continues to be framed in neoliberal terms, according to which associations act as subsidiary agents of the state. However, the state's disengagement with the socioeconomic sphere occurred alongside persistent control and hegemonic practices of local authorities over the post-revolutionary associational sphere, based on a logic of selective inclusion of social groups emerging for the first time or older groups staking a claim in the post-revolutionary arena.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of actors and processes unfolding in the social sphere against a political process from the fall of the authoritarian regime in 2011 until the most recent elections in 2019. The post-revolutionary setting is described as a highly competitive space characterized by strategic dynamics of inclusion and exclusion of different socio-political groups. The analysis describes the rise of Islamic actors in the associational sector and their relations with the Islamist party Ennahda. The chapter shows how groups confronting a highly contentious post-revolutionary environment deploy civic engagement as a political strategy.

Chapter 3 focuses on the increasing diffusion of a paradigm of civil society promoted by international donors in the country. Notably, it scrutinizes the conceptualization, planning, and implementation of an idea of civil society packaged by different kinds of actors holding asymmetrical power relations with local associations. According to the dominant perspective, NGOs must professionalize themselves to be agents of democratic development independent from the political sphere. Going beyond this mainstream interpretation, the analysis of relational dynamics presented in this chapter looks at the multiple micro-interactions involving these two players (donors and associations), uncovering new logics of action, such as associations' strategic seeking of political advantage by adapting to the dominant neoliberal paradigm. In the first section, I cast light on the constellation of international donors targeting the Tunisian associational arena working on the developmental issues after 2011. I show the shift from a rather heterogeneous to a Western-dominated environment.

Chapter 4 presents the main empirical findings. Specifically, it discusses the notion of associations as *players* in the post-authoritarian *arena*. The underlying hypothesis is that associations adopt a specific behavior as a strategy to survive or to participate in a political scenario that is undergoing reconfiguration. The analysis reveals how different kinds of associations throughout the country underwent a standard transformation according to

a dominant paradigm of professionalization diffused by international actors and publicly endorsed by the Tunisian state. In other words, compliance with norms and standards that reflect the neoliberal conceptualization of civil society (such as good governance, depoliticization, and professionalization) has become an entry point for those actors who decide to engage in the associational system to participate in the redefinition of power relations in Tunisia's post-authoritarian setting. In this regard, this chapter lays bare how this transformation has come nowhere near producing an apolitical associational system, contradicting the literature that suggests a process of adaptation to the neoliberal model results in the alienation and depoliticization of local actors. Instead, the professionalization represents a *political strategy* of new socio-political groups intending to participate, resist or just survive in the post-authoritarian reconfiguration of power relations. Notably, the liberalization of the public sphere after 2011 created political opportunities for those socio-political groups that had been repressed or neglected during the authoritarian regime. These are the Islamist movement and the urban middle class in the regions excluded from Ben Ali's patronage network. Moreover, after 2011, a new social category emerged, that of NGO experts, who act as a bridge between local associations and international donors. These figures emerged from below thanks to the massive intervention of international donors, offering an umbrella of career opportunities as project managers, consultants, and the like.

Chapter 5 draws on the Tunisian case to reflect on how associational systems are politically embedded in post-authoritarian settings. The analysis shows how the professionalization of associations in Tunisia is part of the dynamics of power relationships between associational members and other actors wishing to impose their influence over the civil society sphere, such as the state and international donors. Unlike a top-down perspective, the analysis shows that local associations' adaptation to a standardized civil society paradigm has been part of their strategy to seize the opportunity to *enter politics* when power relations are redefined. The analysis indicates the need to conceive of 'politics' as a struggle that goes beyond party competition: associations enter the political sphere as soon as they participate in the reconfiguration of a *pact* between rulers and those governed. The political embeddedness of associations is empirically observed through the analysis of micro-interactions of the actors involved, which reveal the formal or informal multi-positionality of prominent members of local associations in other social worlds (political parties, local administration, etc.). Against the liberal understanding of civil society, which emphasizes the autonomous character of associations, the interactive dynamics observed in this research

are ultimately political. In other words, civic activism during transition is characterized by the evolution of new socio-political networks. This chapter describes in detail the development of three types of socio-political networks (formal and informal) seeking to enter the political system: an Islamic network, an urban-based middle class network, and a network of young, internationalized experts working for NGOs.

The concluding chapter summarizes the main findings of the ethnographical research. The empirical analysis presented in this book allows the reader to rethink the current conceptualization of civil society through the study of relational dynamics in which associations are embedded. The research presented in the proposed volume indicates that associations do not act as isolated units. Instead, their members occupy multiple positions and are involved in complex relational dynamics with actors outside the civil society sphere. In other words, associations are *permeable* to interactions, and civil society ultimately emerges as the by-product of relational dynamics. Associations can be spaces of militancy, arms of the state used to implement public policies or agents of development under the normative influence of international donors. However, they can also be vehicles used by urban elites, political groups, or entire classes to gain entry to politics.

This book shows that adapting local associations to a neoliberal civil society paradigm has a *political function*. In other words, the professionalization of local associations is an effect of a two-way power relationship: on the one hand, the consequence of pressure on the part of hegemonic actors, such as the international donors or the state, and on the other hand, the result of a formidable willingness to align on the part of the association's founders as a strategy to pursue their interests. Civic activism framed according to the acknowledged general rules of professionalization ultimately becomes a vehicle for emerging socio-political groups struggling for power in the context of significant political change. Overall, this volume shows the permeability of the post-authoritarian civil society sphere in which associations' contours are not set in stone but fluctuate according to the interactive dynamics among actors involved in the process of political change.

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Part I

Civil society in transition:

Recasting the arena of power relations

1 State–society relations before and after the Revolution

Abstract

This chapter brings to light the fundamental continuities and changes in state-society’s power relations in Tunisia from the years of French colonial domination until the revolution. The chapter is divided into two main sections. The first part describes in depth the mechanisms of co-optation of civil society actors under the authoritarian regimes of Habib Bourguiba (1956–1987) and Zine-El Abidine Ben Ali (1987–2011), highlighting the role of associations as tools of state control over Tunisian society. The second part highlights the main legal transformations introduced after 2011 that made it easier for new associations to register legally. The rise of thousands of social solidarity and development associations went hand in hand with the state’s continued disengagement from the socioeconomic sphere.

Keywords: authoritarian regime, associations, development, co-optation, revolution

1.1 From colonial control to authoritarian assimilation: a history of Tunisian civil society

Associational life in Tunisia pre-dates the 2011 revolution. Indeed, associations began to spring up during the French colonial period, under the purview of local regulations (Decree-law 1888) and the French law of 1901 (later transcribed into the local decree-law of 1936), which defined an association as “the convention by which two or many people permanently share their knowledge or activities for a purpose other than to share profits.”¹ According to some estimates, in 1937, Tunisia counted 149 local associations

1 Text of the French law of 1901 on the regulation of the associational contract. <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/LEGITEXT000006069570/>

against 1,714 founded by French settlers or officials (Belaid 2009). Tunisian associations were mostly literary, cultural, and student circles and charities. These various manifestations of collective action played a crucial role in constructing national awareness and the Tunisian Arab Muslim identity (Ben Achour 2011). The local scouting movement was a particularly active, if unlikely, player in the struggle for national independence (Belaid 2004).²

The associational system was one of the main areas of intervention of the colonial state, which introduced a jurisdiction inspired by the one prevailing in the metropolis yet adapted to local conditions. Several decrees regulating associations and youth movements were promulgated during the colonial period. The colonial administration promulgated the first decree-law on associations on September 15, 1888, incorporating some articles from the French penal code of 1810, in particular Article 291, which gave the colonial authorities broad discretion as to whether they would grant a permit or not. Another decree-law promulgated on August 6, 1936, reproduced the main provisions of the French law of 1901 on associations, yet with some adaptation to the local context: the administrative authorization was replaced by the introduction of permission related to the specific vocation of the association. However, despite a more flexible procedure, the 1936 Decree-law covered only 'ordinary' associations, which were treated separately from religious associations and continued governed by the 1888 Decree-law.

Under Bourguiba's regime, the associations of the alumni of Sadiki's College³ and the association of Young Tunisians contributed to reinforcing the regime's propaganda based on the grand narrative of an independent Tunisia, along with the newspaper *Al-Hâdhira* and the hegemonic party Neo-Destour.⁴ The Tunisian associational movement was born at the beginning of the twentieth century, between 1905 and 1913, when a range of kinship groups, mutual and charitable societies, musical and sports clubs, theatrical

2 Certainly, proto-associational groups also existed in the pre-colonial period. However, the word "association" (*jam'ia*) in Arabic can also be understood as "society" or as an "institution"; indeed, the *Jam'ia* did not fall under the category of association but was instead considered an administrative organization managing religious properties.

3 The Sadiki College, also known as Collège Sadiki is a *lycée* (high school) based in Tunis. It was established in 1875. Associations formed by its alumni played a major role in the early constitutionalist movement in the country. Noted alumni include Habib Bourguiba (1956–1987), the first president of the Tunisian Republic after the independence.

4 The New Constitutional Liberal Party, better known as Neo-Destour, was a Tunisian political party founded in 1934 by a group of Tunisian nationalist politicians during the French protectorate. It originated from a split with the Destour party. Led by Habib Bourguiba, Neo-Destour became the ruling party after Tunisia's independence in 1956. In 1964 it was renamed the Destourian Socialist Party.

companies, and Jewish and European (especially French) community groups sprung up. In 1907, Tunisians founded a mutual aid society, the 'Amicale de Prévoyance Tunisienne.' Mutualism, combined with the strike movement of 1904, led mainly by Italian expatriate workers, prepared the ground for the birth of trade unionism in Tunisia, officially recognized only in 1932. Indeed, long assimilated by the colonial administration of secret societies, associations became suspected entities due to their role in awakening the national consciousness.

During the interwar years, other associations emerged, such as sports clubs, cultural, leisure, veterans, and women's associations, especially youth groups, like the Scouts and the 'Young Muslims.' During the 1940s, the social and geographical diffusion of the Tunisian associational movement was marked by an increased 'Tunisification,' parallel to the trade union movement represented by the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) which in 1944 broke away from the French trade union, the CGT. The organization of the associational movement in the form of a 'national union' was driven by the struggle for independence. Indeed, as professional organizations, the trade unions were corralled in a strategy of the Neo-Destour party to mobilize the entire population against colonization (Moore 1965). Thus, during the 1950s, most Tunisian associations engaged in the national liberation struggle.

In 1956 the Neo-Destour the UGTT and the UTICA (Union Tunisienne de l'Industrie, du Commerce et de l'Artisanat) formed the National Front ahead of elections for the National Constituent Assembly (NCA). Bourguiba became Prime Minister and President of the Council of the new constitutional monarchy and concurrently held the positions of Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of National Defense. The NCA abolished the monarchy, which was replaced with a presidential republic. Bourguiba became the first president. If the government first opted for a liberal policy orientation toward the economy, then gradually applied the economic program of the UGTT by implementing the 'collectivization' of arable lands. During the 1960s, the regime adopted socialism wholesale (in 1963, the Neo-Destour party renamed itself the Destourian Socialist Party). The establishment of a single-party regime signaled the end of the pluralist system and sounded the death knell for the associational heterogeneity that had characterized the colonial period. Indeed, the room for associations to maneuver diminished steadily. The very few associations were exploited as vectors of the regime's propaganda. Contrarily to other countries in the Arab world, the limited literature on Tunisian civil society during this period might be partially explained by the total absence of an independent associational sphere worthy of study.

Associational life based on voluntary membership and autonomous action began to clash with the regime's objectives. Tunisian independence and nation-state building led Bourguiba to place the entire association movement under constant state control. Through various measures, Bourguiba brought the pluralism of the associational activity to a conclusive end. Indeed, between 1956 and 1963, the associational landscape was definitively recast under the label of 'National Unions,' which gave birth to the corporatist state (Redissi 2007). Workers' unions, scouting associations, women's societies, youth groups, and sports clubs were grouped into confederations and subjected to state nomenclature and discipline. These confederate bodies—which were cast as 'pillars of the state'—included unions for workers (UGTT), industrialists and traders (UTICA), farmers (UNAT), women (UNFT), youth (UTOJ), and students (UGET). Bourguiba's modernization policy placed religious schools and charities under state control.⁵ Moreover, centuries old Zaytounian religious associations were disbanded.⁶ With the first law on associations (Law No. 154 of November 7, 1959), trade unions, scout movements, sports clubs, and other representations of interests were officially brought under the capillary control of the state, becoming the arms of its power. Legislation shaped the way civil society is allowed to operate.

In legal terms, the 1936 Decree-law remained in force until November 7, 1959, the date of the promulgation of the new law. The latter's provisions regarding public freedom were much more restrictive than the Tunisian Constitution adopted in 1958. The adoption of this law did not give rise to a public debate, contrary to what had been the case with the constitutional regime in 1955. Indeed, this law mainly served to end the activities of foreign associations, especially French associations, and to marginalize the

5 Soon after achieving power in 1956, Habib Bourguiba adopted sweeping reforms based upon strong anticlerical accents. In particular, he directly opposed the traditional religious apparatus and implemented measures conceived to reduce its influence over society. The state absorbed into the judicial system the *sharia* courts and nationalized private *awaqfs* (religious charities) and *zawiyas* (religious schools). In this way, the financial resources of the religious apparatus became considerably limited, and the latter became economically dependent on the state. Bourguiba also decreed Tunisia's family code, known as the most modern code in the Arab world. It abolishes polygamy, requires mutual consent before marriage, entitles women to start divorce proceedings and to enjoy an equal division of goods after divorce, forbids husbands from unilaterally ending their marriages, and raises the minimum marriage age for girls. In 1966, a family-planning programme that included free birth-control pills and legal abortion was launched.

6 These were religious associations established in the period of the Grand Mosque of El-Zaytouna, the oldest in Tunisia, founded in AD 737 and known to host one of the first and most outstanding universities in the history of Islam.

communist groups, which were tolerated until 1963, when the Tunisian Communist Party (Parti Comuniste Tunisien, PCT) was outlawed (Belaid 2004). In its articulation with the Constitution of June 1, 1959, the new law on associations completed the regime's political strategy. Indeed, the so-called dualist regime of constitutional guarantee and legislative planning of civil liberties was embodied in the interdependence between the constitution and the law while adjusting to the project of the national party-state. Thus, while recognizing freedom of opinion, expression, the press, assembly, and association, the constitution contemporaneously subjected its exercise to the conditions defined by the law (Article 8). This provision was at the origin of the 'normalization' of legislative restrictions on the freedom of associations (Ben Achour 2011).

The authoritarian corporatist system set up under Bourguiba started to decline at the end of the 1970s, with several attempted insurrections and protest movements foiled by the army and the rise of a leftist opposition and the Islamist movement. On the one hand, the multiplication of strikes in grassroots trade unions pushed the UGTT leadership to adopt a logic of contention contrary to its stated mission to represent workers' interests as defined by the state. At the end of the 1970s, the trade union organization became "the space of refuge and leadership of those forces opposed to power" (Zghal 1998: 10). On the other hand, a loosely organized opposition emerged in the form of political movements, non-legalized parties, and associations. The first such stirrings arose on university campuses in the 1960s in the form of a Marxist-Leninist leftist movement headed by the Tunisian Study and Socialist Action Group or GEAST (also called *Perspectives*, the name of its magazine), which challenged the regime's "illegitimate" claim to represent the values of progress, development, and equality (Ayari 2009).

Around the same period, Jamâ'a al-Islamiyya (the Islamic Association) began to gain strength. As elsewhere in the Arab Muslim world, political Islam in Tunisia emerged after the failure of the pan-Arab socialist project and the defeat of the United Arab forces against Israel in 1967 (Hermassi 1984). In the early 1970s, Bourguiba's regime took note of the resurgence of Islamic values within Tunisian society. In 1967, the government established the Qur'an Safeguarding Association, a parastatal structure whose mission was to train Qur'an readers and promote religious education in secondary schools. Jamâ'a al-Islamiyya was born as an alternative movement to the religious schools created by the state. Jamâ'a quickly established a presence in the country's mosques, where the group organized discussion circles and sermons. The first sprouts of Islamist political socialization and doctrinal formation sprung within these groups (Burgat 1988; 2002). During the 1970s,

the regime adopted a posture of studied caution toward the Islamist groups, seeing them as a counterweight to the influence of the extreme left among young Tunisians. In August 1979, Jamâ'a was rebadged as the Movement of the Islamic Tendency (MIT) (in Arabic *Harakat Ittijah al-Islami*) and continued to recruit young students and graduates into its ranks.

Furthermore, the recognition of the LTDH (League Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme) stemmed from a "compromise without risks" (Chouikha and Gobe 2009) between the representatives of power and the circles of the liberal opposition. A group of liberals set up a committee for freedom which launched an appeal in April 1977 signed by 528 intellectuals and members of the liberal professions (academics, doctors, lawyers, and the like) to establish a conference to discuss civil and human rights (Chouikha and Gobe 2009). The League made a point of inviting foreign observers, including American politicians, to the Conference. Although the authorities banned the conference, its announcement created a new balance of power between the liberals and the government. Conscious of the international impact of this appeal, Interior Minister Tahar Belkhodja (1973–1977) informed the liberal group that the LTDH could have legal existence only if it could count on seven members from the PSD (*Parti Socialiste Destourien*) to agree on the first committee director. The LTDH gradually positioned itself as the interlocutor *sine qua non* between the authorities and the other political forces, strengthening to a great degree Tunisia's credibility in the human rights space. In the absence of the legal status of opposition parties, the League positioned itself, after the UGTT, as both an exemplar and the main arena of the country's pluralism. Indeed, while tightly regulating which actors were allowed 'in' and kept 'out,' the liberals did permit a range of political currents crossing Tunisian society to express themselves.

Two events—the "black Thursday" of 1978 and the "coup of Gafsa" of 1980—alongside the steady growth of the Islamic movement, pushed Bourguiba to accept a degree of political pluralism, albeit with the state firmly in control (Camau and Geisser 2004). Four months after its XIth Congress, on June 18, 1981, the Council of Ministers published official criteria for the legal recognition of political parties. It also announced that parliamentary elections would be held no later than November 1, 1981, and invited all opposition parties to participate through independent lists. The (glaring) exception was the PCT. While Bourguiba lifted the 1963 ban in July 1981, the party was still prohibited from electoral participation.

With these liberalizing moves, Bourguiba opened the political field to recognize political groups, according to his sense of what was at stake politically at that moment. Against the backdrop of this opening, the notion of civil

society as an array of voluntary organizations independent from the state first emerged in Tunisia. Indeed, as detailed above, the single-party order had recognized ‘collectives’ but had systematically excluded militant groups and favored only pliant organizations that lacked any will or capacity to undertake independent initiatives and were used to mobilizing around slogans dictated by the authorities. Ultimately, the regime bargained that the risk of a military coup would only grow if steps were not taken to widen the group of social organizations permitted to form and express themselves within the system, thinking it best to bring as many of those as possible “inside the tent,” to paraphrase President L. Johnson’s colorful quote about J. Edgar Hoover. In the end, the reforms were a kind of ‘release valve’ to release pent-up pressure. The regime saw the move to introduce multiparty politics as necessary to ensure it could continue to hold its grip on power (Zghal 1989: 209).

When Zine El Abidine Ben Ali took over in 1987, the first openings of his regime triggered an ‘associational flourishing’. Between 1987 and 1990, the number of associations increased from 1,976 to 4,821 entities, an increase of 144% (Desmères 2001: 7). They continued to grow annually, numbering 9,517 by 2010, according to data from the Center for Information, Training, Study, and Documentation on Associations (IFEDA)—a non-administrative public institution created in 2000 under the supervision of the Prime Ministry. Based on the criteria established by the Tunisian law, there were 5,988 cultural and artistic associations; 1,270 sports associations; 592 development associations; 478 scientific associations; 474 charities; 123 general associations; and 22 women’s associations. As Hibou has remarked:

These quantitative data must be taken with the utmost precaution since it is difficult to know what they do, as this figure is politically constructed. The functional character assigned by the authorities to the associations suggests that they are primarily an extension of the administration and a management structure. It is estimated that at least 5,000 of these NGOs are linked to the Ministry of the Interior or the party and are mainly confined to what is considered harmless and festive: more than 80% of these associations are cultural, artistic, and sporting, 69% for the first, 13.4% for the others. (Hibou 2006: 113).

Indeed, according to Ben Achour, these figures overlook one of the main cleavages crossing Tunisian civil society “between satellite organizations of political power and beneficiaries of its favors and non-governmental associations, which are the systematic object of the repression” (Ben Achour 2011: 298). According to Ben Néfissa (1992), the cleavage is generally reflected

in Arab civil society between service associations subject to regime control and advocacy associations, which do politics through the associational form. Islamic religious associations are the third type commonly found in the Arab world. Nevertheless, unlike other countries such as Egypt, in Tunisia, these associations, which were part of the Islamic movement during the 1980s, were eradicated during the repression of the 1990s or brought fully into the state apparatus. Consequently, the reality of civil society in Tunisia was ambivalent, as its components constantly oscillated between a genuine construction of citizenship and dynamics of co-optation led by the regime.

Associations were governed by many laws and regulations and were subject to various complex legal regimes that institutionalized civil society and allowed the public administration of social bonds. The Associations Act was amended twice, in 1988 and 1992. These amendments dealt mainly with introducing a declarative system (an official declaration was sufficient to create an association, pending the approval of national authorities) and the prohibition of refusal to apply for membership. The organic law No. 88–90 of August 2, 1988, was introduced to update the law of November 7, 1959. The new law's wording appeared to loosen rules and make associational life easier while retaining the discretionary power of the Ministry of the Interior to authorize and dissolve associations. The significant change it introduced was in Article 5, according to which:

The Minister of the Interior may, before the expiration of three months from the date of the declaration [of creation of the association], decide not to give his approval. The decision must be reasoned and notified to the parties concerned. (Ben Achour 2011: 300).

As noted above, however, the cosmetic changes introduced in the 1988 law belied the way it continued to entrench state discretion, not least the language permitting members and leaders of associations to be prosecuted for any breaches of current regulations, incurring a term of imprisonment of up to 6 months.

A further modification of the regulatory framework of associational life was made by Law No. 25 of April 2, 1992, which was presented by authorities as being more liberal. Nevertheless, the legislator added to the first article of the Law No. 154 of November 7, 1959, the fact that associations must henceforth be:

Subject, according to their activities and purpose, to the following classification: women's associations, sports associations, scientific associations,

cultural and artistic associations, charitable, relief and social associations, development associations, and associations of a general character. (Ben Achour 2011: 300).

This imposed categorization of associational action limited the latter's development to the extent that they were forced to function according to frameworks and mandates predefined by the authorities. No single entity could pursue multiple missions and change from one official status to another was complex, cumbersome, and subject to regulatory discretion. Furthermore, according to Section 2 of the Law of November 7, 1959, associations undertaking activities beyond the official mission could be dissolved. Finally, the 1992 law prohibited the so-called 'general' associations from refusing membership to any applicant showing commitment to its founding principles. The same law, which had a retroactive effect, introduced (for the first time) a prohibition against persons in leadership positions in political parties from simultaneously holding executive power in any registered association.

Civil society as a discourse of power and the exclusion of challengers

If the debate on civil society in Tunisia corresponded to the crisis of the authoritarian corporatist model, it was, above all, following the inception of Ben Ali's regime in 1987 that the term civil society was imposed in the speeches of all political actors, claiming pluralism, the autonomy of the partisan organizations, trade unions, and associations vis-à-vis the state. Moreover, the question was linked to the collapse of the single-party regime and its political resources: the intervention of the army during the crises of the 1980s endangered the only civilian regime in the Arab world. In this context, 'civilian' is opposed to 'military.'

However, beyond the liberals, the Tunisian opposition did not take up the notion of civil society since it is considered too closely tied to Western or bourgeois culture. Subsequently, the term was used in the 1988 National Pact, which recognized political parties and social and professional organizations as the foundation of civil society (Zghal 1989). As all political forces, including Islamists, signed the National Pact, the term civil society became a structuring notion of Tunisian political discourse. This idea of civil society continued to be diffused until the 1989 municipal elections when the successes of the Ennahda party made the Islamists the main threat to both the leftist opposition parties and the ruling party. The final nail in the coffin of the more inclusive idea of civil society fell in 1991 with the attack on the

Bab Souika headquarters of the ruling RCD party. It was widely interpreted as an Islamist conspiracy against Ben Ali.⁷ In this situation, the notion of civil society took on a new meaning:

It was no longer the totality of the separate organizations of the state, regardless of their ideological orientation, but more precisely, the parties and associations that shared the same values vis-à-vis human rights and individual freedoms. Therefore, by denying its agreement to the principles of the National Covenant, the Ennahda party not only excluded itself from civil society but became the main threat to civil society in the making. (Zghal 1989: 211).

While, as mentioned, the term ‘civilian’ was initially opposed to that of ‘military’ in the context of safeguarding the foundations of the republic, it was later opposed to ‘religion.’ This political shift had a twofold function: to claim that the government was expanding the protection of civil liberties and denouncing political adversaries to justify the repression. Therefore, the regime seized the theme of civil society to legitimize its discourses and practices.

Indeed, during the 1990s and 2000s use of the term ‘civil society’ in official political discourses expanded dramatically. The term began to appear in almost every public speech by government officials, aiming to cement the idea that the regime supported and welcomed “civil society” and that this space was flourishing in Tunisia. To this end, in 1993, the regime established an annual ‘National Day of Associations’ on April 23, which included presidential awards for outstanding associations and their members. This celebration was accompanied by a genuine interest in research and analysis of associational activities. In 1990, the regime established the Center of Research, Study, Documentation, and Information on Women (CREDIF) and, in the year 2000, the IFEDA, as mentioned above (Desmères 2001).

In Ben Ali’s public discourses, civil society was instrumentally used as functional to the process of democratization of the country and its development. Moreover, it was also charged with preserving the Tunisian identity in that explicit links were drawn with the role of mass movements in confronting the French colonial regime and the struggle for independence. Thus, ‘civil society’ was presented as essential to the political and economic development of Tunisia, guided by the principle of ‘national sovereignty,’

7 The RCD was the quasi-hegemonic party under Ben Ali’s authoritarian regime.

or, in other words, the 'steady hand' of the Ben Ali regime. Finally, in a 2008 speech, he reaffirmed these principles:

We have established our policy on the correlation between development, democracy, and human rights. We have also ensured the participation of all parties, organizations, and components of civil society in all matters that affect our society and our country. And we will continue to work to devote ourselves to this approach and expand the areas based on respect for our national identity and the primacy of the interest of our people.⁸

In his presidential speech on November 12, 2009, Ben Ali noted: "We count on the adherence of all Tunisians, especially constitutional institutions, national political parties, organizations and councils, and components of civil society to our program for the future."⁹

The second feature of the regime's public speeches was to underscore how essential civil society was in a context characterized by a redefinition of the state's role and competences according to the neoliberal agenda. According to this view, associations needed to take on board values such as rationality, efficiency, and innovation (Hermassi 1996: 7). Civil society, therefore, was 'necessary' to "deepen Tunisian modernity" (Desmères 2001: 12). Thus, these discourses served to create an official representation of the Tunisian civil society and to legitimize the Tunisian government vis-à-vis international partners based on the Tunisian "civilizational project" (Desmères 2001: 12).

The regime's image of associational life was highly circumscribed, defined by a set of powerful legislative and coercive mechanisms designed to guarantee state control. In practice, this provided no room for horizontal linkages to develop among associations. Some authors describe this as a policy of encirclement, in which civil society voices were muted almost to silence and action confined to narrow private circles (Redissi 2007). This constriction of associational and political space reduced an association's field of activity to such an extent that it was little more than a club with no public beyond its members. In those cases where the regime could not isolate the association, it could interfere with its electoral process, according to the law of 1992, which obliged the associations of 'general character' to accept any membership request.

8 Presidential speech on the 21st anniversary of Ben Ali's election. Retrieved from: <http://www.businessnews.com.tn/discours-integral-du-president-ben-ali-a-loccasion-du-xxieme-anniversaire-du-7-novembre,525,17028,1>.

9 Presidential speech of November 12, 2009. Retrieved from: <https://www.babnet.net/kiwidetail-18094.asp>.

The Tunisian League of Human Rights (LTDH) case is emblematic. Created in 1978 with the consent of Bourguiba, who wanted to legitimize the regime vis-à-vis the growing protest movement, the LTDH filled the entire country with its national structures and locals. At first, its members came from a split in the PSD. Subsequently, the organization managed to cover a wide range of Tunisian political currents, including a 'progressist' Islamist current that was not part of the Islamist Movement of Islamic Tendency (MIT). The League thus became a *space of political substitution* (Chouikha and Gobe 2009), or a *surrogate political arena*, offering both a space for militant reconversion for people involved in political parties and an opportunity for multi-positioning for its members, reaching a hybrid form between political party and advocacy association. Indeed, the law of 1992 implicitly referred to the LTDH. Indeed, under the penalty of a fine, the organization was obliged to include any person wishing to join the organization based on a simple declaration of adherence to the organization's values. Moreover, the leaders of the associations could no longer have any responsibility within political parties.

A compromise on this point was reached between the Congress of 1994 and the one held in 2000, in the context of an extension of the policy of repression against political Islam and the extreme left parties, which reflected control of any disputed space. However, since the Congress held in 2000, the League began a confrontation with the regime. Thus, the organization was targeted by a policy of domestication. Hibou has analyzed the 'confinement' strategy directed at the LTDH, which consisted of "preventing or disrupting meetings, harassing or physically attacking activists, encircling meeting places, forcing locals, summoning officials to the Ministry of the Interior, organizing tendentious and defamatory media campaigns, taking legal actions, blocking bank accounts and foreign funding" (Hibou 2006: 117). In addition to these mechanisms featuring a violent repertoire of action, the regime used both financial bias and judicial recourse to paralyze the functioning of the League. In 2002, the state confiscated the LTDH's funding granted by the European Commission. In parallel with coercive financial instruments, notices of indictment and judicial intervention affected association members and were locked. They blocked their decisions by preventing the holding of national congresses until the fall of the regime.

Associations as agents of public policy: liberalization, globalization, and subsidiarity

Set against a backdrop of five decades of persistent authoritarian rule, the rise of associations must be interpreted not only as a bid to open the space

of political freedom but also as a move to question and even challenge the power of the Tunisian state. Since the 1970s, Tunisia has followed a path of development centered on the market economy, underscoring a transition from “the social treatment of the economy to the economic treatment of the social,” now oriented toward the creation of jobs and support for economic activities (Destremau 2009: 133). In the 1980s, under external pressure, neoliberal policy prescriptions moved to the center ground, with a stabilization policy announced in 1983 and an SAP in 1986 under the aegis of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). This led to a new era of social policy. Fiscal austerity constrained social spending, and a significant target of this was the Caisse Générale de Compensation, created in 1967 to subsidize basic consumer goods. When budget cuts began to bite in 1984, ‘bread riots’ gave the regime pause, and a new social policy was put in place to limit the social impact of the most stringent spending cuts.

The state revitalized the social security system through horizontal transfers of social benefits that tended to substitute for vertical transfers. Thus, social associations were created between 1987 and 2009, and their founders generally came from the civil service and the RCD (Tainturier 2017). Their mandate focused on promoting and social protection of women, children, the elderly, and those with disabilities. These categories of the population were those defined by the state as non-contributory under an insurance system of protection by contribution. The development of social action by the state through the associations was designed to *target state spending* to those deemed most in need and replaced the general system of assistance that applied to the whole population (Guelmani 1996).

The Tunisian Union of Social Solidarity (UTSS), with its network of local associations (the Regional Social Solidarity Committees in each governorate and the Local Social Solidarity Committees in each delegation), was tasked with the distribution of state aid. The UTSS had a hybrid nature as it was placed under the supervision of the Ministry of Social Affairs, yet it was also registered as an association. Another social assistance mechanism was the National Solidarity Fund, created to fight poverty and socioeconomic exclusion through national social solidarity. This was also known colloquially as ‘26.26,’ the presidential account number into which citizens could deposit donations. It operated on a territorial basis in the so-called ‘shadow zones,’ namely those zones considered the most marginalized of the country.

Like social action associations, development associations were integrated into the state’s assistance policy, which included regional development programs (Destremau 2009). Nevertheless, while the integration of social action associations was achieved through the supervision of the Ministry

of Social Affairs, development associations were under the control of international aid and development agencies. To break with an interventionist policy of assistance, the state decided to shift from solidarity action toward an 'economic integration approach,' giving priority to solidarity through micro-credit for creating activities and microenterprises.

Tunisia's first development associations were created mainly in the 1970s and at the end of the 1980s by former ministerial staff, usually from the Ministry of Planning, but also by former scientists and university professors (Tainturier 2017). This was the case with the 'Association pour la Promotion de l'Emploi et du Logement' (APEL) founded in 1972, the 'Association de Soutien à l'Auto Développement' (ASAD), founded in 1988 by a Dutch cooperation project responding to the floods of 1982, and of the 'Appui aux Initiatives de Développement' (AID) founded by former members of ASAD in 1998. In the early 1990s, the state provided training programs to upgrade these associations based on the management capacities required by international donors. The first training programs were carried out by Tunisia's central bank, which testified to the importance accorded by the Tunisian state to international development funds as a source of foreign exchange. Subsequently, a specific organization dedicated to developing the associational system—the IFEDA center—was created and placed under the supervision of the Prime Minister.

The Tunisian Solidarity Bank (BTS) was created in 1997. Its primary objective was to help economic and social integration and improve the living conditions of low-income social groups. The Tunisian state intended to invest in the associational field by popularizing micro-credit through the bank. Thus, from 1999 onwards, development associations were created in all the country's delegations as relays of BTS, which could grant micro-credits with a low-interest rate. These associations worked as intermediaries between the BTS and the beneficiaries and were responsible for monitoring and recovering loans. They acted as part of a territorial extension of the public system and in a subcontracting relationship with the BTS. During the first decade of the 2000s, the BTS network of development associations fully embodied the characteristics related to the neoliberal paradigm of civil society by adopting the standards imported by globalization and the new organization of public action based on 'subsidiarity,' according to which an associational and territorial actor was better able to repair social problems.

The rise of associations should also be interpreted in light of the constraints of Tunisia's accession to international agreements, which meant it had to comply with governance and civil society participation standards. Within these constraints, the Tunisian state acted not only in a logic of

capturing funds for international cooperation but also in a logic of legitimization by adopting the principles of civil society participation. The first step came with the SAP in 1986 under the aegis of the IMF and the World Bank following a severe crisis of economic growth, employment, and foreign debt. It is within this framework that, since the 1990s, the World Bank's funding programs have increasingly introduced in Tunisia the notion of 'good governance,' thus calling for reforms at an administrative level and concerning measures of transparency in public management, decentralization, and participation of civil society in the development and monitoring of public policies.

In addition, Tunisia participated in the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 and agreed to follow the recommendations of the Rio Charter. The issue of sustainable development became a theme to guide public policies at the level of the fight against terrorism and poverty and to preserve the environment. A "national action program for the environment and sustainable development (Agenda 21)" was elaborated in 1995 to "promote an integral mode of development, based on social equity and the guarantee of the well-being of each one in a healthy and preserved environment" (Tainturier 2017: 87).

Another international source of standards related to civil society was the strengthening partnership between Tunisia and the EU. Tunisia signed an Association Agreement with the EU in 1995. Subsequently, several cooperation programs became part of a multilateral and regional framework defined by the EU's external relations policy. These are the MEDA I and MEDA II programs in the framework of the Euromed partnership between 1995 and 2004 and several cooperation instruments under the External Neighborhood Policy from 2005 to 2011 (Chiriatti and Sigillò 2019). MEDA's main priority was to support the economic transition of Mediterranean countries and create a Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Area. It also aimed at strengthening democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and sustainable socioeconomic development through civil society participation.

The second cooperation program under the new External Neighborhood Policy (ENP) was developed in 2004. It reaffirmed that this policy sets ambitious objectives based on the mutual recognition of shared values, including democracy, the rule of law, good governance and respect for human rights, the principles of a market economy, free trade, sustainable development, and poverty reduction and strengthening political, economic, social, and institutional reforms. Among the ENP priorities to achieve these objectives is the "reinforcement of the key role of civil society."¹⁰

10 See: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-neighbourhood-policy_en

Associations as power tool: clientelism and control practices

Economic liberalization, the import of international standards, the logic of subsidiarity, and the redefinition of the state's role and position did not mean a withdrawal of the state from its controlling action. According to Hibou's definition, the Tunisian state is 'privatized' in the sense of "the spread of the use of private intermediaries for a growing number of functions previously devolved to the state and its redeployment" (Hibou 1998: 153). It is not a question of simple dynamics of outsourcing public action to new actors but rather the 'private' use of state machinery by individuals, groups, or organizations. Indeed, the privatization of the state is "less the fruit of the strategy of the latter to survive or consolidate, than the fruit of many actors and multiple logics of action" (Hibou 1999: 12). In this context, the leading actor in the privatization of the state was the ruling RCD party, omnipresent through thousands of cells distributed throughout the territory, 7,500 local cells, and 2,200 professional cells (Hibou 2006: 101). As such, the RCD had no way to allocate resources; nevertheless, it acted as an intermediary, notably through associations and governmental solidarity mechanisms (such as the *Fond de Solidarité National*).

The RCD acted by creating satellite associations or co-opting existing associations into clientelist networks. As a matter of fact, in most cases, these were associations that had not received an official mandate, and which therefore were not formally integrated into the parastatal machine. The strength of the RCD lies in its ability to federate the actions of these organizations and to recover them when they had innovative projects when they attracted individuals or were potentially subversive, in any case, to reorient them for its benefit. The functional character assigned by the authorities to the associations suggests that they were an extension of the administration and a framing structure. In 1993, the state set up associations' control bodies: the 'Commission du financement de l'activité associational,' the 'Commission de l'action associative et des enjeux de l'ère nouvelle' the 'Commission des réalités et perspectives de l'action associational en Tunisie,' and the 'Commission du rôle des associations dans l'œuvre de développement.'

Hibou analyzed these associations as part of a diffuse framework of supervision and surveillance of the population from the bottom. Thus, the associations were integrated into power relations, ensuring the regime's hegemony:

Not leaving any space empty, structuring it according to its concerns, its vision of the territory, occupying a space as soon as a new demand,

a new need, a unique expression emerged. In addition, the association's subjection made possible the associational members' control procedures (Hibou 2006: 114–115).

Another function of supervision was to discipline the population:

Associations spread the objectives, the ideas, the fears, the concerns, and the priorities of the moment throughout society. They participate in realizing social policies, accompanying, or substituting the state, in a classical perspective widely shared by international donors. Moreover, they also have the mission to directly support the liberalization, to improve the competitiveness policy of the Tunisian authorities by trying to shape behaviors and conditioning the economic reflexes of individuals. Their mission is also to channel personal dynamism, co-opt and direct individual energies, hunt down and denounce people deviating from this policy, and encourage and congratulate people accomplishing results. (Hibou 2006: 115)

Beyond the control mechanisms, the RCD exploited associations for clientelistic purposes. It included social action associations, such as UTSS, and development associations granting the population micro-credits.

Concerning social assistance, the provisional lists of beneficiaries were established at a local level, with the active participation of the party's cells. After that, they were finalized at a regional level, with the involvement of the regional secretaries of the party as well. Whether party representatives were present or absent was of little importance, as there was a total overlap between local and regional authorities and party structures (Ben Romdhane 2011). Beyond this policy of monetary support, specific assistance programs for the same population groups were designed and funded by the Ministry of Social Affairs and implemented by the associations through a network of institutions of social action for all 'categories with special needs.' These correspond to 17 centers of protection and social integration, two counseling centers, a social center for observation of delinquent children, 295 special education, rehabilitation, and vocational training centers for disabled people, three shelters for disabled people without family support, 12 living units for children without family support (Tainturier 2017: 107). Part of these structures was placed directly under the Ministry's supervision, yet they invited partner associations to organize activities in partnership. Associations funded by the Ministry entirely managed another part.

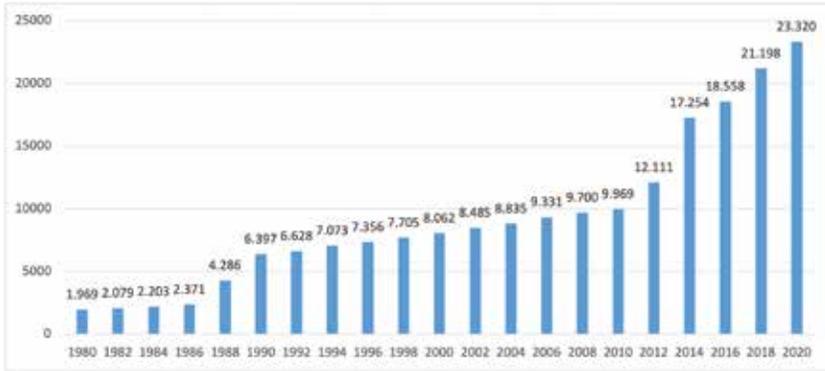
The micro-credit strategy was devised to offer top-down assistance amidst the social crisis. According to Laroussi, the reforms implemented based on the Structural Adjustment Program had created unforeseen effects that affected some low-income social groups and undermined the social structure: this prompted the state to construct a political discourse open to international requirements of good governance and support for civil society (Laroussi 2009). Furthermore, by establishing a network of development associations providing micro-credits as intermediaries of the BTS, the state created actors with significant financial resources to cover all sensitive areas without the need to work with international NGOs. Indeed, “the conditions were much less restrictive with BTS than with international NGOs that imposed certain guarantees according to the selection of beneficiaries” (Laroussi 2009: 130). This allowed both the intervention and intermediation of the RCD regarding recipients of loans and renegotiations of repayments, which often turned a loan into consumer credit.

According to Ben Romdhane (2011), clientelism was a systematized practice in Tunisia during the nineties. It corresponded to a new requirement: the need to exercise control over populations and neighborhoods that became inaccessible. The targets of the clientelist system consisted of all the individuals and groups ‘at the margins,’ in other words, the poorest strata of the population: this system was their condition of access to central institutions. Therefore, support for the creation and participation of associations in delivering state aid was intended as an effort to perpetuate the legitimacy of the authoritarian regime. In particular, the main goal was to counter the influence of political Islam working in social actions through mosques or, in other countries, through charitable associations.

1.2 The democratic flourishing and a new legal framework for the associational sphere

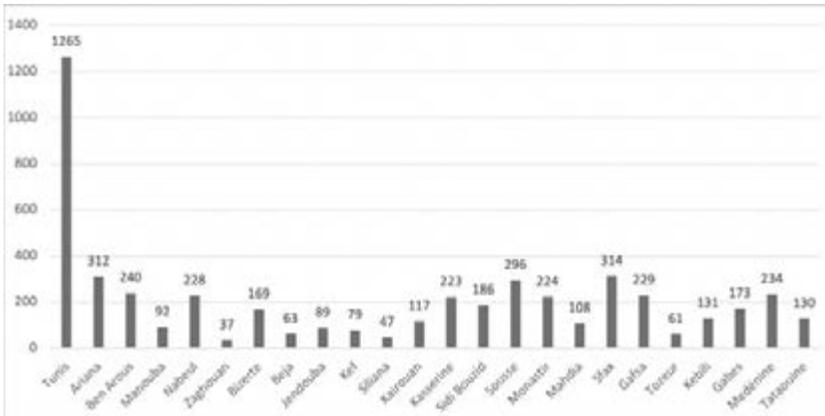
Thanks to Decree-law No. 88 of September 24, 2011, allowing the simplification of the administrative arrangements for the creation of associations, Tunisia registered the result of nearly 2,000 new associations, of which about 700 were after the elections of October 23, 2012, while it counted 9,600 in 2010 (IFEDA database). The promulgation of the decree-law reflected a radical change from the past law on November 7, 1959. Indeed, by replacing the Ministry of the Interior with the General Secretariat of the Government as the authority responsible for creating an association, the new law brought

Figure 2 Number of associations in Tunisia



Source: Author’s elaboration based on data from the IFEDA database.

Figure 3 Associations by governorate



Source: IFEDA. Data from 2013

systematic coercive practices mainly to an end. The new law eliminated the permit application requirement and the waiting period by establishing the simple declaration principle as the basis for the association’s existence. The publication in the Official Journal of the Tunisian Republic, which makes the association’s legal presence effective, must be made after receiving the return receipt of the registered letter accompanying the application. Failure to return the return receipt of the registered letter within 30 days of submission of the application shall constitute proof of receipt. About the operation of associations, no classification is now required—in terms of

areas of activity—no limitation on the scope of action is introduced, and membership criteria are now determined solely by the association.¹¹

Table 2 Associations by activity sector (2011–2013)

Sector of activity	Number	%
Social	1,140	22.59%
Cultural	1,027	20.35%
Development	943	18.68%
Science	498	9.87%
Citizenship	317	6.28%
Sport	283	5.61%
Friendship	272	5.39%
Human Rights	193	3.82%
Environment	171	3.39%
Women	68	1.35%
Youth	63	1.25%
Childhood	43	0.85%
Schools' Associations	29	0.57%

Source: Author's elaboration based on the IFEDA database.

Other important aspects concern the relation with politics. The new law maintains the exclusion of politicians in the governing bodies of associations. Still, now the association is fully entitled to express political opinions and take positions on public interest issues. Moreover, the new law allows foreigners to participate as ordinary or founding members. As for the coercive measures, the new law repeals all criminal and administrative sanctions against members in the event of non-compliance. In that case, the association can continue to exercise its activity until the court renders its judgment.

Finally, after 2011 it was much easier to obtain national and international funding. For subsidies from abroad, the law requires the association to publish the source, amount, and purpose of the financing in the official gazette and on its website within one month of the subsidy being requested and granted. Furthermore, unlike the previous law, where no provision required auditing, the new law mandates that an audit be commissioned if the association's annual budget exceeds 100 dinars (Hudáková 2021).

¹¹ Interestingly, the IFEDA database still categorizes associations by sectors of activity, applying an old system of classifications that do not reflect post-revolutionary trends.

Table 3 Provisions and changes of the law on associations before and after 2011

Law No. 154 of November 7, 1959	Law No. 88 of September 24, 2011
Declaration to the Ministry of the Interior (Governorate or Delegation)	Declaration to the General Secretariat of the Government.
The Ministry of the Interior reserves a period of 3 months to decide on the acceptance of the constitution of the association.	The Prime Ministry reserves 30 days to decide on the acceptance of the constitution of the association.
The law provides for eight categories of associations and limits their scope of intervention.	No classification and limitation of the scope of associations is foreseen.
Associations of a general nature may not refuse any application for membership, failing which they may be sued legally.	The association sets the membership criteria.
There is no age limit for founders and members.	Founding members must be at least 16 years of age; other members must be at least 13 years of age.
Implicitly, Tunisian associations can only be constituted by Tunisians (the national identity card is required as part of the application).	Associations may be constituted by Tunisians or residents in Tunisia.

Source: Compiled by the author.

1.3 The securitization of the associational system after 2013

The associational flourishing triggered by the renewed legal framework has generated new international opportunities through a massive penetration of international donors supporting civil society. The most significant novelty was the massive intervention of Islamic-based donors, which, until 2011, had very limited permission to enter the country (see Chapter 3). The widespread intervention of donors from Gulf countries generated suspicion among the secular strata of the Tunisian society, worried about the illicit funding of terrorist organizations in the country.

After the political assassinations of secular–leftist activists Chokri Belaïd and Mohamed Brahmi in February and July 2013, which generated a severe political crisis, the liberal legal framework targeting the post-revolutionary civil society was suspended. National authorities opened a new era of securitization with a ban on the Salafi–Jihadi Ansar al-Sharia movement and all associations suspected of being affiliated with the organization (Merone et al. 2021). After this time, controlling all religious activities became a high priority on the national authority’s security agendas. Notably, religious-based associations have been accused of being the main threat to the state’s security, causing the ‘Wahhabization’ of Tunisian society.

In January 2014, Ennahda was obliged to relinquish power to a technocratic government. Since the inception of the Jomaa government, police have carried out several operations targeting all religious-based associations to verify the legality of their activities. According to most people interviewed, accounting procedures were used as the primary mechanism of pressure and control, with many associations accused of hiding illicit funding linked to terrorist activities. As a result, they faced sanctions that could include suspension of activities for between one and three months, freezing of association assets, and even the definitive closure of the association. As reported by the president of a charitable association that was sanctioned, “the police come to the premises to check the papers. At first, it was hard because we did not have the necessary expertise, and they could attack us on everything. They froze the activities of the association for a month.”¹²

New legal measures undertaken have been justified by national authorities to overcome the deficiencies and loopholes of the 2011 decree-law.¹³ According to Ali Amira, in charge of the General Directorate for Political Parties and Associations between 2014 and 2017:

The decree-law on associations, enacted immediately after the revolution, is too vague since it gave too much freedom to all Tunisians wishing to create an association... We must better clarify certain aspects concerning associational life. Otherwise, we will lose control of illicit funding and associations' links with terrorist groups. This is a significant problem regarding religious associations.¹⁴

In 2014, 449 associations were sanctioned for failing to register the receipt of probable illicit foreign funding, 179 because their statute was not clear or breached the law (for example, charitable associations overstepped their legal regulation by teaching the Qur'an), and 236 associations were closed due to their links with terrorist groups.¹⁵

After the attacks in Tunis in March 2015, the attack on the seaside resort in the governorate of Sousse in July 2015, and the attacks by the Islamic State in the southern city of Ben Guerdane on the border with Libya in

12 Author's interview with the President of a charitable association in Sfax, January 2017.

13 After 2011, organisms regulating the control of associational activities were created under the new decree-law 88/2011: the General Directorate for Political Parties and Associations, a body linked to the Presidency of the Republic, which has a more technical role, and the Ministry for the Relations with Civil Society, which has a more political role.

14 Author's interview, July 2018, Tunis.

15 Author's interview, July 2018, Tunis.

March 2016, the national authorities declared Tunisia to be in ‘war against terrorism’ (Sigillò 2019; Merone et al. 2021). As shown in the next chapter, the securitization campaign was chiefly backed by secular forces in a context of reactivation of the Islamist vs. Modernist divide, helped by widespread coverage in the media, such as French-speaking newspapers and online journals, most of them active during the old regime and forging the Ben Ali’s RCD campaign against the Islamic movement during the nineties.

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2 Civil society and politics after 2011

Abstract

This chapter provides an overview of the actors operating and the processes unfolding in the Tunisian associational sphere against the backdrop of post-revolutionary political developments. The following pages describe the post-revolutionary setting as a highly competitive arena characterized by strategic dynamics of inclusion and exclusion of different *players*. In the first section, I highlight the political process underpinning the post-authoritarian context from 2011 until the 2019 elections by underlining the competition between new emerging actors and the remnants of the old regime. In the second section, I show how post-2011 civil society's dynamics reflect the cleavages characterizing the political sphere. In the third section, I focus closely on religious groups, emphasizing the heterogeneity of the Islamic associational space and its relationship with the Ennahda party.

Keywords: democratization, cleavages, strategies, Ennahda, associations

2.1 A fragile democratization: dynamics of inclusion and exclusion

The revolution in Tunisia, which ended over 23 years of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's authoritarian rule, is often celebrated as the one success story of the Arab Spring. Civil society actors are widely perceived to have played an essential role in the country's successful political transition (Hudáková 2021). Indeed, civil society actors were active participants in the various transitional mechanisms put in place following the departure of President Ben Ali on January 14, 2011. They also contributed significantly to drafting the country's first democratic constitution. Moreover, they have stepped up during moments of political crisis to address issues and help resolve conflicts.

Civil society actors came into their own in 2013 when a crisis erupted following the assassination of two left-wing opposition figures. Four

prominent civil society organizations launched a ‘National Dialogue’ to solve the crisis, threatening to derail the Tunisian political transition. Its success in steering the country back on course against a backdrop of heightened Islamist–secular tensions saw the so-called ‘National Dialogue Quartet’ awarded the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize “for its decisive contribution to the building of a pluralistic democracy in Tunisia in the wake of the Jasmine revolution of 2011” (Norwegian Nobel Committee 2015).

Three of the organizations within the National Dialogue—the Tunisian General Labour Union (Union générale tunisienne du travail, UGTT), the Tunisian League for Human Rights (Ligue tunisienne des droits de l’homme, LTDH), and the Tunisian Order of Lawyers (Ordre national des avocats de Tunisie, ONAT)—enjoyed substantial symbolic capital for having been so vocal in opposition during the Ben Ali regime. Without a viable political alternative capable of breaking the deadlock, they could mediate successfully among the various political actors. Coming at a time of profound civil society disillusionment with government policies and societal disappointment at the lack of progress on addressing the socioeconomic grievances that had been so crucial in sparking the revolution, the Noble Peace Prize was not only “intended as an encouragement to the Tunisian people” but also as a general recognition that “civil society institutions and organizations can play a crucial role in a country’s democratization, and that such a process, even under difficult circumstances, can lead to free elections and the peaceful transfer of power” (Norwegian Nobel Committee 2015).¹

Despite the conventional wisdom, which holds Tunisia up as the one success story to emerge from the Arab Spring, the tale of the democratization process can also be read through other lenses, according to which Tunisia is still undergoing a difficult transition process, where the outcome might not be the liberal-democratic system that many external observers wished for (Sigillò 2016a).² First, in the initial three years following the fall of the

1 <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2015/press-release/>

2 On July 25, 2021, with the ongoing COVID-19 crisis exacerbating underlying socioeconomic grievances, and after a week of rolling protests in the most marginalized cities of the country, President Kais Saied invoked Article 80 of the Tunisian Constitution permitting him to freeze parliamentary activities for 30 days, suspend parliamentary immunity and dismiss the Prime Minister Mechichi from office. Somewhat counterintuitively, the Saied’s measure was received fairly well, with people gathering on the streets to celebrate the announcement. Many media outlets also welcomed the move. Many Tunisians shared Saied’s criticism of selected institutions as corrupt, incompetent, or both, including the executive, the legislature and the Ennahda party, the largest group in the parliament. Following Saied’s move, numerous politicians, businessmen and judges, as well as members of parliament no longer protected by immunity, were banned from traveling abroad or arrested. Despite the support for strong action among the people to

authoritarian regime, when many were hopeful about the prospects for democracy, the situation remained highly polarized. The victory of Ennahda in elections for the NCA in October 2011 triggered widespread discontent among Tunisia's secularist forces. In 2012, in a highly conflictual political scenario and under the initiative of the strongman Béji Caïd Essebsi (the future president of the Tunisian Republic from 2014 to 2019), who for a long time enjoyed close relations with the old regime, several forces gathered in the neo-Bourguibist party *Nidaa Tounès* (Call for Tunisia) intending to block the rising power of the Islamist party. Indeed, the peculiarity of this new party was its unique capacity to hold together a variety of ideological currents, united just by their anti-Islamist position (Wolf 2017).

Second, if, on the one hand, Tunisia had seen a relatively smooth political transition, on the other, there was a general failure to acknowledge and get to work on addressing socioeconomic grievances. Indeed, the negotiation of rules and procedural mechanisms to ensure an effective transition has undermined efforts to address underlying economic and social conflicts. Thus, the deepening of the financial crisis and the absence of material benefits for large segments of Tunisia's population led to accusations that the parties in power were failing to represent the people. If the revolutionary process and consequent victory of the Islamist party Ennahda in the elections have allowed Tunisia's conservative middle class to take a seat at the political table, the price has been ongoing neglect of Tunisia's disenfranchised lower classes who continue to see little or no benefit from the revolution (Merone and De Facci 2015).

Salafi–Jihadi movements, which emerged after the revolution as the political challenger closest to the poorest strata of society, have increasingly channeled the discontent of the disenfranchised. For example, *Ansar al-Sharia* has increasingly won strong support in the most marginalized areas of Tunisia (Merone 2015). The betrayal can explain the widespread success of this movement felt by those at the bottom who came onto the streets to topple the old regime but who think they have been entirely neglected by those swept into power in its wake. The perception that they are excluded has, in turn, triggered dynamics of mass polarization and radicalization. After the political assassinations in 2013, the extreme fringes of the leftist movement mobilized against moderate Islamists in power. At this time,

address ongoing challenges of the country, President Saïed's extraordinary actions, which were extended beyond the initial 30-day period allowed by the constitution, call into question the 'exceptionalism' of Tunisia's democratic transition in the Arab world, with concerns at home and abroad that the country faces a return to authoritarian rule.

Ansar al-Sharia approached the moderate Islamists of Ennahda, proposing that they jointly establish an Islamic front to find common ground between modernists and Islamists in the country's religious sphere. Ennahda eventually rejected the Salafi group's offer, and the latter was officially declared a terrorist organization in August 2013 (Merone 2015).

The official compromise established in 2014 between the two sworn enemies, Ennahda and the secular Nidaa Tounès party, was perceived in many quarters yet another betrayal of the principles of the revolution. Moreover, the leading opponents of this "rotten compromise" frame it as part of an uneven democratization process that ignores the most marginalized parts of the country and systematically excludes an entire segment of Tunisia's body politic (Marzouki 2015). This unequal process of democratization has thus scarcely addressed underlying discontent rooted in social inequality, economic alienation, and political disillusionment, especially in the most marginalized areas of the country, where the revolution began in 2011.

Indeed, social unrest has remained barely contained since. In January 2016, new urban revolts exploded in Kasserine after the death of Ridha Yahyaoui, a young, unemployed university graduate who climbed a telegraph pole and threatened suicide after learning that he had been removed from a shortlist for employment in a regional education department.³ In August 2016, Habib Essid was ousted as prime minister following a vote of no confidence by parliament, blamed for delays in reforms designed to address ongoing grievances. But the fall of his government and the search for a cabinet to replace it compounded delays in responding to public demands to improve services, address regional inequalities, create jobs, and boost public security.⁴ Thus, responsive governance has been effectively paralyzed as the fledgling democracy has grappled with tremendous challenges but few resources to bring to the task.

Since 2011, we can observe a normalization process characterized by the specter of the resurgence of authoritarian strategies of repression and exclusion. Former President Béji Caïd Essebsi (2014–2019) was reticent to allow reforms that could threaten the financial interests of his business contacts belonging to the same social stratum that was privileged during Ben Ali's regime. The national unity government formed in August 2016, and the almost frantic search for a consensus to regulate socio-political

3 Tunisia government creates 5,000 new jobs as unrest simmers. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/tunisia-government-creates-5000-new-jobs-unrest-simmers>.

4 <https://www.fpri.org/article/2016/09/taking-stock-u-s-policy-options-algeria-morocco-tunisia/>

conflicts following that was considered a vehicle for the revival of the old regime. For example, Prime Minister Youssef Chahed (2016–2020) appointed 12 new governors, nine of whom were officials of the old regime.⁵

Indeed, principles of political consensus in the name of stability, reconciliation, and the fight against terrorism meant that only particular segments of Tunisia society had been party to institutional pacts, thus reiterating old socio-political divides which characterized Bourguiba and Ben Ali's regimes. In 2017, leftist activists opposed the so-called 'reconciliation law,' aiming "to revive the economy by offering amnesty to businessmen accused of corruption under the old regime in exchange for a closed-door confession and pay-backs" (Marzouki 2016). This, in turn, triggered new forms of contention challenging the legitimacy of the frequently articulated (but for many empty) refrain of "national unity," which has framed the democratization process since 2011.

The results of the 2019 presidential and legislative elections occurred against this background of profound, widespread disillusionment with politics. In October 2019, Kais Saied was elected as the country's new president in a race characterized by a turnout of 55.2%. Saied, a noted jurist, retired professor of law, and anti-corruption campaigner, came onto the political scene billing himself as an anti-system, law-and-order social conservative and burnishing his (genuine) credentials as a legal expert and political outsider.⁶

The legislative elections also contributed to reshuffling a highly contested political system and renewed a political elite accused of forgetting the claims and grievances raised by the 2011 revolution. Widespread discontent against the Tunisian political elite grew in the wake of the unexpected compromise between Ennahda and the neo-Bourguibist Nidaa Tounès party, which had faced each other in a highly polarized landscape between 2012 and 2014. In 2019, the two major parties fell victim to a protest vote, with Ennahda losing 17 MPs and Nidaa Tounès keeping just three seats following a series of internal splits.⁷

Thus, on the one hand, while the 2019 elections swept away many of the dominant political forces, on the other, new political forces emerged that campaigned on populist calls for root-and-branch economic reform. Such players benefited from widespread discontent about the policy deadlock

5 Minister Youssef Chahed previously was Secretary of State for Fishing from 2015 to 2016 and Minister of Local Affairs in 2016.

6 <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/06/world/africa/tunisia-election-nabil-karoui.html>

7 Machrou' Tounès, Tahya Tounès are the splinter parties of Nidaa Tounès.

generated by the consensus-driven, post-2011 governance. The *Qalb Tounès* party, with 38 seats, called for “new sustainable development policies and joined the many critics of the new trade agreement between Tunisia and the EU for the establishment of a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area” (Sigillò and Blanc 2019). *Attayar* (or *Tayyar Dimuqrati*), a party created in 2013 and campaigning for a “strong and just state” and an anti-corruption agenda, progressed from the seventh to the third-largest party in parliament, with 22 seats. Another force was the *People’s Movement*, which focused on socioeconomic issues, which jumped from having three seats in 2014 to 16 seats in 2019. The *Parti Destourien Libre* (PDL), led by Abir Moussi, who served briefly as the Assistant Secretary General in charge of Women in the RCD the year before the fall of the Ben Ali regime, came in third. She and the PDL ran on a platform deriding the politics of consensus that emerged after 2011. Since the new parliament began its work in December 2019, Moussi, a staunch secularist, has taken the political fight to *Ennahda*, contributing much to the polarization of the political scene along the secular–Islamist divide.

Above all, two newcomers, *Itilaf al-Karama* (the Coalition of Dignity) (21 seats) and *Hizb al-Rahma* (five seats), “which have been hastily lumped together as Salaf parties,” have thrived with an agenda that underlines *Ennahda*’s inability to implement the promises of the revolution due to its commitment to the “politics of compromise” with the remnants of the old guard (Sigillò and Blanc 2019). *Itilaf al-Karama* is particularly notable for gathering a heterogeneous mix of Islamic and Leftist ex-members of the LPR (Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution), human rights defenders (lawyers, journalists, and bloggers), former members of *Ennahda* who quit after feeling betrayed by the party’s pragmatic turn, members of the Salafi *Jabhat al-Islah* party, and independent Salafi sheiks (Blanc and Sigillò 2019). Its spokesman, Seifeddine Makhoulouf (himself a leader in Tunisia’s Salafi-jihadist movement), took the spotlight with repeated attacks on France and the French ambassador, “accusing them of plundering Tunisia’s natural resources and wanting to change the Tunisian way of life” (Blanc and Sigillò 2019).

Although most conservative members of *Itilaf* blame *Ennahda* for “imitating secularist parties,” *Itilaf al-Karama* has never claimed itself as a religious party (Blanc and Sigillò 2019). Instead, it has built a trans-ideological platform that prioritizes a sovereigntist agenda, demanding that Western powers stop meddling in Tunisia’s domestic politics, with the goal of “restoring the dignity of the Tunisian people,”⁸ reflected in the group’s very name. Thus,

8 Author’s interview with a member of *Itilaf Karama*, Tunis, October 2019.

Itilaf constitutes a group of self-proclaimed ‘revolutionary’ forces whose gathering momentum lies in its refusal to allow the return of former regime officials. The politicization of this new cleavage—actors of compromise vs. hardline revolutionaries—which was previously without a partisan basis, represented the main novelty of the 2019 legislative elections (Blanc and Sigillò 2019).

2.2 The cleavages rooted in the post-revolutionary civil society

Since the regime’s fall, the political dynamics underpinning the fragile transition process have interacted with those of civil society. As one activist had put it: “there was a revolution, so we have to change. We have to be engaged to transform our Tunisia actively.”⁹ In this regard, civil society’s commitment is perceived as a relevant form of political engagement. New associations are supposed to support change in the country due to a revolutionary process. In this context of renewed commitment, we can observe the reactivation of four main cleavages, which are not mutually exclusive but profoundly intertwined. These are the old regime actors vs. the post-revolutionary actors’ cleavage; the center (Tunis) vs. periphery cleavage; the interior/south regions vs. the Sahel region cleavage, and the Islamists vs. Modernists cleavage.

The associational flourishing of 2011 differs from that of the late 1980s less in terms of numbers and more in a qualitative sense—namely, the central role today played by opponents of the regime. On January 17, 2011, at the presentation of the new government, Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi (November 1999–February 2011) announced the end of the freeze on the activities of associations previously targeted by the regime. In particular, the LTDH would directly benefit from this liberalization and thus become a symbol of the democratic transition.¹⁰ In addition to resuming the LTDH, former human rights activists created other associations in Tunis and the regions. This was a situation where political activism mixed with associational activism, in continuity with the opposition to Ben Ali’s regime. The new emphasis on human rights, women’s rights, and civil rights marked a discontinuity from the previous period and the commitment to democracy. Coming from the entourage of the LTDH, the UGTT, and political

9 Author’s interview with the president of a charitable association in Sfax, February 2017.

10 <http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2011/01/17/01003-20110117ARTFIG00590-la-tunisie-se-dote-d-un-gouvernement-d-union.php>

parties such as the PDP, Ettajdid, and Ettakatol, these activists would later be identified as “leftists” by the Islamists.

A second difference between the post-revolutionary associational flourishing and earlier ones is the apparent reference to revolutionary events. The protest movements of the winter of 2010–2011, which led to the fall of the Ben Ali regime, had advanced several socioeconomic demands. The protest movement of the interior regions comprised unemployed young people, graduates or those who had left the education system prematurely, and young people from working-class neighborhoods. It was formed around issues of employment, development, and justice facing the inequalities that became evident to a growing part of the population “through the actual conditions of access to work and the labor market, through the decline of their purchasing power and a real impoverishment” (Hibou 2011: 6–7). This movement joined the big cities’ militants and made claims about political liberties. The slogans of the demonstrations demanded, ‘work, freedom and dignity’ (*chagoul, horriya, karama el wataniya* is the most famous slogan of the so-called Jasmine Revolution), as well as the end of corruption related to the family of the president. Revolutionary rhetoric was formed by this juncture between the socioeconomic and socio-political divides. Subsequently, these claims were taken over by the new associations that tried to set up new ways of supporting development, particularly in areas of the country considered marginalized. The Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES) emerged as a left-oriented NGO aiming to defend economic and social rights at the national and international levels by working on labor law, women’s rights, environmental rights, and migrants’ rights. Its goal is to establish a development model based on justice and equality. The organization’s headquarters is in Tunis, and its members are young, well-educated Tunisians, typically with strong internationalized networks. The FTDES claims are similar to those of minor associations located in marginalized areas of the country, such as in rural zones of the interior and the south with no international contacts. However, the lack of resources of rural associations often puts them in a conflictual position with the organizations based in Tunis.

The Libyan crisis starting in March 2011 contributed to deepening the cleavage between internationalized NGOs and local associations with fewer resources in Tunisia. As thousands of Libyan refugees arrived in Tunisia, refugee camps were set up in the country’s southern regions, particularly Medenine. Under these emergency circumstances, new faith-based charitable networks rapidly sprung up to organize the collection of essential products for refugees and to offer support. In particular, the

massive influx of Libyan refugees at the Ras Ajdir border led several informal groups to organize themselves to provide humanitarian assistance. In the context of widespread revolutionary enthusiasm, the *interactions* between religious grassroots actors carrying out solidarity activities and international donors operating in the field triggered a rapid institutionalization of Islamic charitable associations (Sigillò 2016b).

According to the president of Tunisia Charity, this first-hand experience in collaborative civic engagement helped participants establish structured horizontal ties, which in turn ultimately led them to consider founding an association with a specific identity and goals (Sigillò 2016b):

During the [2011] refugee crisis, we all went to the border from all parts of Tunisia to help our Libyan brothers. Thanks to this experience, we realized that it was necessary to organize associations to be more effective in conducting rescue activities.¹¹

As shown in the next section, most activists involved in these humanitarian networks were former political opponents of the Tunisian Islamist movement, the precursor of the Ennahda party, who, after the decree-law 88 of September 24, 2011, could form associations freely.¹² As we will see in the next section, most associations' founding members, are former opponents of the old regime and have transformed their associations into a political project. This commitment goes hand in hand with intense criticism of ancient clientelist practices, which the associations were part of during the authoritarian regime. Old associations (those already active before 2011) today acknowledge that they have more extensive freedom of intervention in the field, as they no longer have to respect the list of beneficiaries imposed by local authorities.¹³

Charities increasing popularity among the most disadvantaged segments of the population grew as their ability to expand their networks throughout the country provoked a strong counter-reaction from secular–leftist associations. The latter alerted the public to the alleged existence of a covert project to Islamize Tunisian society led by the Islamist Ennahda party (Sigillò 2016b). In this regard, several media backed by well-known modernist civil society

11 Author's interview with the President of the association T., Tunis, November 2015.

12 The Islamist movement re-emerged in Tunisia after January 2011, with the arrival in Tunis of Rached Ghannouchi from his exile in London and the legalization of the Ennahda party, after 23 years of repression. Details on the evolution of the movement and its relationship with associations are provided in the next section.

13 Author's interview with the president of the association S., Sfax, May 2016.

organizations, such as the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD), took part in the struggle against Islamic actors by discrediting these newly emerged associations. For example, the online journal *Tunisie Secret* posted the following message in its 'About us' section:¹⁴

We have promised to do everything possible to unveil the farce of the *Jasmine Revolution* and to deconstruct the myth of the Arab Spring, which has quickly turned into the *Islamist winter*. Let it be said right away that we are not a neutral newspaper. Neutrality does not exist in any newspaper or any country in the world. If it is not the power of a political group or the influence of a lobby, it is the power of money that determines a newspaper's editorial line. We are not neutral because Islamist obscurantism is our enemy, French democracy is our model, and respect for human rights and secular humanism are the ideals we defend.¹⁵

In an increasing conflictual scenario, Islamic-based and secular-based associations consider themselves the 'true' civil society in transition toward democracy through a confrontational game, where one side refers to the Ennahda party and its new hegemony and the other side to the old regime backed by anti-Islamist propaganda.

2.3 The Islamist movement and the separation between parties and associations

The Tunisian Islamist movement re-emerged in Tunisia after January 2011, with the arrival in Tunis of Rached Ghannouchi from an extended exile in London and the legalization of the Ennahda party, after 23 years of repression. Tunisian Islamic activism developed in the 1970s in the form of an Islamic community inspired by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (*jama'a al-Islamiyya*), based on the idea that Islam is a global practice that does not differentiate religious from social and political activity (Cavatorta and Merone 2015).

With the partial liberalization of the 1980s, the religious group transformed into a political movement, the MIT. Over time, the Islamist movement

14 Tunisie Secret backed the national authority's securitization campaign against Islamic associations alongside other French-language online journals: *Le Temps*, *La Presse*, *Réalités*, *Leaders*, *Jeune Afrique*, *Kapitalis*, *Webmanager center*, *Business news*, *Courrier de l'Atlas Tunisie*, and *Tunisie numerique*.

15 Retrieved from: http://www.tunisie-secret.com/Qui-sommes-nous_a84.html. My italics.

has changed by adapting to the windows of opportunity offered by the regime. In 1989, the new president, Ben Ali, who initially seemed favorable to a policy of inclusion, allowed the party to establish itself. However, to comply with Tunisian laws banning religious parties, Rached Ghannouchi, the party leader, decided to change the name of the organization from the Movement of the Islamic Tendency to Movement Ennahda (Harakat Ennahdha—*ennahdah* means ‘rebirth’), thus jettisoning any religious reference in the name.

After the regime’s fall, the movement acquired complete legitimacy as a political party (Wolf 2017). The liberalization of the public sphere allowed its members (and other Islamic militants) to engage in new spheres of engagement outside party politics (Sigillò 2021).¹⁶ Moreover, the legitimization of the social sphere of the movement also became an important political strategy for Ennahda after 2011 (Merone et al. 2018). Indeed, after winning the 2011 elections, Ennahda could count on a large constituency, a space of Islamic activism existing outside the party but overlapping with its militant base. Depending on this social base, the party gave impulse to creating associations with a religious mission or creed led by its activists.

Moreover, several of the movement’s activists have served as presidents of many associations, demonstrating the party’s eagerness to invest in the associations. Against this background, in 2011, thousands of associations with a religious mission or creed appeared as a means of a ‘parallel’ or ‘alternative’ form of engagement with the party. According to a former MIT activist: ‘After the revolution, you could choose whether you joined the political party or the associations. However, especially at the start, activists were engaged in both spheres.’¹⁷

As mentioned, charitable associations (*al-jam’iyyât al-khayriyya*) have become one of the most visible forms of the new Islamic activism generated among former militants of the MIT. However, charitable activities of a religious nature are not a specific by-product of the Tunisian Revolution. During the crackdown on the Islamist movement in the 1990s, activists had already organized a charitable network to help the families of political prisoners during the regime’s repression. As a former MIT activist notes:

16 Immediately after the regime’s fall in 2011, Islamic activism in Tunisia crystallized into two main political trends: Islamism (fully represented by the Ennahda party) and Salafism. Salafi actors are not a by-product of the revolution. They had sprung from a different set of ideological premises than those of Ennahda. For further details on the differences, see Merone et al. (2021). The primary expression of post-revolutionary Salafism is embodied in the Ansar al-Sharia movement.

17 Author’s interview with a former MIT activist, Tunis, May 2016.

“Charity was one of the main activities of the movement in the fight against socioeconomic exclusion from Islamist networks. During Ben Ali’s regime, the charity was always secretly given to the poorest families of political prisoners, widows, and orphans of martyrs.”¹⁸

The decision of the activists of the movement to engage in the charitable sector in post-revolutionary Tunisia represents a kind of ‘revenge’ of the opponents of the old regime, a form of pointed criticism of the clientelist practices in force under the control of Ben Ali. Indeed, charitable associations that emerged after 2011 do not refer to social policies, but to religion, in opposition to the state monopoly of religion and the mechanism of patronage and social assistance during the old regime. With the claim of the referent to Islam, charitable organizations stand out from the logic of interest not so much by need and urgency but by faith and obligation: “We do not do it for interest, we do not do it for the poor; for us, it is an obligation, it is our religion. We do it for God.”¹⁹ By following religious prescriptions, their activities are aimed at specific objectives, such as supporting orphans and providing care for families, distributing the Ramadan food baskets, back-to-school materials for children, and duvets for winter.

Reference to Islam by most charitable organizations after 2011 is also evident in funding procedures. Charities mainly finance their activities through the collection of locally collected alms (*zakat*), which entails the giving of a percentage of an individual’s wealth to the poor (one of the five pillars of Islam and, as such, a religious obligation) and from donations (*sadaqat*), personal forms of charity also encouraged by Islam (but are not obligatory). Until 2013, Tunisia charities were primarily funded by the Gulf monarchies’ charitable foundations. The most active throughout the country is a Qatari charity and two other influential Kuwaiti organizations, the ‘Sheikh Abdullah al-Nouri Charitable Society’ and the ‘International Islamic Charity Organization’ (see Chapter 3). During the initial period after the revolution, the presence of Arab donors proved to be particularly beneficial for Islamic charities struggling to attract international funding due to a lack of experience soliciting such support, in contrast to those founded before 2011.

The second type of Islamic activism rooted in the associations is that of religious schools. According to the Imam of the Sharia’s Science Association, created after 2011, the Qur’anic associations that emerged after the revolution questioned the Islamic education sponsored during the authoritarian regime:

18 Author’s interview with the President of a charitable association, Sfax, February 2016.

19 Author’s interview with the President of the association A., Medenine, May 2016.

“During Ben Ali’s regime, religious education was based on a pietist style of teaching Islam. This approach envisaged a domesticated Islam as an instrument of societal control to include like-minded groups and to exclude the challengers, such as the Islamist movement.”²⁰ After the 2011 revolution, a new wave of religious education emerged into the public space. It called into question the traditionally religious educational system, accused by the post-revolutionary preachers of being an ideological instrument of the ruling elite under Ben Ali (Merone et al. 2018). According to the president of the Qur’an association, “before the revolution, the people did not have access to true Islam: all the imams belonged to the RCD.”²¹

The new preachers who emerged in the post-revolutionary landscape are the third form of Islamic activism. Applauded by many, these new religious leaders are much younger, on average than the old guard, like Ellouze and Chourou.²² For example, in the city of Sfax, preaching activities have evolved around charismatic imams, such as Mohamed Affès, the preacher of the Great Mosque of Sfax, and Ridha Jaouadi, imam of the Lakhmi Mosque and president of the association of imams.²³ Since 2011, these new religious figures have been praised by the Islamic community as a positive by-product of the revolution, in contrast to the ‘state Islam’ characterized by the top-down appointment of imams.

According to this ‘revolutionary’ narrative, after the fall of the authoritarian regime, the new imams “have to be appointed by the people, by the Islamic community.”²⁴ In light of the post-revolutionary momentum, *da’wa* (preaching activities) were coupled with a re-appropriation of the

20 Author’s interview, Tunis, July 2018.

21 Author’s interview with the president of the Qur’an association, Tunis, July 2018.

22 Habib Ellouze and Sadok Chourou have been two historical preachers of the Tunisian Islamist Movement since its origins. When MIT became a party (Ennahda), the two leaders were elected to its executive body. In exile between 1981 and 1984, Habib Ellouze spent his time before 2011 under the tight administrative control and was in prison for 15 years. In 2011, he was elected MP in the Sfax electoral district but continued to act as a preacher. Arrested in 1991, Sadok Chourou spent 16 years in prison, 14 of which were in solitary confinement. After the revolution, Chourou was elected as an MP. Much like Ellouze, he is identified inside and outside the party more as a preacher than a politician.

23 The reopening of the political space in post-revolution Tunisia has enabled different actors to take a stand and launch new demands. One of the new phenomena observed in this context has been the emergence of a trade union movement led by imams, previously appointed by the state. The imams involved in the trade union are the *imâm khatib*, the orator cleric in charge of ensuring the Friday prayers; *Imâm Alkhams*, the cleric in charge of the five daily prayers; the *mouaddin*, the person responsible for making the call to prayer; the *qayim*, the person responsible for the maintenance of places of worship.

24 Author’s interview, Sfax, May 2016.

urban space after years of repression. Immediately after the regime's fall, most sermons occurred outside the state-controlled mosques during the authoritarian regime. After 2011, Islam was preached in informal public spaces, such as *cafés* or public squares, to reach the most significant number of people, in light of a renewed democratic spirit in contrast to a top-down understanding of preaching practices.²⁵

As mentioned above, several religious associations created in the aftermath of the revolution counted Islamist party activists among the members of their executive boards. The first example of this hybridization between politics and the associational system dates before 2011, with the case of the association Marhama, founded in Germany in 1999 by Moshen Jendoubi, a member of Ennahda in exile.

Another example of a charitable association born before the revolution and linked to the Tunisian Islamic activism is Attaawen Charity, formally founded by Mohamed Néjib Karoui in September 2010 in Sousse, three years before the fall of Ben Ali. As the son of Hamad Karoui, former prime minister of Ben Ali (1989–1999), he had the permission to found a charity with a religious orientation even during the authoritarian regime: “the association was and still is apolitical, even if it has an Islamic ideological background.”²⁶ Indeed, even if no more formally linked to Ennahda, the president of the association has a political pathway within the MIT and is part of a broad Islamic public emerging in Tunisian public space in the aftermath of the revolution:

In 1980, the year of my eighteenth birthday, I had an experience of spiritual awareness; I began to pray, change my friends, and go to the mosque. It was at this time that I joined the Movement. I was participating in a new community; I started attending classes at the mosque and participating in house rallies. That same year, I met Hamadi Jebali in the mosque in my neighborhood, and we became friends.²⁷

With the *multi-positionality* of activists, the boundaries between the political and associational *arenas*, especially immediately after the revolution, were unavoidably blurred. Mohamed, president of a Sfax charity and former activist of MIT, explains: “at the beginning, the association did everything. There was not a real distinction between political activity and social activity.”²⁸

25 Merone et al. (2021).

26 Author's interview with a member of the association *Attaawen*, Tunis, November 2015.

27 Author's interview, Tunis, May 2016.

28 Author's interview, Sfax, May 2016.

The development of an associational camp close to the Islamist party triggered a strong reaction of the associational ‘modernist’ *arena*, including advocacy and human rights associations, ideologically close to the secular and leftist political forces—which accuse the party of indirectly recreating a system of hegemony rooted in the social fabric, like the RCD under the regime of Ben Ali.²⁹ As the president of the modernist association, Femmes Démocrates, reported, “we have passed from one dictatorship to another.”³⁰

Against this background, 2012 saw the mobilization of several associations of religious inspiration counteracting the “political attack” of secular forces.³¹ In 2012, in those areas of the country where the polarization between secular and religious social and political forces is more emphasized, Islamic associations created a more compact urban network, according to a logic of contention (Sigillò 2016b).³² An emblematic example is the case of the Tunisian Front of Islamic Associations (*jebhat tounsiya al jamaïet al islamiya*), composed of preaching and charitable associations intending to bring together Tunisian Islamic forces to “fight against secularism in Tunisia, the desecration of Islam and for the insertion of sharia in the constitution.”³³

The Tunisian Front was particularly active during 2012, when the socio-political space was more confrontational. The social bloc was the main organizer of demonstrations and protests in front of the Constituent Assembly. Several charitable associations took part in this bloc together with other associations of *da’wa*, trying to counteract the country’s secularization. The Islamic Front mobilized the masses and supported the party in different circumstances during 2012. On March 25, the Front organized demonstrations to react against ‘World Theatre Day’ on March 27. Moreover, on September 14, 2012, the Front set up the manifestation moving from the al-Fath mosque to the American embassy. In particular, the Tunisian front

29 The associational system reflected the polarization with the government led by the Ennahda party on one side (the Troika), and an opposition that reorganized itself around the new secular Nidaa Tounès party on the other.

30 Author’s interview with the President of the association ATFD, Tunis, November 2015.

31 Author’s interview extracts.

32 The polarization of leftist–secular and Islamic associations has been evident especially in Tunis and Sfax, the country’s two largest, most developed cities. However, there continues to exist vast peripheral zones that have been neglected by the state and international donors, which have become the operative field of charitable activity. It is here that religious charities have made their mark, promoting themselves as new social welfare ‘subsidiary institutions’ that alone among the various organizations dispensing services to the public have fully earned their beneficiaries’ trust.

33 Author’s interview with the President of a charitable association which took part in the Front, 13 February 2017.

of Islamic associations supported the sit-in before the American embassy to express discontent about movies shown in America that insulted the Prophet.

Lastly, associations that are part of the front also participated in the petition against the UGTT strike organized for December 13, 2012. Indeed, the UGTT had called for a general strike against an 'illegitimate' government. Islamic charities were among the organizations signing the petition in support of Ennahda. An example of a local network established to follow a logic of contention was the creation of *Wa attaawanou* (from *ta'awun*, meaning 'collaboration') in Sfax, where the willingness to create a tighter Islamic bloc has proved to be more significant since 2012.³⁴ The network, consisting of about 30 associations of religious reference, was particularly active in 2012–2013. It facilitated the associations' activities in Sfax and the organization of mobilizations of national interest, such as the insertion of *sharia* in the constitution.³⁵

In light of the abovementioned conflict occurring at the associational level, the Ennahda's party was under double pressure (Merone et al. 2018). On the one hand, the pressure of the secular forces gathered under the new party Nidaa Tounès, whose initial objective was to thwart the rising power of the Ennahda party. On the other hand, the radical forces of the country, such as the newly emerged movement Ansar al-Sharia, wished to establish an Islamic political front involving the Islamist party. According to the calculations of Ennahda's leaders at that time, any disruption of the constitutional process or a widespread impression of political instability risked bringing the former regime back onto the stage (Netterstrøm 2015).

Thus, at the IX Congress in 2012, the party's leadership prompted a debate on the potential distinction between preaching activities (*da'wa*) and politics (*siasa*) to dispel the secular forces' accusations regarding the party's alleged hegemonic strategy toward civil society. In light of this debate, after the Congress, the party officials created a new association, *Da'wa wa al-Islah* (DwI), as a first attempt to push the most conservative members of the political group to leave professional politics (McCarthy 2015). Thus, some of

34 There are several verses in the Qur'an that explain the concept of *ta'awun*. However, verse two in surah al-Maidah clearly narrates the concept of *ta'awun*: "and cooperate in righteousness and piety, but do not cooperate in sin and aggression. And fear Allah; indeed, Allah is severe in penalty" (al-Maidah, 5: 2).

35 In 2014, the coalition broke up under the pressure of the national authority's securitization campaign, informal ties among the associations and their activists continue to exist and have a role in organizing activities and mobilizations for the defense of Islam. Further details are provided in the next chapters.

the party's charismatic personalities, such as Habib Ellouze, Sadok Chourou, and Sahbi Atigue, historical leaders of Ennahda, gradually emerged as 'connectors' between two spheres of engagement (Merone et al. 2018).

The idea of specialization has evolved over the years in a context characterized by high pressure linked to the increasing polarization in the country. Indeed, the party has continued to transform in light of a growing confrontation with secular forces on constitutional issues such as the notion of *sharia* or gender equality (Gana and Sigillò 2019). In particular, the various constitutional projects drawn up within the ANC were symptomatic of these two antagonistic visions of Tunisian politics (Gobe and Chouikha 2014). However, after the political assassinations of the activists Mohamed Brahmi and Choukri Belaid in February and July 2013, and after the military coup in Egypt, which dismissed the Muslim Brotherhood from power in July 2013, the pressure against the party in power peaked.

Throughout this period, Tunisia witnessed various mobilizations and counter-mobilizations of different civil society groups (secular or religious), which reflected the country's growing political polarization. Notably, opposition activists engaged in civil society tried to launch their version of the Egyptian protest movement *Tamarod*, which during the same period had led to the dismissal of President Mohamed Morsi. Like its Egyptian namesake, the Tunisian group accused Tunisian Islamists of causing the country's political and economic crisis. During a demonstration in front of the Parliament, thousands of demonstrators demanded the dissolution of the NCA and the dismissal of the Ennahda-led government, the so-called 'Troika government.'³⁶

Ennahda thus strategically undertook further actions to increase its legitimacy among secular forces. In essence, it made compromises on a draft of the constitution under discussion at the time by abandoning the idea of inserting *sharia* (Islamic law), cutting its ties with radical actors, such as Salafi organizations, and agreeing to relinquish power in favor of a technocratic government led by the independent Mehdi Jomaa in January 2014. Undoubtedly, the crisis of the summer of 2013 marked a watershed: from this moment, Ennahda's discourse revolved around its detachment from the Islamist project of transformation of Tunisian politics and society. Moreover, the victory of the party Nidaa Tounès in the 2014 elections paved the way for an unexpected coalition government. However, several activists

36 The Troika was an unofficial name for the alliance of the three parties (Ennahda, Ettakatol, and the Congress for the Republic, by its French acronym CPR) that ruled in Tunisia after the 2011 Constituent Assembly elections.

perceived the compromise between Islamists and the forces of the old regime as a betrayal of revolutionary principles.

Interviewees from several associations insist that there was an evident change in state control measures after 2014 in connection with the pragmatic turn of the Ennahda party. The president of a charitable association explains: “The state’s control measures are an attack against Ennahda. I wonder why the state also did not control secular charitable associations.”³⁷ While Ennahda tried to mediate between secular forces and its Islamic constituency, it also exploited the situation to push the party’s activists engaged in civil society to engage in a professionalization that would reflect the separation between *da’wa* and politics, as was discussed at the IX Congress.

At the IX Congress held in the Tunisian town of Hammamet in May 2016, the party leader Rached Ghannouchi declared: “There is no longer any justification for political Islam in Tunisia.”³⁸ This statement was followed by the decision of the party’s leadership to engage in the process of specialization (*tahaşşus*), aiming to separate the political dimension from the religious one. This measure thus entailed a distinction between two intertwined parts of the same political group: the partisan dimension (*hizb*) and the social movement (*haraka*). As Ghannouchi declared:

Ennahda has moved beyond its origins as an Islamist party and has fully embraced a new identity as a party of Muslim democrats. The organization is no longer both a political party and a social movement. It has ended all its cultural and religious activities and now focuses only on politics. (Ghannouchi 2016).

The first consequence of the specialization was the official separation of careers between the party leaders on the one hand and the leaders of the associations on the other (Dell’Aguzzo and Sigillò 2017). Thus, several party officials left the boards of Islamic associations once elected to the *choura*. In turn, some members of the *choura* left the party to concentrate on the activities of their associations and decided to dedicate themselves exclusively to the civil society sphere, such as Habib Ellouze with the association DwI (Merone et al. 2018). This process has encouraged and facilitated a parallel specialization of Islamic associations, according to the logic of professionalization.

37 Author’s interview, Tunis, June 2018.

38 https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2016/05/19/rached-ghannouchi-il-n-y-a-plus-de-justification-a-l-islam-politique-en-tunisie_4921904_3210.html

Notwithstanding this decision, the measure was perceived as controversial, if not unnatural, by several currents within the Islamist community as it envisages a distinction between two dimensions—religion and politics—which are conceived as deeply intertwined, as ‘two parts of a whole’ (McCarthy 2018).³⁹ Thus, from being representative of the overall Islamist constellation, the specialization process created a split between those who refuse such a change in the name of the original Islamist ideal and those who think that the new historical juncture demands a separation of politics and preaching. In Chapters 4 and 5, I will describe how Islamist activists engaged in the civil society sphere dealing with such a controversial issue.

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3 From the global to the local: the tale of civil society promotion

Abstract

This chapter scrutinizes the diffusion mechanisms of ‘civil society promotion’ packaged by different kinds of actors. In the first section, I cast light on the constellation of international donors targeting the Tunisian associational arena working on the developmental and charitable sector since 2011. In the second section, I analyze the diffusion of a neoliberal model of civil society, describing the conceptualization, planning, and implementation of development projects in the country. The third section describes the spread of projects on the ‘social solidarity economy’ (SSE) as a way to enhance associations’ skills. The fourth section analyzes the impact of SSE programs in marginalized areas of the country. In the last section, I show how the state replicates discourses and is inspired by the international neoliberal agenda.

Keywords: civil society promotion, international donors, social solidarity economy (SSE)

3.1 The constellation of international donors in Tunisia

Before the Arab Spring, Tunisia was not a favorite destination for many international donors due to its limited strategic significance and the perception that donor support would do little good in such a repressive regime. Before 2011, the Tunisian state filtered every foreign intervention. Therefore, the action of international donors was particularly limited by rules and procedures set by the authoritarian regime. One exception to this regime of restrictions was certainly the EU development cooperation. Tunisia was the first Southern Mediterranean country to sign an Association Agreement (AA) with the EU in 1995. The AA aims at promoting “sustainable development in the country through enhanced political

dialogue and economic and financial cooperation, with a particular focus on trade liberalization and security matters. In the period comprised between 1995 and 2006, the provisions laid down in the agreement were operationalized through the MEDA I and II programmes,¹ which covered the different areas identified in the agreement” (Ayadi and Sessa 2016: 10). These programmes were complemented with resources allocated through the FEMIP financial instrument managed by the European Investment Bank (EIB), focused on creating the conditions for successful trade liberalization and emphasizing two areas of priority areas, namely private sector development and creation of an investment-friendly environment (Ayadi and Sessa 2016).

Since 2011, Tunisia has been very open to foreign support “to help build its new order, whether, in the form of foreign direct investment (FDI), loans, aid, or technical assistance” (Kausch 2013: 2), with which, it is hoped, the country can build a new social, political, and economic order. As mentioned by Kausch, “Tunisia’s acknowledgment of the need for foreign support during the transition period has led to the adoption of a legal and political framework that broadly favored the opening up of local civil society and accepting foreign assistance” (Kausch 2013: 2). Thus, after 2011 the country witnessed a growing influence of external actors over the domestic arena. Foreign support for the transition process became the leitmotif of the post-revolutionary landscape. Since 2011, foreign aid to Tunisia has doubled, going from 562 in 2010 to 1.067 million euros in 2012 (Net ODA Disbursement).² Local associations became the privileged targets of international funding programs, mainly because after the fall of the regime, international actors could directly target non-state actors, bypassing the state.

A striking heterogeneity characterizes the galaxy of international donors in Tunisia. National governments, multilateral organizations, NGOs, and private foundations are all part of this mix (see Table 4 below for a sketchy overview of international donors’ presence in the country since 2011).

1 The MEDA Regulation was the principal instrument of economic and financial cooperation under the Euro-Mediterranean partnership. It was launched in 1996 (MEDA I) and amended in 2000 (MEDA II). It enabled the EU to provide financial and technical assistance to the countries in the southern Mediterranean: Algeria, Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Malta, Morocco, the Palestinian Territory, Syria, Tunisia, and Turkey.

2 See: <https://www.aidflows.org/index.php?cid=TN>.

Table 4 Gross ODA Donors to Tunisia (million €)³

Year	2010		2011	
	Amount	Percentage	Amount	Percentage
France	180	29%	229	34%
Spain	133	18%	97	14%
AFESD*	95	15%	73	11%
Japan	77	12%	87	12%
EU agencies	77	12%	105	16%
Germany	51	8%	48	7%
Italy	19	3%	17	3%
GEF**	8	1%	N/A	N/A
Global Fund	4	1%	N/A	N/A
Kuwait	3	1%	6	1%
Switzerland	N/A	N/	5	1%
United Arab Emirates	N/A	N/A	5	1%
TOTAL	647	100%	672	100%

* Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development

** Global Environment Facility (World Bank/UN)

Source: Kausch, 2013: 13, based on OECD-DAC calculations.⁴

During the immediate post-revolutionary phase (2011–2013), the EU alone has allocated € 34 million as direct support to civil society organizations operating in Tunisia in the framework of its cooperation with the country and intending to strengthen the civil society's role in promoting human rights and democratic reforms. The action of the EU was framed as a response to the Arab Uprisings through two Joint Communications,⁵ in March and May 2011, respectively, attempting to upgrade its democracy promotion policies in the Mediterranean: 'The Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean' (PDSP), putting civil society support at the heart of the EU's Neighbourhood Policy in the South, and the ENP Review: 'A New Response to a Changing Neighborhood.' Based on these

3 As reported in Kausch's report (2013): "in spite of its significant post-revolution commitment, the US does not appear among the top ten official development assistance (ODA) donors to Tunisia" (Kausch 2013: 13).

4 OECD-DAC Statistics [https://public.tableau.com/views/OECD-DACaidataglancebyrecipient_new/Recipients?:embed=y&:display_count=yes&:showTabs=y&:toolbar=no&:showVizHome=no](https://public.tableau.com/views/OECD-DAC%20aid%20at%20a%20glance%20by%20recipient%20new/Recipients?:embed=y&:display_count=yes&:show_tabs=y&:toolbar=no&:show_viz_home=no).

5 Issued by the EU Commission and the High Representative for the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy.

two documents, the EU launched two leading programmes in the MENA: the Civil Society Facility for the Neighbourhood and the SPRING Programme. Under the framework of the SPRING programme the EU allocated €7 million for the period 2012–2016 to support civil society through the ‘Programme d’Appui à la Société Civile’ (PASC).⁶

The EU’s development cooperation is based on Calls for Proposals aiming at contracting international NGOs (mainly European) to lead its projects.⁷ In September 2012, an EU call for proposals was published to “support and accompany Tunisian civil society in its efforts to structure and consolidate, so that it can contribute effectively to the democratic transition and the improvement of the local socio-economic context.”⁸ The grant was awarded to the non-governmental organization European Partnership for Democracy (EPD), an NGO based in Brussels. Through the EPD management, the PASC entered into an agreement with the Tunisian government’s service responsible to help local associations. The programme had three main objectives: “to strengthen the capacities of civil society organizations and their networking, to encourage dialogue and joint initiatives between civil society and the state, and to revise the regulations concerning the work of civil society.”⁹ In order to achieve these objectives the EPD, in turn, selected four local partners, labeled as ‘leading civil society actors’: Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES), the Tunisian Association for Studies and Research in Democracy and Local Affairs (ATERDAL), the Center for Training and Support for Decentralization (CFAD) and the National School of Administration of Tunis (ENA). This top-down selection is based on technical criteria which result in creating a competitive environment among associations wishing to obtain EU funding.

6 The EU’s civil society support programme (PASC) is part of the SPRING programme (Support for Partnership, Reform and Inclusive Growth), launched by the EU in the southern countries of its neighborhood “to support the democratic transition process and promote good governance.” See: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_11_636

7 As observed, this financial instrument results very technical, tending to exclude most needing recipients as they lack the expertise. The ‘renewed’ approach of the EU was built on the concept of ‘more for more,’ alias positive conditionality. This seemed to be in contrast with the aim to pursue a new bottom-up approach based on the ownership and the empowerment of civil society. The strictness of conditionality finally discourages local recipients which prefer to take grants from other donors.

8 https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/tunisia/documents/press_corner/cp_pasc_pacs_090712_fr.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1jOHPcicFqxv5JVtkPZ9wdJ13s1H68H5Uzvy9OHslyYbiYORKLJ7ki99LPRoeJ02dLP3yt9Oy8auWek2NMEb6GpiWiptX9Tf3L6vgQ

9 <https://nawaat.org/2016/08/10/soutien-europeen-a-la-societe-civile-enquete-sur-un-programme-controverse/?fbclid=IwAR2F54tcHmZgt->

Another multilateral actor supporting civil society in a similar way is the United Nations, through the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). The UNDP has a *sui generis* status in Tunisia, as (besides providing its funding stream) acts as an intermediary agent between various international donors and local beneficiaries. It distributes funding mainly from Italy, Japan, Switzerland, Norway, and Belgium. Thus, UNDP Tunisia finally functions as an international NGO, albeit of a very distinct kind. As we will see, this special status has significant implications in the field. It allows the UNDP to function as a transmission belt between the remote international donor community and the very local actors close to the ground (small local associations scattered throughout the country).

Besides UNDP and the EU-contracted NGOs, other international NGOs are widespread in Tunisia. Significant examples are Mercy Corps, CILG-VNG, CEFA, COSPE, and NEXUS. They act independently or as intermediaries of foreign governments or overseas agencies. Moreover, German political foundations (*Stiftungen*) are particularly active in the post-revolutionary arena. Among the most influent are the ones associated with the major German political parties, the Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung (Social Democrats), the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (the Left), and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Christian Democrats). Their activities are therefore driven by the political mission of the parties with which they are associated, and they primarily work with local political parties and some advocacy associations.

The novelty brought by the Tunisian revolution was the inclusion of regional players among the actors involved in international development assistance aimed at the country undergoing a political transformation.¹⁰ Indeed, the fall of the regime opened the space for influential (potentially *hegemonic*) actors (*players*) to play an essential role in post-revolutionary Tunisia. Notably, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), Turkey swiftly penetrated the post-revolutionary arena by merging technical assistance with an indirect diffusion of norms and values. This was facilitated by the new democratically elected Islamist party Ennahda in October 2011. Until Tunisia's Ennahda party won elections in 2011, no Islamist party in (or beyond) the MENA region had managed to lead an elected government, except for Turkey's Justice and Development party (AKP). Thus, as confirmed

10 In fact, as early as the 1990s Islamic donors had begun to work alongside major Western players in the international aid system (Ghandour 2003). However, international Islamic actors were primarily prevented from getting involved in Tunisia until 2011, considering the regime's anti-Islamist campaigns.

by several Ennahda party leaders interviewed, the AKP was taken as a model to make Islam and Democracy coexist in the country (Marks 2017).

After 2011 the Gulf monarchies also moved in.¹¹ As Islamic players, they have positioned themselves as proponents of the South–South model of aid giving and adhere to international calls for stronger donor–recipient dialogue to improve aid effectiveness (Tok, Calleja and El-Ghaish 2014). While many DAC donors such as the EU have historically tied foreign aid to the liberalization of investment law for donor companies, or the purchase of donor country goods and services, Gulf States have limited the extraction of material gain from aid spending. Indeed, Al-Hamad, the Director General of the Arab Fund and former minister of Finance in Kuwait, stated that Arab donors have always adhered to the principle of non-interference in recipient country policies. He argued that the Arab approach is limited to advising on policy matters when they discover apparent failures (Villanger 2007). Moreover, Al-Hamad also stated that many Arab donors are so against the ‘conditionality approach’ that they refuse to enter co-financing schemes with Western donors. Finally, Abu Dhabi Fund’s annual report states that Arab

11 Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates have been among the most generous donors, with official development assistance (ODA) reaching about 1.5 percent of the combined gross national income (World Bank 2010). On the other hand, Qatar became more and more visible in the international aid architecture only in the last decade (Tok, Calleja and El-Ghaish 2014). During 1973–1990, Arab aid as a share of GDP was more than twice the United Nations target of 0.7 percent and five times the average of the OECD-DAC countries (Shushan and Marcoux 2011). While flows of Arab aid as a share of GDP decreased from 1990–2008, Arab donors continued to meet the UN target of 0.7% throughout the 1990s and were almost twice as generous as OECD-DAC donors from 2000–2008 (World Bank 2010). About 60 % of national and multilateral Arab aid goes to other Arab countries (Isaac 2014). Gulf assistance has been directed to eight Arab recipient countries: Morocco, Egypt, Syria, Algeria, Tunisia, Jordan, Yemen, and Sudan (Villanger 2007). Gulf influence in the MENA region was evident years before the Arab uprisings. Indeed, statistics show that GCC’s monarchies collectively represented the first regional investor in the Mediterranean region (Isaac 2014). This economic influence has been translated into a growing ability of the Gulf states to gradually assume a more significant political, social, and cultural influence in regional politics. In particular cultural and ideational influence is also highlighted by the fact that substantial Gulf aid went to countries with a predominantly Muslim population (Tocci et al., 2012). Funds channeled to non-state actors appear as a regular feature of Gulf aid flow to MENA. The official explains the aim to promote Gulf cultural clout in the MENA region, and unofficial aid is given to socio-cultural organizations. Saudi Arabi and Qatar, in particular, extended their influence in the Muslim world by supporting, for example, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the non-governmental Rābitah al-‘ālam al-islāmi (Islamic League), and the Fiqh Muslim Congress (Tocci et al. 2012). Because the Arab bilateral donors do not provide detailed information about their assistance, it is difficult to estimate whether their aid relationships with these countries have changed. However, there are indications of increased support for Egypt (primarily by Saudi Arabia), Jordan, Morocco (by GCC), and Tunisia (by Qatar) (Rouis 2012).

aid is given to help developing countries set up policies for the economic and social development of their own free will outside political and economic pressures (Van den Boogaerde 1990). This would reflect the Islamic philosophy of helping without building economic returns (Van den Boogaerde 1990). Thus, in 2011 donors from the Gulf appeared to be the leaders in providing aid that supports recipient autonomy and interests.

This 'political aid' (Villanger 2007) differs from politically motivated 'development aid' as the latter remains geared toward development-based initiatives while still susceptible to the geo-political interests of donor governments. In contrast, by being allocated through finance ministries rather than national development funds, political aid may not be explicitly targeted toward enhancing 'development' per se (Tok, Calleja and El-Ghaish 2014).

However, while Arab multilateral institutions have tended to provide a quite comprehensive documentation of aid spending, bilateral aid is characterized by a high opacity (Villanger 2007; Shushan and Marcoux 2011). As a matter of fact, transparency of bilateral Arab assistance is limited by the tendency for Arab donors to make additional aid contributions above and beyond regular aid spending (Tok, Calleja and El-Ghaish 2014).

In addition to state-funded organizations, there was a substantial grant flow from private donors. Indeed, a series of charitable donations by Gulf countries contributed to the relative 'fuzziness' of Arab aid by blurring the lines between public and private spending (Ennis and Momani 2012). As a matter of fact, Southern Mediterranean countries have witnessed the progressive expansion of an Islamic network of Arab Gulf-supported charitable activities in the last decade (Tocci et al. 2012). For example, Sheik Mohamed, ruler of Dubai and Prime Minister of the UAE, has 'personally' established aid campaigns and has provided several large donations to various initiatives. As a result, the ability to accurately report Arab aid expenditure is further confused, adding to reporting challenges and further hindering the transparency of Arab aid (Clarke 2006; Tok, Calleja and El-Ghaish, 2014). Islamic traditions of charitable giving (*sadaqah*) have existed since the birth of Islam, just as the obligatory alms tax, *zakat*, and the religious endowment, the *waqf*, have historically been important Islamic institutions of social welfare (Barnett 2012). But international Muslim charities and, in general, the notion of Islamic aid are a relatively new phenomenon, the new vehicle of Islamic normative discourse. The International Islamic Relief Organization (IIROSA) is the first of them, emerged in 1978 in Saudi Arabia. The second most crucial charity is the International Islamic Charitable Organization, established in Kuwait in 1984. Starting in the mid-twentieth century, the

Islamic resurgence denotes a global movement of renewed interest in Islam as a relevant identity and model for the community, manifested in greater religious piety and Muslim solidarity, in the growing adoption of Muslim culture, dress codes, terminology, and values by Muslim worldwide (Lapidus 2002: 823). Then, international Muslim charities became part of an Islamic aid culture, parallel to and largely detached from the mainstream Western aid culture (Petersen 2014). The Islamic aid culture was shaped by organizations such as the Muslim World League, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the International Council for Da'Wa and Relief. It had been shaped by experiences of marginalization, of being colonized, and of the poor not as distant sufferers but as fellow members of the religious community (Petersen 2014).

Against this background, the mainstream aid culture emphasizes values of universalism and neutrality, building on a material conception of poverty and assuming a strictly secularized concept of religion. On the other hand, the Islamic aid culture came to promote a different set of values. First, the Islamic aid culture turned on notions of brotherhood and Islamic solidarity, binding Muslims together in a global community, the *umma*. In this perspective, all Muslims are part of the same religious brotherhood and, as such, are closely connected, mutually interdependent, and obliged to help one another.

Transnational charitable actors played a crucial role in post-revolutionary Tunisia, especially between 2011 and 2014. Notably, Islamic donors from the Gulf mostly penetrated the Tunisian social fabric by deploying charities or foundations tied to specific national governments (Momani 2012; Colombo 2012; Talbot 2012). They targeted the newly emerging faith-based charitable associations as their direct beneficiaries, bypassing the procedure of making preliminary agreements with the state or international NGOs.

'Qatar Charity' and two Kuwaiti organizations—the 'Sheikh Abdullah al-Nouri Charitable Society' and the 'International Islamic Charity Organization'—had the most prominence in the country at least until 2014.¹² The institutional set-up of these donors as charities enabled them to penetrate the social fabric easily, compared to other organizations. The bottom-up approach they adopted was particularly welcomed during the first period

12 Projects funded by Qatar Charity consist of constructing five primary schools in the governorates of Kairouan, Kasserine, Gafsa, Sidi Bouzid, and ten hospitals and clinics in the regions of Tozeur, Médenine, Kairouan, Kasserine, Gafsa, and Sidi Bouzid. See: <http://www.forbesmiddleeast.com/en/lists/read/2012/the-most-transparent-charities-inthe/listid/15>; <http://www.arabhum.net/contentitemen.php?ID=12265>

after the revolution, especially by those associations struggling to attract international funding based on conditionality due to their lack of experience. One interviewee noted that “it is much easier to obtain financial support from Gulf-based charities, mainly from Qatari or Kuwaiti sources, as they do not impose conditions on prospective beneficiaries, unlike the majority of Western donors.”¹³ At the start, such organizations, found it very difficult to obtain financial support from Western donors, which apply stringent selection criteria and “as a consequence,”¹⁴ they leaned heavily on Gulf donors, at least until 2013.¹⁵

Islamic donors are generally considered a world apart for their lack of membership in the OECD system. Some authors stressed that they have even a different understanding of aid (Villanger 2007). For instance, ‘good governance’ has been promoted as the primary vehicle for achieving development by Western donors. The EU has been stringent in demanding improvements in governance for a country to be eligible for aid. According to Villanger, democracy and governance are not topics that are part of the Arab aid dialogue as Arab donors consider the issues a responsibility of recipients’ governments. On the other hand, corruption and efficiency have become crucial for Arab donors to make progress. Arab donors have supported more extraordinary efforts toward aid effectiveness and ‘best practices’ in aid allocation through providing untied aid (Momani and Ennis, 2012).

However, despite the differences described above, the constellation of international donors active in post-revolutionary Tunisia should not be read as a zero-sum game between Western and Islamic funding actors. A relational approach allows unveiling the complexity of international aid and the contextual reasons of their reducing influence in the country after 2013. First, most donors from Gulf countries also adhere to neoliberal norms and values. Moreover, several Western donors active in Tunisia cooperate with Arab donors. For instance, from 2009 to 2015, the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) managed the ‘Cooperation with Arab donors in the MENA region’ program, intending to coordinate between

13 Author’s interview with the member of a charitable association in Medenine, February 2017.

14 Information taken from many interviews with Islamic charities.

15 As mentioned in previous chapters, the financial relationship between Tunisian religious associations, particularly Gulf donors, generated widespread suspicion among the leftist–secular constituencies in Tunisia. After the political assassinations in 2013 and terrorist attacks in March and July 2015, several associations with religious missions or creeds were shut down for allegedly channeling Qatari money to jihadist activities. Thus, Islamic donors gradually lost their legitimacy and even their impact in the field, as Islamic associations started to look at Western donors to avoid allegations of a lack of transparency.

Figure 4 Top Ten Donors of Gross ODA for Tunisia, 2019-2020 average

Source: Author's elaboration on OECD statistics.

the Gulf-based Arab donors and the German development aid targeting civil society actors. The program consisted of several projects financed in close cooperation and coordination with at least one Islamic donor.¹⁶ Another partnership among Western and Arab donors in Tunisia involves CAWTAR¹⁷ (Center for Arab Women Training and Research), the UNDP, and the World Bank. This partnership aims to support women entrepreneurs and provides local women's associations training to nurture decision-making and problem-solving skills. Finally, western-based Muslim NGOs have sought to align themselves with this development aid culture run by institutional donors, such as USAID. Petersen (2011) has labeled this more recent approach as 'invisible Islam' and a 'desacralized' form of aid. Notably, Islamic Relief UK has been particularly active in Tunisia since 2011, by covering the Southern regions of the country that have been mostly neglected by other Western-based actors before the revolution.¹⁸

Based on more recent OECD statistics, it appears that the EU continues to be the largest donor in the country (see Figure 4). As mentioned by the responsible of PASC, this might be partially explained by restrictive policies undertaken since 2014 against Islamic actors which have been accused, along with their direct local beneficiaries—most of them local charities—of provoking the Islamization of the country and the organization of terrorist attacks.¹⁹

16 Source: <https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/14363.html>.

17 CAWTAR is a Saudi organization operating in several MENA countries, including Tunisia.

18 See: https://islamic-relief.org/where_we_work/tunisia/

19 Author's interview with the responsible for PASC-Tunisia. Tunis, October 2019.

3.2 The deployment of a neoliberal idea of civil society as an instrument of power

Various studies highlight that funding mechanisms, despite their presumed technocratic grounding, are never truly neutral as donors deploy a neoliberal assemblage of norms and procedures in their funding programs that, in turn, reflect a particular vision of civic activism (Van Rooy 1998; Fioramonti 2012; Challand 2014). In this section, I define the dominant ideas of ‘civil society promotion’ packaged at the international level and internalized at the local level as a ‘conceptual apparatus’ (Ferguson 1994)—“to suggest that what we are concerned with is not an abstract set of philosophical or scientific propositions but an elaborate contraption that *does something*” (Ferguson 1994: Preface) [*italics in the original*]. In other words, following Foucault (1977), the conceptualization of a specific category is an *instrument of power*. According to Ferguson, the ‘vivisection of the conceptual apparatus’ (Ferguson 1994: Preface), which means an investigation of how specific ideas are generated in practice, is necessary to understand how a concept is conceived and how it causes social change when deployed (Ferguson 1994). Notwithstanding the variety of international ‘civil society promoters,’ norms and standards have increasingly emerged—especially after the 2013–2014 campaign of securitization—as mainly forging a *dominant paradigm* based on a neoliberal understanding of civil society. According to this idea, associations are considered independent vectors of socioeconomic progress and, as such, complementary agents of democratization. To achieve these tasks, associations must acquire technical skills to operate in the development sector and be fully detached from the political sphere. Thus, a dominant narrative framing ‘civil society promotion in a democratizing Tunisia’ and a set of practices flowed from it. Under this framework, the international donors mainly active in the country have massively diffused norms and procedures that eventually informed local associations’ frames, organizations, and networks.

Despite the heterogeneity of international aid in post-revolutionary Tunisia, we can trace some patterns. The international donors’ infrastructure is organized along two main axes: the *participatory axis*, based on consultation between associations and local administration, and the *development axis*, related to the implementation of sectorial projects led by associations. According to this approach, the targeted associations are given the role of development agents in partnership with the state. As such, they are considered crucial actors in the democratic consolidation

of the country (Sigillò and De Facci 2018). As posited by the UNDP-Tunisia coordinator:

We target local associations as we want to produce socioeconomic and, in turn, political change in the country; only a fully-fledged civil society contributing to the bottom-up development of the country can lead to democratic consolidation.²⁰

Thus, Tunisian associations are conceived internationally as critical players in fostering local development and democracy. The participatory dimension is emphasized in international donors' discourses and practices, which are informed by the notions of 'participation' and 'inclusion' of non-state actors in decision-making. As a World Bank representative in the country noted: "our effort is to enable civil society actors, through the implementation of our programs, to contribute to decision-making in the public sphere and to make associations of the pillars of democratic government."²¹

According to the general understanding of civil society, associations need to be autonomous from other spheres to function effectively. This notion informs the dominant discourse deployed by international actors targeting civil society in Tunisia. In this view, donors expect associations to be autonomous, requiring them to be *professionalized* and *depoliticized*: "to participate in decision-making, associations need to be autonomous [and] thus professionalized."²² This discourse has informed all the practices of international donors in Tunisia, and their development programs have reflected this influence. As the footprint of international donors in the country has grown, local associations have not only been seen as facilitators of democracy but increasingly as agents of development.

Beyond functional autonomy, international donors have also emphasized the need for policy competence. Concretely, this imagines local associations able to assume the regulatory and policy functions of the state, which—as mentioned in previous chapters—progressively disengaged from the provision of public services even before 2011. Concretely, foreign donors have implemented development projects throughout the country that assume local agents will readily develop these competences. In other

20 Author's interview with the UNDP-Tunisia coordinator, Tunis, November 2016.

21 Author's interview with Elien Murray, local coordinator of the World Bank in Tunisia, Tunis, December 2016.

22 Author's interview with Elien Murray, local coordinator of the World Bank in Tunisia, Tunis, December 2016.

words, within the void left by the state, civil society moves to the forefront as the driving force of local development.²³ According to this perspective, after 2011, Tunisia has become part of an international political economy of support to NGOs. Indeed, in the Tunisian associational sphere, ‘civil society’ has become virtually synonymous with ‘NGOs’ based on donor funding criteria: “international actors have operationalized civil society in terms of professional NGOs as they are bureaucratically suitable vehicles for the implementation of development projects in those sectors and regions where the state is considered absent.”²⁴ Since 2011, international donors have focused their development efforts on precisely those parts in the south and east of Tunisia systematically excluded from the development program of the authoritarian regime: “the Medenine and Tataouine areas have always experienced economic exclusion, depriving many young people of decent work and socioeconomic opportunities.”²⁵

3.3 Diffusing a paradigm of social development: the Social Solidarity Economy model

Development policies in Tunisia are a sensitive topic or, better said, highly politicized. Indeed, as noted in previous chapters, the authoritarian regime conceived welfare policies as a political instrument of social control. For this reason, since the revolution, international actors have been at pains to foreground the participatory axis, conferring a central role to local associations, which are considered “the lever of development” (*le levier du développement*).²⁶ Thus, after 2011, the social solidarity economy (SSE) model has been widely diffused throughout the country by various development actors. These international actors have imported SSE practices based on the idea of an ‘alternative’ to the established development model, which is

23 The category of ‘development’ can be conceptualized in multiple ways (Ferguson 1994). On the one hand, development is used in connection with economic modernization. A second definition frames development in terms of quality of life, or standard of living, and refers to the reduction and amelioration of poverty and material want. In this second approach, the term ‘development’ is shorn of its classic *teleological* connotation and is vested instead with a *moral* one. Development is no longer a movement in history but a social program activity.

24 Author’s interview with Faïçal Dchica, Regional Coordinator of PASC, Djerba, April 2016.

25 Author’s interview with Ahmed Saggay, UNDP Regional Coordinator, Medenine, April 2016.

26 “La société civile: levier du développement local” is the title of a project targeting civil society actors, implemented by UNDP Tunisia. See: <http://www.tn.undp.org/content/tunisia/fr/home/library/poverty/la-societe-civile--levier-du-developpement-local.html>

considered non-inclusive. The inclusive alternative accentuates the *essential role of civil society*, which must be involved in any cooperation project.

The leading keywords used by international organizations are 'employability,' 'entrepreneurship,' and 'strengthening civil society.' These terms are complemented by terms that underscore the 'supportive stance' of associational work: 'local development,' 'social integration,' 'social assistance,' 'micro-credit,' and the like. It is tough to precisely define SSE as "no shared understanding of this notion among the international donors' community."²⁷ However, there are some standard features that we can highlight. All the actors diffusing training and projects inspired by the SSE agree on its role (social purpose), its central values (prioritizing people over the capital, voluntary membership, democratic management, equitable distribution of wealth), and the traditional actors implementing the programs: associations, cooperatives, and foundations.

To be sure, development initiatives and social services that respect the general principles of the social economy are nothing new. Indeed, after the implementation of the Structural Adjustment Plan of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the late 1980s, associations developed throughout the country and progressively gained control of several areas that before were reserved for the state: the provision of essential services and facilities, particularly in the rural areas, the struggle against illiteracy, the creation and support of development projects, promotion and integration of women in the economic circuits, and the rise of income-generating activities. Moreover, in November 2007, the Spanish cooperation agency organized an international conference on the 'social economy' in Tunis (Sigillò and De Facci 2018). On this occasion, Tunisian associations signed the 'Tunisian charter of social economy,' which launched the 'Tunisian Network of Social Economy' (RTES). The latter offers technical assistance to organizations working on diagnosis, training, and professional accompaniment of SSE projects. However, under Ben Ali, associations and, more generally, 'social economy actors' were part of the authoritarian system of population control and claimed the apparatus legitimizing the regime (Sigillò and De Facci 2018).

After 2011 social action came to the fore as an alternative to dysfunctional state institutions in Tunisia. The phenomena of unemployment, poverty, and underdevelopment were no longer seen as a failure of the market or delays in public action. Still, they said something about the role of the state itself. Against this background, the norm of 'participation' has been spread

27 Author's interview with Mehdi Baccouche, SSE expert and Programme Director of Lab'ESS, Tunis, November 2016.

by the intervention of international donors through the implementation of development programs. Indeed, the discourse on the *participation* of local associations in the implementation of welfare policies, an area that before 2011 was fully controlled by the authoritarian state, eventually fits with the neoliberal agenda of international donors, which targets the third sector to supply the state to foster the distribution of goods and services.

In this way, social work becomes part of an ideological framework explaining the complex functioning of society and the economy. Associations become essential economic players in two main ways. On the one hand, they are promoters of alternative ideas on development; on the other, they are the central device of a network of economic organizations with which they work in synergy (Abu-Sada and Challand 2011). Thus, after 2011, local associations specializing in socioeconomic development were brought into an ecosystem of stakeholders contributing to the implementation of SSE projects. However, as we will see in detail in Chapter 5, this notion is articulated differently by the various actors involved. Local stakeholders have appropriated the SSE reference system heterogeneously according to the different strategies of (re-)engagement in the post-revolutionary public space.

Immediately after the revolution, a plethora of new *international* actors started to penetrate the country through the diffusion of SSE-inspired projects. For example, the French development agency (FDA) works as a development financing actor and, at the same time, as a research center. In Tunisia, it is directly dependent on the French embassy and must be supported by French or foreign agencies to implement development projects (not recruiting coworkers directly). Likewise, the U.S.–Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) finances Mercy Corps, an American NGO. On the other hand, the German cooperation agency (GIZ) is autonomous, as it operates with self-organized cells deployed on the field. Finally, the so-called ‘decentralized cooperation’ implies the horizontal collaboration between European (especially Tuscany in Italy and Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur region in France) and marginalized Tunisian regions (Sigillò and De Facci 2018).

As a reaction to the international and transnational diffusion of SSE’s projects, in 2012, many *local* actors started to be engaged in the field of SSE. Thus, stakeholders claimed the SSE framework’s ownership in their activities by presenting themselves as ‘agents of change,’ carrying out the ‘democratic alternative.’ In particular, the UGTT has established itself in this arena as a key player in charge of formulating and drafting the national law on SSE. However, the UGTT was not isolated in this process. Several ministries worked on the law, but somewhat fuzzy, without accurate coordination.

Moreover, we have witnessed the proliferation of different organizations. Besides RTES, the only program active before the revolution and officialized only in 2012, we can observe the activation of a variety of organizations based in Tunis, such as RADES (Réseau des associations de l'économie sociale), TCSE (Tunisian Center for Social Entrepreneurship), and PLATESS (Plateforme tunisienne d'économie sociale et solidaire), which function as spaces of development of ideas and knowledge on the SSE and support the implementation of programs through training sessions and by encouraging the networking and coordination of the actors involved in SSE activities. In addition, they work as platforms acting as intermediaries between different national actors and those engaged in international cooperation. Thus, they are the place of interaction where international experts meet and exchange views and experiences with local activists.

These networks are not limited to international actors and local associations but also include ministries, some political parties, UGTT, and universities. Moreover, the spaces for creating knowledge are generally multi-stakeholder programs and inter-stakeholder discussion platforms: conferences, project organization meetings, sensitization, and training workshops. Capturing these knowledge-building 'forums' helps to highlight the complexities of interactions that translate different experiences and ideas about the nature and purpose of SSE into a shared grammar that has made it widely distributed since 2012.

RADES is an exemplary case of a network of associations in the social economy. Created in May 2012 by former micro-credit associations who have reinvested in the new situation of pluralism, it works to consolidate the structures and institutions of the social economy in Tunisia after the revolution. As a result, it targets social economy actors: associations, cooperatives, and development associations. Its activities include assistance and encouragement to the exchange of experiences of social actors, support of actions aimed at the promotion of women, the family, and the elderly, the fight against unemployment, especially in the inland regions of the country, and research activities on the field of social economy and the organization of seminars and workshops. Other structures find the driving force of their actions in their international links. Such is the case with RTES, born in 2007, from the opportunities provided by the Spanish development agency, appropriated by local actors, including the National Union of Mutual Associations (UNAM). Until 2011, it covered the function of disseminating and popularizing the concept of the social economy (albeit without authorization from the relevant ministry).

In the aftermath of the revolution, RTES partnered with the Italian NGO GVC to promote the social economy in the rural parts of Tunisia's interior

regions. Its rather pragmatic vision of SSE, as an alternative opportunity for state and private sector intervention, modeled upon the idea of micro-enterprises, is hybridized with the more ‘militant’ conception of the Italian NGO focused on promoting women’s cooperatives in rural areas. On the other hand, the TCSE was born from the experience of its promoters in the transnational organization the Jeune Chambre Internationale (JCI), which extends a program of development of social enterprises. The organization focuses on ‘social entrepreneurship’ as a means of innovation while also considering it as an opportunity for those regions where other economic models have failed.

For its part, PLATESS works in partnership with the French association, ‘Alternative sans frontière,’ which is active in the field of SSE in France. The idea of implementing SSE projects lies in adapting economic activities to the specifics of the social contexts of interest. The platform is at the forefront of promoting SSE by organizing conferences and sensitization meetings in the capital and other regions. Workshops are among the first initiatives organized to define and disseminate the SSE. PLATESS organized in 2013 and 2014 several conferences involving international experts and partners, representatives of Tunisian institutions and organizations, and researchers. In this context, the National Institute of Labor and Social Studies (INTES) at the University of Carthage plays a strategic role. INTES hosted the first international conference on SSE organized by the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID) and RTES in 2007. In addition, the institute has recently set up a professional master’s degree program in SSE.

Beyond the national platforms that claim to be “laboratories of ideas and good practices of the SSE,”²⁸ there is the direct implementation in the country of projects of international donors. These include the ‘Laboratoire d’Economie Sociale et Solidaire’ (Lab’ESS) program, created in 2013 and financed by France’s AFD, and Prom’ESS, launched in 2016 and funded by the International Labour Organization (ILO). Lab’ESS specializes in building the capacity of Tunisian associations and entrepreneurs undertaking ‘social entrepreneurship projects’ through consulting, training, and networking. For its part, ‘Prom’ESS’ aims to establish a local ecosystem favorable to SSE, focusing on developing the legal and institutional framework, strengthening, and improving the services offered to support organizations working on SSE, and launching and supporting initiatives in the social economy sector.

28 Author’s interview with Mohamed Ben Mahmoud, PLATESS General Director, Hammamet, February 2017.

Besides these two initiatives, the ‘Soyons Actives/Actifs’ program, which aims to support civil society, works very closely with, and draws finance from the French NGO ‘Solidarité Laïque’, the EU, and the AFD. The program, which brings together Tunisian and French associations, works to train, and professionalize associations in the SSE sector.

Finally, other national actors carry out activities often associated with the SSE framework. These include, for example, old and new micro-credit agencies like BTS, Enda, Taysir, and Yunus Social Business. In addition, significant national and regional development associations, such as TAMSS, ACG, and AFTURD, are part of this framework, thanks to the funding opportunities of international donors, who have invested them with a central role, as facilitators of the SSE project implementation process, by using a participatory approach. Thus, different associations have complied with the SSE framework by appropriating discourses and practices that are not necessarily in line with their original ideas, such as the emblematic example of charitable associations with a religious mission or creed.

3.4 Implementing social development projects at the local level

International actors mainly diffuse the SSE in regions considered the most marginalized areas of Tunisia, according to their indexes of socioeconomic development.²⁹ In this section, I provide examples of how social development projects were implemented in two regions characterized by very low indexes of socioeconomic development: Siliana and Medenine.

In February 2012, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) launched a ‘socioeconomic round table’ (TREMED) through which its *idea* of SSE was introduced to Tunisia. Since its creation, the activities of the round table have been oriented toward the implementation of a strategy for regional development, with particular attention to ensuring the participation of civil society actors. Indeed, its objective is to create synergy between different actors to develop a space for reflection on the economic and social development of the region. Sometime later, Germany’s GIZ joined TREMED with an offer to finance the Regional Plan for Environment and Sustainable Development (PREDD), with the contribution of civic actors as well. At a later gathering of the round table held in Djerba in December 2016, the key ideas that emerged were “valorization of the resources of the territory”

29 <http://www.itceq.tn/developpement-regional.php?fbclid=IwAR1YXtFsUDYAbzcaS-wbDbmpcZhKPUWqSf2qZtPskRmit-xYgGXdG3cl9cQ>.

(human or material) and the imperative “to create employment” within the framework of a “social and solidary economy.”³⁰

The SSE model implemented through TREMED has also been proposed in the region by other donors, following the exact mechanisms of inclusion of state actors and civil society. For instance, since 2012 the UNDP’s program ‘Appui au relèvement économique, développement du secteur privé et cohésion sociale pour une croissance inclusive en Tunisie’ has been active in the regions of the south. According to the general understanding of international actors, this project mainly targets civil society actors exclusively represented by local associations. Other examples are the programs ‘Tounès Tekhdem’ (Tunisia Works) and ‘Tounès Temna’ (Tunisia Develops) implemented in Medenine in 2012 by the American NGO Mercy Corps as the intermediary of the funding organization MEPI. Also, in this case, the general idea of the intervention is to contribute to local development through the valorization of civil society. Therefore, even here, local associations acquire the role of development agents.

The development model imported by international donors has been informed by expertise and technical efficiency standards. Therefore, through their intervention, international donors also transfer their ideas and practices of professionalization. All international donors active in the region provide preliminary training for local associations to acquire sound knowledge of SSE’s precepts and to strengthen technical skills to manage development projects. These training programs, in the form of workshops and seminars, are made as open as possible to any associations active in the region, based on an inclusive approach. Upon completing their training, only the best associations are selected for grants based on their capacity to correctly internalize the norms and standards provided during the training phase. The reward for their efforts is a grant to implement their development projects.

This merger between the norms of inclusion and participation of social actors on one side and entrepreneurial skills on the other has informed international donors’ conceptualization of the notion of SSE, characterized mainly by a neoliberal frame. Indeed, donors’ interpretation of the social solidarity economy is more and more related to *social entrepreneurship*. It is no coincidence that *social enterprises* rather than *community cooperatives* are the normatively desired outcome of most international projects. In fact, besides the disengagement of the public action, the diffusion of the *neoliberal ethos* is based on the promotion of a model of individual responsibility, inspired by the *homo-economicus* conception, according to

30 Participant observation in a meeting of the round table held in Djerba in May 2016.

which everyone must be a self-made entrepreneur and thus must enhance his 'human capital' (Allal 2016).

Therefore, associations, as new agents of development, are trained by international donors to become the facilitators of the diffusion of these norms. Through their projects, local associations, in turn, diffuse ideas and practices of individual entrepreneurship and self-realization to their beneficiaries (Sigillò and De Facci 2018). An exemplary case of this trend is the creation of the so-called 'espace entreprendre' (entrepreneurial space) throughout the country by the Tunisian–Belgian development projects, which consists of the promotion of self-employment and the consolidation of the assistance of promoters during the different phases of implementation of their projects. The entrepreneurial space is aimed at anyone with qualifications or professional experience who wishes to set up a business. Adopting a participatory approach, local development associations act as facilitators to help micro-entrepreneurs manage projects over the life cycle.

There are other examples of this trend throughout the country. The UNDP agency in Tunisia has implemented development projects based on the support of the private sector. For example, it initiated the program 'Projet création accéléré d'emploi et d'appui à l'entrepreneuriat' in 2014, which goes in this direction. This program aims to foster employment through intensive training for young unemployed graduates and rural women, considered the most vulnerable social category in Tunisia. Since its inception, 250 Tunisians have benefited from the training program.³¹ Beneficiaries have been selected based on the merits of their proposed individual development projects. Training programs are conceived to help beneficiaries develop a business plan as the first step toward creating a sustainable livelihood as a microentrepreneur. In the project brochure, we read the experiences of individuals who have successfully implemented their projects through this program. Another example is the 'Najah mashroua' (My project can be successful) initiative. It provides seed capital to help young unemployed people get their start-ups off the ground.

Reflecting on these case studies of development projects in Tunisia since 2012, it becomes apparent that international donors have seen their function as providing technical assistance in project implementation and *educating associations to be effective*. In so doing, international donors intervene in the life cycle of an NGO: they set the agendas, fix priorities, and shape the means and conditions of activism itself. Put differently; they bring a specific

31 Author's interview with the project coordinator. Tunis, October 2016.

set of ideas about how ‘civil society’ looks to the field, shaping the process fundamentally as a result.

A whole ‘civil society promotion’ sector has been institutionalized to enhance associations’ technical and administrative expertise. From this perspective, the role of international training and workshops is to transfer ‘best practices.’ The direct intervention of international donors concerns capacity-building programs and organizational skills transfer targeting newly born and formerly renewed associations. The demand for the *managerialization* of associations and the consequent professionalization of associational activity is justified by discourse around capacity-building as development. This training is conceived to build a developmental ecosystem, where the primary concern is to improve the skills of local associational operators and transfer these skills to the target population of associational projects.

Generally, international donors insist associations remain far from critical political processes. Indeed, most donors publish grants for specific technical issues, not to strengthen an organization’s political capacity. We find evidence of this trend in many interviews where local experts of international organizations acknowledged: “we only finance associations that are not linked to the political sphere.”³²

According to the communication coordinator of UNDP Tunisia, “associations are fundamental actors for solving the country’s socioeconomic problems, as they are closer to people, so they can easily implement projects funded by international donors.”³³ The community of international donors essentially shares this opinion. Therefore, a plethora of different actors (multilateral, governmental, and non-governmental) have mainly targeted the social fabric. Thus, they have intensified their activities in favor of local associations to supply the lack of public intervention. However, associations can become development agents only if they can professionalize their work. Indeed, the main activities undertaken by the UNDP was to reinforce the professionalization and the specialization of associations to guarantee the autonomy of civil society:

Tunisian civil society needs autonomy, especially from the political sphere, because many active groups today stem from socio-political movements repressed during the old regime. For this reason, it is necessary to work on the professionalization of associations because they still lack autonomy.³⁴

32 Author’s interview with the UNDP Tunisia Communication Coordinator, Tunis, October 2015.

33 Author’s interview with the UNDP Tunisia Communication Coordinator.

34 Author’s interview with the UNDP Tunisia Communication Coordinator.

The main idea is that associations must become agents of development. So, to achieve this task, they must *specialize* in their work as civil society actors. Therefore, “specialization” is deeply linked to professionalization, and development professionals often adopt the term to highlight the need for the independence of civil society actors: “We are working on the professionalization of civil society and its specialization as well. We have good examples of associations that have become professional, and now they are financed by the European Union.”³⁵

Taieb Thalal, the regional coordinator of PASC in Medenine, precisely makes this argument.

Out of 220 applications submitted after the training, only 18 projects were funded by the European Union. These projects are proposed by associations that distinguished themselves during the training phase [and] who developed their managerial skills.³⁶

The EU-funding project PASC is scattered throughout the country and delivers workshops and training programs to help associations formulate and manage projects and to strengthen their capacity to stay clear of the political sphere across the entire life cycle of a given project. Moreover, associations have been increasingly encouraged to follow the “ethical” rules of “good civil society actors” through training linked to EU funding programs. Thus, only associations that have correctly internalized international norms and standards are selected to receive grants. A UNDP Tunisia coordinator reinforces the point:

Two experts evaluate the applications of the associations for the implementation of the projects. Forms and an evaluation grid are used for the selection process. We consider their objectives, the formulation of projects, their execution capacities, and the presence of well-trained staff within the association. So, associations must have some experience in the field.³⁷

Indeed, only most internationalized associations, such as “Iwatch Tunis” or “Avocats sans frontières,” having established strong contacts abroad,

35 Author's interview with the UNDP Tunisia Communication Coordinator, Tunis, October 2015.

36 Author's interview with Taieb Thalal, Regional Coordinator of PASC Medenine, Medenine, February 2016.

37 Author's interview with Taieb Thalal, Regional Coordinator of PASC Medenine, Medenine, February 2016.

eventually receive funding from the EU. Nevertheless, the mechanism of conditionality described above is widespread in Tunisia and seems particularly effective in encouraging associations to follow “best practice” benchmarks. Moreover, the conditionality mechanism continues even after the delivery of grants for small projects of 4/6 months: “If these criteria are not respected by associations who have applied, we ask that their application be frozen. If some problem occurs after the launching of the project, we stop the contract with the partner association.”³⁸

Mercy Corps followed the same approach, often funded by the U.S.–Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). In the framework of the projects Tounès Tekhdem and Tounès Tenmna implemented in Medenine, the training phase was open to all associations active in the governorate. However, only a tiny number of them were selected to receive grants. Therefore, we can easily argue that norms and standards are diffused through a mechanism of indirect coercion, as most local associations adapt to international norms and standards and often transform themselves to participate and thus survive in the new socio-political landscape.

3.5 Between coercion and disengagement: state sponsorship of civil society

In this section, I shed light on some contradictions in the state’s approach vis-à-vis local associations, by showing the gap between the state’s official discourses and practices on the ground. If on the one hand, the state has progressively disengaged from the socioeconomic sphere in line with a neoliberal ideology, on the other hand, it is resilient in maintaining its control over local associations, as it was before 2011. This is partially explained by the persistence of a centralized administrative system that continues to employ officials who were part of the bureaucratic machinery of the pre-revolutionary authoritarian regime.

After the fall of the authoritarian regime, the Tunisian state gave impulse to the flourishing of local associations as pivotal actors who could “successfully contribute to the socioeconomic development of the country.”³⁹ Two devices contributed to this “associational flourishing.” First, the decree-law 88/2011 on creating associations made it possible to simplify administrative

38 Author’s interview with Faïçal DChicha, Regional Coordinator of PASC Medenine, Djerba, April 2016.

39 Interview with Mohamed al Mounir, Regional Coordinator of UNDP, Djerba, May 2016.

procedures by making the “declaration regime” compelling as the basis for the association’s existence. In other words, the new law removed the request for the local authorities’ authorization and the associated “waiting period” by establishing the declaration principle as a basis for the association’s existence. Moreover, by shifting the responsibility for overseeing the registration and regulation of associations from the interior ministry to a dedicated secretariat, the law signaled in no uncertain terms that the coercive practices of the old regime vis-à-vis creation and supervision of associations were over.

Since 2011, the Tunisian state has officially emphasized the crucial contribution of social actors to the development machine. From this perspective, the model of social solidarity economy seems to have become the solution to all the socioeconomic problems of the country and the universal leitmotif of discourses of the government and different political parties. In December 2011, Ridha Chkoundali, an economist in the Ennahda party, pointed out: “if we establish a complementarity between the public and the private sector, while progressively promoting the third sector, that of the social and solidarity economy, Tunisia will be doing very well.”⁴⁰ In March 2016, at the opening of the ‘national dialogue on employment’ workshops,⁴¹ Habib Essid, former prime minister (2015–2016), claimed: “The public sector, which currently employs around 800,000 people, is no longer able to reduce unemployment. The social solidarity economy will greatly support the national effort.”⁴² In April 2016, Lofti Ben Aissa, economist and militant of the Front Populaire: “It is an immediate response to social movements and unemployment. The social and solidarity economy can bring our GDP growth to 4%.”⁴³

In July 2017, under the patronage of Youssef Chahed, who became Tunisia’s prime minister in August 2016 and served until 2020, the Ministry of Development, Investment, and International Cooperation launched the strategic study on the SSE with the support of the UNDP, under the framework of the project “Inclusive Growth and Human Development,” financed by the SDC. The national strategy for the promotion of the SSE was part of the operationalization of the five-year development plan 2016–2020 and within

40 https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2011/12/12/les-islamistes-jouent-leur-credibilite-sur-l-enjeu-economique_1617293_3234.html

41 <https://www.leaders.com.tn/article/19351-les-travaux-preparatoires-du-dialogue-national-sur-l-emploi>.

42 <http://laboress-afrique.org/spip.php?article221>

43 <http://www.webdo.tn/2016/04/20/lotfi-ben-aissa-expert-financier-leconomie-sociale-solidaire-porter-pib-a-4-dici-2020/>

the framework of the new social contract that resulted from the Carthage Agreement in July 2016.⁴⁴ This agreement aims to identify the main strategic axes for developing the SSE in Tunisia and to draw up an action plan to support and promote it. In his speech, the Prime minister expressed his strong commitment and stressed the critical role the SSE could play as a “safe alternative to the creation of wealth and jobs and social inclusion in Tunisia.”⁴⁵ He recalled that Tunisia has a “great potential in the sector” and that “the government will look at the evolution of the social and solidarity economy.”

Creating a Higher Council for the Social Economy is one of the significant decisions announced by the Head of Government during this conference. Moreover, in his speech, Fadhel Abdelkefi, Minister of Investment and International Cooperation and Acting Minister of Finance, said: “In the developed world, SSE is the third pillar of the economy.” He added that “there is the political will to allow its implementation in Tunisia” and that “this new economy will be sustainable and inclusive.” The conference was attended by Nourredine Taboubi, Secretary General of the UGTT, Hichem Elloumi, Vice-President of the UTICA, Abdelmajid Ezzar, President of the the Tunisian Union of Agriculture and Fisheries (UTAP, in French *Union Tunisienne de l'Agriculture et de la pêche*), Samir Bettaieb, Minister of Agriculture, Water Resources and Fisheries, Mohamed Trabelsi, Minister of Social Affairs, and Ridha Saidi, Minister Counselor to the Head of Government. They were unanimous on the importance of this sector as a pillar of development in Tunisia. They also recalled that establishing a legal and economic framework for the SSE in Tunisia is necessary to promote this sector. Representatives of the various ministries, public institutions, civil society, universities, banks, embassies, UN agencies, and technical and financial partners also attended the conference.

It is clear from the preceding discussion that the Tunisian state considers local associations as crucial agents of its development policies. We can list several specific policy initiatives that reinforce the claim. First, associations have become part of the state's active employment policy by establishing voluntary civil service. This is an internship opportunity for unemployed graduates to have a work experience in associations, with an allowance of

44 In summer 2016, President Essebsi oversaw a process to create a government of national unity that, it was hoped, would have stabilized Tunisia. This process was formalized in July 2016 through the Carthage Agreement.

45 These and following quotes are obtained from participation in the conference, Sheraton hotel, Tunis, July 2017.

200 dinars and social security paid by ANETI (Agence Nationale pour l'emploi et le travail indépendant), the agency formally attached to the Ministry of Employment. This system enables graduates to follow, on a voluntary and part-time basis, training courses to acquire practical skills and professional attitudes to facilitate their integration into working life. Designed in 2011, in an emergency, this initiative aims to develop young associations through trainees paid by the state and enhance the role of associations in the struggle against the rise of unemployment in the country.

We see since 2011 that associations are increasingly considered agents for implementing public policies due to the progressive retreat of the state from the socioeconomic sphere. Much like associations, the state has “caught on” to the benefits presented by the normative discourse of international donors, according to which associations must be professionalized to be effective. As a matter of fact, since 2014, hiring rules for civil service have become stricter: the association must be affiliated with the social security system. Therefore, only better-organized associations can benefit. Another emblematic example of the state's conception of the role of local associations is the establishment of those mentioned above “entrepreneurial spaces,” created after 2011 by the Tunisian–Belgian development assistance. Through this initiative, the state has established partnerships between the development associations and the Ministry of Employment. Associations, indeed, once having acquired sound expertise, have the role of accompanying and monitoring young unemployed graduates who wish to create their projects. Therefore, associations *participating* in this process are legitimated as policy collaborators or even as subsidiary actors of the state.

Officials of local administrations in the three governorates under analysis have stressed the importance of associations for implementing public policies and as agents of local development. In all the governorates under investigation, the local administrations talk about the necessity of solid cooperation between state and local associations to implement public policies under the fluid framework of the SSE. For example, the general director of development in the governorate in Sfax, who reports directly to the Ministry of Development in Tunis, stresses the importance of local associations fostering the development of the region:

Associations are resources for the governorates. They must have the expertise to help the governorate to implement development policies.... There are associations in Sfax with which we are in partnership. These associations count experts who can develop strategic plans for the city

and the entire region. These associations are people who matter to the town and have the material and symbolic means [to influence policy].⁴⁶

In Sfax, some associations belonging to the urban upper-middle class network are strong enough to present themselves as partners of local administration. Contrarily, in Siliana, local associations suffer the marginalization of the regional context. Thus, they do not have the material and social means to present themselves as public policy agents. Moreover, Siliana's donor footprint is smaller than other country areas. According to the former governor Slim Tissaoui 2016, "even if Siliana, as an inland region, has meager socioeconomic rates, the region is not under the international spotlight as other interior regions, such as Kasserine and Jendouba; therefore, the intervention of international donors is relatively weak."⁴⁷ For this reason, the state directly intervenes by providing local associations training to strengthen their capacities.

International donors are instead particularly active in Medenine. Therefore, local administration is embedded in the "development machine" of international donors, especially in the framework of SSE projects. An emblematic example is the role of local administration in coordinating the socioeconomic round table for the development mentioned before. The southern development office's general director directly responds to the development ministry, has the role of moderator during the round table meetings and the coordinator of all the activities. According to a participatory approach, the socioeconomic round table is composed of equal thirds of civil society actors (exclusively professionalized development associations), representatives of local administration (mainly the officials of the southern development office,) and private sector actors (local enterprises). Composed this way, the round table is highly participatory and a representative place for discussion and production of ideas on local development. The decision-making body is a steering committee composed of elected representatives of the three categories mentioned above, with the co-participation of donors. The steering committee decides on the activities that will be prioritized and the associations that will be supported to undertake development projects. Associations that obtain grants to implement projects are not necessarily part of the round table, but funding always depends on the priorities the steering

46 Author's interview with Khaled Hachicha, General Director of the regional development office of Sfax, November 2016.

47 Author's interview with Slim Tissaoui, former Governor of Siliana, June 2016.

committee determines. The decentralized administration plays a vital role in coordination.

Therefore, according to the examples mentioned above, the disengagement of the state from the socioeconomic sphere in a neoliberal perspective does not necessarily imply a total absence of the state but rather its redeployment under other forms (Hibou 1998). The State can be very active in all the critical stages of the implementation of SSE projects, including the selection of local associations involved. This apparent contradiction unveils some characteristics of the state's approach vis-à-vis civil society actors. Indeed, as in the case of international donors, the state's power to "promote and exclude" (Challand 2009) implies an indirect coercion mechanism, as associations are indirectly forced to conform to norms and standards. Otherwise, they disappear. This need for the state's apparatus to be always present and its persistent control over associations is so strong that it has generated several conflicts with local associations. For instance, local administrations do not favor the possibility of associations attracting resources from international donors bypassing the state (even if, after 2011, this procedure is legal, whereas this was not possible in the era of Ben Ali).

Moreover, obstacles to collaboration between associations and local administrations originate from a misinterpretation that the latter has of the role that associations could play. Besides the official discourse on the autonomy of associations, the administration perceives them essentially as a relay of the state. Thus, it neglects their involvement in decision-making processes in the implementation of development: "the associations must learn to stay in their place, they cannot make decisions, it is the administration that must make the decisions."⁴⁸ During a focus group involving associations and representatives of the local administration of the governorate of Siliana, the conflict became evident. Specifically, associations did not recognize the work of the state. They claimed that they have to intervene in public action according to a mechanism of subsidiarity. At the same time, local administrations did not recognize the legitimacy of associations intervening independently from the state in sectors considered a state's prerogative, such as development. Indeed, local administration officials demonstrated their reluctance to leave the whole initiative to associations, even if, at the same time, they indirectly

48 These data were obtained through a focus group whose participants were local administration officials, members of local association steering committees and project managers of international donors' offices established in Siliana, organized in 2017.

forced them to professionalize to be autonomous. On the other hand, associations replied that the state wants them as “good soldiers.”⁴⁹ More precisely, associations denounce that the state, according to the official discourse, intends to leave them autonomous, yet within a framework of control that seems to recall an old authoritarian mechanism of co-optation of civil society actors.⁵⁰

The parallelism with the authoritarian phase is not unusual in post-revolutionary Tunisia, as the administrative and bureaucratic apparatus has not changed after 2011. This implies that most civil servants are the same as those recruited under RCD hegemony. Therefore, it is not surprising that the opening of the political opportunity structure after 2011 has generated the fear of losing control from at least one part of the local administration. The persistent need for a solid apparatus to control local associations is quite evident from the analysis of how rules and public devices dedicated to civil society are exploited by local administrations. Meddeb highlights how the “voluntary civil service” is becoming a means of reorganizing the action of local authorities:

Deprived of active and legitimate mediation channels, delegates sought to rely on associations to meet the population. The use of these associations partly responds to the desire to find relays that can collect and provide information on the population’s social and economic situation. Without financial means, delegates seek to develop local resources, trying to organize the community around managing the social issue. (Meddeb 2015: 373).

The state’s fear of loss of control over civil society has been reinforced by the increasing specific weight of political actors who, after 2011, are present on a local scale in local municipalities.⁵¹ The Islamist party Ennahda, mainly its capacity to penetrate society, seems to be the primary concern of local civil servants who, before the revolution, were engaged in the RCD’s machine of control and who, after 2011, reinvested in the secular, neo-Bourguibist party Nidaa Tounès. From this perspective, the evaluation of the regional

49 Author’s interview with an activist of the association ‘Les Aventuriers du Développement’, Siliana, June 2017.

50 Data were gathered from the focus group in Siliana in June 2017.

51 The first fair and free local elections in Tunisia were held on May 2018. Until then the members of representative local bodies were nominated by the Ministry of Interior. The composition was decided based on the results of parliamentary elections of 2011 and 2014.

development director about the state of civil society in the governorate of Siliana seems particularly emblematic:

The associational fabric is regressing; the forthcoming decentralization law risks leaving the territory to local political decision-makers. As a development agency and an agent of the state, I can't allow politicians to take control of the associations. Politicians do not know how to manage the region. Therefore, civil society must prepare itself to be autonomous: there will be ten elected officials who will have political power.⁵²

This fear of local civil servants dates back to the conflict between the state and the Tunisian Islamic movement during the authoritarian regime. *Ennahda*, which until 2011 could not compete in the political arena because of massive repression, has progressively developed a bottom-up strategy: broadening its constituency by penetrating society. Thus, the conflict was reactivated after 2011 with the flourishing of Islamic charities close to the Islamist party. In particular, after the political crisis of the summer of 2013, Islamic charities started to be affected by severe sanctions with the accusation of opacity and lack of professionalism. As we will see in the last section of this chapter, the deployment of coercive methods has partially produced the transformation of these social actors.

Undoubtedly, the conflict between local associations and the administration is also linked to internal issues within the administration itself regarding the approach adopted to plan regional development policies. Indeed, the approach taken by the administration is both centralized and sectorial, the same as that adopted before 2011. It is centralized as the regional development directorate (the representation of the Ministry of Development at the governorate level) has the task of returning to the Ministry of Interior the documents presented by the local branches of the other ministries. In other words, only the central administration can create the regional development plan.

Moreover, the approach remains sectorial, which means it does not consider the issue of development as a whole and thus does not include ideas and contributions of those organizations and associations not structured within the administrative sector of development, but which contribute to development through their activities. Hundreds of associations claim to contribute to local development through their work but are not formally

52 Author's interview with G. Houcine, General Director of regional development, Siliana June 2016 and June 2017.

registered as “development associations.” The development policies of the state exclude these.

From this perspective, the participatory approach to the development plan is not accepted by the ministry at the central level. Even where local public servants have an innovative approach, they encounter severe difficulties in applying a participatory approach detached from Tunis's leading power. Therefore, views of the associations are not considered since the Ministry of Development only consults the regional directorates. This reveals a clear difficulty in pruning forward a process of political decentralization of public action in the aftermath of the end of authoritarian rule.

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Part II

Associations as players and arenas

There was a revolution, so we must change.
(Mohamed, head of a charitable association in Sfax)

4 Associations as players

Abstract

This chapter illustrates the associations' agency by analyzing the activation of localized networks under the normative frame of professionalization. Notably, it sheds light on mechanisms of NGOization of local associations by showing how their organizational structures have adapted, their cultivation of competences through the recruitment of professional experts, and the specialization of their activities. In light of this, the chapter shows how most associations have progressively internalized the neoliberal model of civil society as a *strategy of adaptation* to exploit emerging opportunities under new constraints. Therefore, I demonstrate that the process of professionalization—the acquisition of a new professional language and practices—acts as a sort of “access code” to participate in the post-authoritarian redefinition of the public sphere.

Keywords: professionalization, NGOs, social development, charity, civil society

4.1 From associations to NGOs: building new ideas and practices

Since 2011, local associations in Tunisia have been transforming. In particular, NGOs have been progressively *bureaucratizing* and *professionalizing*, eschewing the more unstructured approach of earlier periods (De Facci 2021). The underlining hypothesis I lay out in this chapter is that associations have professionalized to *survive in the post-revolutionary arena*. This reflects their need to negotiate opportunities and constraints set by international donors and the Tunisian state after 2011.

Moreover, since 2011, hundreds of associations have disappeared because they have been unable to attract international and local resources (donor funding or state subsidies) or because they have been sanctioned for breaching rules—the main factor explaining the failure of local associations to

gain funding and thrive their *lack of professionalization*. In the following analysis, I draw on data from 70 associations scattered across four regions of Tunisia to show that almost all have progressively adapted to the newly dominant civil society discourses and practices. In other words, they have gradually defined their ideas, structures, and competences according to a neoliberal frame.

In conformity with Law No. 88 of September 24, 2011, local associations must have a steering committee consisting of a president, a vice-president, and a treasurer to be officially recognized. Indeed, the idea is that associations' activities require a centralized decision of power. We observe that over time most associations under analysis, notwithstanding their size, vocation, and regional context of reference, have improved their organizational structure. As stated by the president of the association 'Massar pour le développement' in Medenine:

In the beginning, we were an informal group of friends. We did not establish any hierarchy. We decided to nominate a president, a vice-president, and a treasurer among us just because we were obliged by the law order to become an association. Then, we realized that to survive, we had to become professional. Thus, we needed a more robust structure and procedures. Now we have an assembly every month and internal elections every year.¹

The majority of associations interviewed have followed these new procedures.

The general idea stressed by associations is the necessity of becoming professional. In particular, the new frame is characterized by a strong emphasis on individual entrepreneurship and self-realization. Thus, we have progressively witnessed a *managerialization* of social practices. Associations are captured by a commercial logic, where specific skills are developed through continuous training, and politicization is highly frowned upon. Specialization is intended as the effort to formulate a language and practices particular to *the associational system*. Such a system has nothing to do with the political sphere and should be kept separate.

The diffusion of a market-oriented approach within the associational system emerges during interviews, mainly when associations reflect on themselves. As claimed by the president of the "W." association. in the governorate of Siliana: "a professionalized association is necessary to have

1 Interview with the president of the association, Medenine, May 2016.

structured ideas and goals and to be competitive.”² Similarly, the president of the association “E.” in Medenine claimed:

We cannot always continue with volunteering. We must professionalize. In the past, there was enough time. We do not know if there will be a time in the future. People must be paid for their work because they offer a service to the community.³

The idea of competitiveness in a free market of services provided by the third sector is the leitmotif that characterizes the process of institutionalization of local associations. In other words, the emphasis has shifted from direct involvement through voluntary action and hands-on activities to professionally driven activities that attract financial support. Moreover, the focus is on increasing the number of dues-paying members, enhancing the organization’s image, and obtaining grants and sponsorship to ensure organizational stability. For example, the association “H.” president based in Medenine, stated: “We try to organize recreational activities in the city to make the association known and increase the adherents. It’s essential to be more effective in the field.”⁴

Following this idea of effectiveness, most associations interviewed declared they had added an executive committee composed of new professional figures to their organigram. The idea is that associational activity requires the institutionalization of roles of expertise. In this regard, I have observed the rise of NGO experts, who—while not essential for associations to thrive—do increase their professionalism. These professional figures comprise the so-called *developmental arena* (de Sardan 1995). Their creation has been accompanied by institutional motivations for direct involvement in the “development machine” of post-revolutionary Tunisia.

Indeed, securing international funding has altered how local associations organize themselves. In particular, the intensification of interactions with international donors after 2011 drove the rise of expert cadres in this field. The so-called “social solidarity economy” (SSE) projects exemplify this new trend, as these projects prompt local associations to recruit and train an ever-expanding array of experts, bureaucrats, NGO leaders, researchers, technicians, project leaders, and field agents, who in turn mobilize symbolic and material resources. These experts can be considered *strategic hires*,

2 Author’s interview with the Project Manager of the association W., Siliana, June 2016.

3 Author’s interview with the President of the association E., Medenine, May 2016.

4 Author’s interview with the President of the association H., Medenine, February 2016.

as their competences make associations more attractive to international funding. Indeed, as mentioned in the previous chapter, several donors have confirmed their preference for associations that maintain professional experts on the staff, which is read as a kind of proxy or guarantee of effectiveness.

Professional titles are a critical marker in this new associational environment. In this environment, the figure of the 'consultant' hails from outside the association, while the 'project manager' works on the inside. The project manager has the competences to plan and formulate project proposals in response to donor funding calls. Typically, it is those within the local association who have had the benefit of workshops or training sessions put forward in the role of project manager, and they are charged with liaising with international donors. Once the association has obtained funding, its project manager is directly paid by the donor. Therefore, the position of a project manager is highly sought-after.

When one local association succeeds in obtaining funding in this way, it triggers an emulation mechanism in the field. Those associations are still outside the international donors' 'development machine' due to a lack of experience or skills that mimic 'what works.' In this way, 'best practice' discourses and practices of the most successful, internationalized local associations become diffused through the field. For example, once small and weak associations in rural areas, such as those scattered among the mountains of Béni Khedache in the governorate of Medenine, have progressively adopted new technical languages and procedures observed in the professionalized urban associations that stand out for their effectiveness. Moreover, the emulation mechanism can quickly result in intense competition among groups with similar goals to develop or recruit competences to secure the resources necessary to survive. This dynamic is striking in the governorate of Siliana, where resources are particularly scarce.

The broader behavior change dynamic here reflects the public space's changed structure since 2011. Associations adapt their behavior to *be recognized as legitimate actors* in this evolving public space. They modify their self-conception, organizational structures, and activities instrumentally to market their new expertise to the state. As discussed in previous chapters, they have championed third-sector initiatives since the revolution. This progressive adaptation by local associations reflects their interest in participating in the third-sector implementation of public policies by allowing them to bill themselves as *agents of development* in this arena.

Evidence of this approach emerges through analysis of the discourses and observation of the practices of local associations scattered across four

regions of the country. Members of associations have acquired a standardized language, which emerges clearly during the interviews. This language allows them to present themselves to local administrations and international actors as effective 'developmental operators' (and as such, legitimized in the public sphere). Specifically, they have learned to use technical speech that includes concepts and terminology (including 'buzzwords') linked to the universe of productivity and effectiveness. This language is supported by international donors who are concerned with finding reliable local partners: "associations, of course, are not enterprises, but they should start to think in terms of outputs."⁵ Diffused on a massive scale throughout the sector, this discourse influences all associational activities.

Interestingly, it is the associations themselves that are most critical of 'amateurism' (as we will see later, criticism of amateurism is an instrument used to delegitimize and attack other associations that are involved in the political contention) and highlight the value of professionalism of their work, the skills and technical experience of their members, and the standardization of their procedures:

Associational work can't be effective if associations are not professionalized. In Medenine, for example, no more than two or three associations genuinely impact the region's development. My association in Zarzis, for instance, is one of the most effective, as international donors widely recognize it, as it treats associational life as a real job and not an activity to conduct during free time.⁶

This discourse has diffused widely among the majority of associations of Medenine and other associations in other regions of the country. This suggests that discourse on professionalization is an instrument of legitimacy in the new public sphere. Moreover, the transformation process implies a specialization of local associations in one specific sector of activity. In the beginning, organizations from the revolutionary period operated according to a rather vague agenda consisting of social, cultural, and educational activities: "at the beginning, we used to conduct awareness-raising, and positive-thinking activities focused on local issues."⁷

5 Author's interview with C. Ghorbali, Regional Coordinator of PASC focal point and President of an association, Siliana, June 2017.

6 Author's interview with Faiçal Dchicha, Regional Coordinator of PASC focal point in Medenine and President of the ADDCI association in Zarzis, Djerba, May 2016.

7 Author's interview with the president of an association, Medenine, May 2016.

Over the years, most associations have progressively standardized their objectives on reducing poverty in marginalized regions and creating strategic plans for the development of urban areas, notably because of the interest and support of international donors and the state in this range of activities:

Initially, we used to contribute to social development by raising the local population's awareness of public health problems. In our opinion, these activities contribute to the social development of our region. Yet, international donors and the state have a narrow conceptualization of development. They consider 'development' just from a procedural perspective and not a substantial one. They only think those associations that have on their staff professional figures charged with implementing and following up projects as development associations. For this reason, we have decided to specialize in setting up development projects, with a particular reference to the model of social solidarity economy. This is the only way to be considered by institutions.⁸

Thus, the specialization in 'development projects' has progressively become a trend even among unstructured associations of rural areas that have had the chance to fall within the zone of influence of international donors. For instance, small associations that in 2011 used to conduct mere recreational activities for their local beneficiaries, over the last ten years, have started recruiting experts, formulating technical diagnoses on socioeconomic problems related to the territory, and producing detailed reports highlighting possible solutions to contribute to local development so to target a greater audience.

From the international donors' perspective, the idea is to enhance territorial resources and local know-how by professionalizing key-people involved in such development projects. For instance, in the framework of the project Tounès Tanmna promoted by MEPI since 2012, associations in Medenine had the opportunity to acquire technical skills through training and workshops provided by Mercy Corps, an American NGO acting as an intermediary between the United States government and Tunisian associations. The same opportunities are provided through PASC training in Siliana. This expertise acquired by local associations has been instrumental in producing technical reports at the service of regional development strategies. Moreover, it has activated a righteous path that made associations more competitive and attractive to the international donor market.

8 Author's interview with the President of the association S., Siliana, June 2016.

Therefore, associations have become agents facilitating the formulation and implementation of development policies, as they have a greater capacity to attract funding and visibility than isolated individuals. From this point of view, associational activity becomes a service which is instrumental to the state's development policy. In other words, *development* mostly becomes "an NGO affair" (Abu-Sada and Challand 2011).

4.2 The pragmatic turn of Islamic associations

This section deals with the transformation of Islamic actors at the civil society level. The literature on the Islamist Ennahdha party's ideological change has grown considerably in recent years. However, few works have focused on the trajectories of Islamic *activists* outside the political party and, most importantly, on the broader implications that the pluralization of modes of engagement has on the transformation of Islamic activism (Sigillò 2021).

Authors such as Olivier Roy and Asef Bayat explained the transformation process of Islamist movements through the lenses of the post-Islamism framework, highlighting that Islamism as a revolutionary change process had failed (Roy 1992; Bayat 2005). The second theoretical approach stresses the concept of moderation instead. For authors such as Schwedler (2007), the main factor of evolution is the transformation of the Islamist's political strategy, where the decisive factor is the enlargement of the political boundaries. Schwedler claimed that, given a chance to participate, Islamists would consider politics of institutional integration and ideological moderation.

In this chapter, I challenge the specificity of previous analyses by looking at Islamic actors as players like the others. Notably, I show how different kinds of Islamic actors transformed themselves in light of strategic interactions with the other actors in the post-authoritarian arena. From this point of view, Islamic associations are subject to the same interactive dynamics as their secular counterparts. In other words, the transformations undergone by Islamic associations are not exceptional but in line with the dynamics of changes of other social actors wishing to legitimate themselves after 2011.

Islamic associations that emerged after 2011 began to compete with secular NGOs to attract international legitimacy and survive in the political arena after the Jomaa government's securitization campaign in January 2014. In other words, this was a transformation triggered by the *selective incentives* that civil society promoters offered—only professionalized and depoliticized civic actors were in the running. These incentives could be *direct*, such as the subsidies doled out to selected associations, or *indirect*, such as a

disposition to spare select local associations from coercion, allowing them to survive. Given these circumstances, many Islamic associations changed their names, their logos, how they presented themselves to the public, and their internal and external organizational structures (further details in the next section). The changed situation has spurred other changes that have gone beyond a mere superficial restyling. People interviewed explained the desire to broaden the range of *da'wa* (preaching activities) activities beyond the 'traditional' sectors, such as charity, and to combine *da'wa* with activities with the notion of 'development,' interpreted broadly.

This transformation is coupled with a strong emphasis on individual entrepreneurship and self-realization. In light of this, religious-based associations have become captured by commercial logic, and specific skills are developed through continuous training and criticism of politicization. For instance, in recent years, many charitable associations combined *da'wa* activities with customized courses on 'personal' or 'human development' (*tanmia bashariyya*), also described as 'individual coaching' for women, men, and children.⁹ The association Da'wa wa al-Islah, founded in 2012 by the charismatic preacher Habib Ellouze, Ennahda's most conservative leader, well exemplifies this trend. The association has originally developed in Sfax in 2012, in parallel to the party's specialization in political affairs (*tahassus*), and then expanded over the years to almost every governorate in the country. The organization represents a reference for the more conservative part of the population, offering social and human development counseling services to all family members. Training courses on 'life coaching' are taught by professional counselors, mostly educated abroad in fields such as psychology, philosophy, and theology.¹⁰

This transformation also required a complex reconceptualization of the role of *da'wa* in a changed framework characterized by a market-based approach. This approach is readily apparent in interviews, mainly when associational leaders, all old militants of the Islamist movement, reflect on their association. As claimed by the president of the association W. in Siliana's governorate, "a professionalized association is necessary to have structured ideas and goals and to be competitive."¹¹ The president of the association E. in Medenine claimed:

We cannot continue with volunteering; we must professionalize. In the past, there was enough time; we do not know if there will be a time in

9 Author's interview. Sfax, February 2017.

10 Author's interview. Tunis, July 2019.

11 Author's interview. Siliana, June 2016.

the future. People must be paid for their work because they serve the community. For instance, our sessions of individual coaching [and] our family planning, which we provide for free to our community, have a cost, as our trainers are professionals.¹²

The idea of competitiveness in a free market of services provided by the third sector is the leitmotif that characterizes the process of institutionalization of local associations. In other words, the emphasis has shifted from direct involvement through voluntary action and hands-on activities to professionally driven activities that attract financial support. Moreover, the focus is on increasing the number of dues-paying members, enhancing the organization's image, and obtaining grants and sponsorship to ensure organizational stability. For example, the president of the association H. based in Medenine, stated: "we try to organize recreational activities, including spiritual retreats, in the city to publicize the association's work and encourage new adherents."¹³

Overall, changes in the self-conception, organizational structure, and activities of local associations emerged as part of a marketing strategy to 'sell' the association to the state, which encourages third-sector initiatives along neoliberal lines. Recently, Islamic associations have competed with their secular counterparts to participate in implementing public policies by introducing themselves as 'agents of development.' As presented above, it refers to the technical speech informed of concepts and words linked to the universe of productivity and effectiveness, supported by international donors and their concern with finding reliable local partners: "associations, of course, are not enterprises, but they should start to think in terms of outputs."¹⁴

Moreover, in recent years, several Islamic associations have joined multiple arenas of urban mobilization beyond the 'traditional' Islamic cause, thus hybridizing the Islamic network with other local civic circles. In other words, Islamic associations have committed to new arenas of mobilization. The city of Sfax is emblematic; here, local religiously oriented associations have started to mobilize in recent years around specific local issues that might once have been seen as the remit of secular associations, such as environmental issues or the recovery of urban spaces. Participant observation at various mobilization events (assemblies, demonstrations,

12 Author's interview. Medenine, February 2016.

13 Author's interview. Medenine, May 2016.

14 Author's interview with the responsible UNDP Tunisia, Tunis, November 2015.

sit-ins) and interviews conducted with the leaders of associations leading the movement offers an account of the demand by Islamic associations to participate in the decision-making process.

On January 14, 2016, on the fifth anniversary of the Tunisian Revolution, the 'Sfaxian Collective for Environment and Development' (a citizen's network of about 40 associations) organized a massive commemoration march across the city, showcasing a surprising degree of community cohesion, despite the city's reputation for ideological polarization. The march drew a crowd of 5,000 participants, including leaders of political parties and civil society actors from across the political spectrum and the football ultras of the 'Sfaxian Sports Club.' First among the issues brought forward by the mobilization was a demand that the 'Société Industrielle d'Acide Phosphorique et d'Engrais' (SIAPE) phosphate processing plant be closed. Located near the south coast 5 km from Sfax, locals deemed the plant a significant pollution hazard. In addition, the marchers borrowed from slogans used during the revolution ("Get out!", "The people demand...!"), thereby invoking the ongoing popular struggle for "the good of the city" against a development model imposed by the capital.¹⁵

Representatives of secular associations put the participation of Islamic associations in these events down to a strategy "to occupy new spaces of mobilization to amplify its constituency further."¹⁶ However, this interpretation sounds reductive, as it overlooks how Islamist activists reconceptualized the missionary role of *da'wa* in framing their participation. Indeed, they grounded their participation explicitly in religious terms: "behaving as a good Muslim means respecting the environment and joining collective *jihad* to clean the streets and make sure traffic is regulated."¹⁷

Since 2014, the collective mentioned above has increased its activities, and new associations have joined, involving both Islamist and secular activists in development projects for the city, such as the recovery of urban zones such as the Taparura area or Casino Beach. Furthermore, some charities joined partnerships with national authorities, seeking a renewed relationship with local collectivities as a legitimate strategy. The municipality of Sfax welcomes this new approach. Finally, Islamic charities have collaborated with cities to help them in raising funds as part of the participatory budget

15 Author's interview with the responsible UNDP Tunisia, Tunis, November 2015.

16 Author's interviews with several members of developmental secular associations, Sfax, October 2018.

17 Author's interview with the Secretary General of the association *Da'wa wa al-Islah*, Tunis, July 2018.

process (discussed in more detail below), with many associations using their grassroots proximity to solicit donations or raise awareness (De Facci 2017).

Thus, in a political context characterized by the increasing delegitimization of religious actors, Islamic groups in Sfax reconceptualized their sacred mission by drawing on the *da'wa* principles of “commanding good and forbidding wrong” (Meijer 2009) to participate in public policy debates affecting the entire community. The Islamic activists’ sense of belonging to the city of Sfax, in other words, their *Sfaxian identity*, explains why this approach to legitimizing their participation was selected. Put differently, the difficulty of justifying a religious commitment pushes Islamic associations to seek an alternative mission based on the ‘common good,’ serving the city in ways that need not reference religion explicitly. This adjustment is achieved through the hybridization of the Islamic network and new urban networks mobilizing *for* the city.

4.3 The ‘NGOization’ of Islamic charities

In this section, I will describe the professionalization of Islamic charities by showing their adaptation to the depoliticized and technocratic ‘civil society paradigm.’ The bureaucratization of charitable associations is not specific to the Tunisian case. Scholars have studied the NGOization of Islamic charities in several countries, notably Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen (Clark 2004), Palestine (Challand 2008), Saudi Arabia (Khan 2020), Pakistan, Norway, and the UK (Borchevrink 2020). However, in Tunisia, the politicization of these associations has been more salient than in other countries as they developed only recently (after 2011) and following decades of repression of the Islamist movement.

Like their counterparts in other countries, Tunisian Islamic charities have undergone a deep transformation triggered by the external pressure of a neoliberal international system and the internal dynamics of state privatization. However, in Tunisia, Islamic charities have also been subjected to a differentiated relationship with the Islamist party, which entailed a process of ‘specialization’ in a context of intense societal and political conflict. Initially, when they were created, “these associations had weak, informal structures, compared to their secular counterparts. Moreover, when they first started to provide services in peripheral zones, their activities went generally unnoticed by the international donor community” (Sigillò 2016b). Yet, since 2014, they can no longer source funding from Gulf countries. As a result, most of them have focused on developing their technical ability to

meet the requirements of Western donor sources of funding, honing their expertise to “acquire better practices” and be legitimized as “civil society actors.”¹⁸ This has resulted in a steady transformation in structures and processes since 2014.

The securitization campaign undoubtedly accelerated this change. As a result of the conflictual dynamics with the national authorities, associations moved steadily in the direction of *managerialization* of their practices, especially in terms of financial management. During interviews, many associations reported needing to hire accounting experts “to avoid problems with the state.”¹⁹ It is significant that during interviews with executive boards, board members made an objective point of presenting their financial records, revealing their preoccupation with transparency and desire to legitimize their management procedures. Thus, professionalization has gone beyond “adopting best practice” to become a shield that associations use to defend themselves from any “attack by the state.” As one charity president explained:

We need to improve our work to avoid any attack from the state concerning bureaucratic issues. Now the accounts and registers are in order, with the complete list of financial transactions from our national and international donors.²⁰

Moreover, as a strategy to acquire a renewed legitimacy vis-à-vis national authorities, some charities have begun to assume the role of subsidiary actors, collaborating with local administrations to organize some events or projects, thus following a logic of engagement with institutions. As stated by a member of an association in Medenine, “We are glad as the delegate has called us to ask if the association wishes to collaborate with the local administration in the distribution of school materials next September.”²¹

The transformation peaked following Ennahda’s ‘specialization’ between the political dimension (supposed to be a political party business) and the religious dimension (assumed to be the business of associations), which in turn has facilitated a parallel specialization between preaching associations and charities. A former militant of the MIT and president of a charitable association in Tunis observed: “We are looking to specialize in the field

18 Excerpts from author’s interviews with associations’ leaders in the four governorates under investigation.

19 Author’s interview with the President of a charitable association in Siliana, June 2016.

20 Author’s interview with the President of a charitable association in Tunis, November 2015.

21 Telephone call with the President of a charitable association in Tunis, September 2016.

of civil society, while Ennahda specializes in political affairs.”²² Thus, charitable associations developed into a technocratic specialization going in the direction of professionalized NGOs for development, thus responding to the logic of civic engagement, formally separated from the political and religious spheres. The separation of civic life from political life according to the dominant model of an autonomous civil society fostered by the specialization process led the associations to be physiologically exposed to a transformative environment. It implies contacts with international and national institutions offering incentives and opportunities not foreseen in the political sphere and pushing associations to behave in a certain way. In addition, associational entrepreneurs, who belong to the well-educated middle class (Haenni 2002; Clark 2004), seem to be more and more driven by career motivation rather than by political ideals. Members of executive committees of associations are professionals and have often had the chance to study and train abroad. Therefore, they are highly motivated to invest their human capital in their association.

According to the interviews, the organizational practices of charitable associations are more and more informed by marketing criteria. In organizing their activities, they have established a division of labor to serve local needs efficiently. They have divided the urban space into zones of intervention so that each association oversees operating a specific zone. Associations have created shared databases based on this grid of interventions to avoid duplication. Moreover, associations started to compete on their level of professionalism.

Indeed, most professionalized associations display a hegemonic ambition over the associational field. For example, the association S. is the biggest and most professionalized charity with a religious mission or creed in the governorate of Sfax. “S.” grew out of MIT after 2011. Like many charitable associations in Tunisia following the government’s crackdown on the charitable sector in the summer of 2013 (detailed in Chapter 2), S. changed its name, shedding all religious connotations, and moved to specialize in civic affairs. Thus, nowadays, we can observe a total restyling of the association with the presence of new professional figures. M., among the association’s founding members, today acts as an external consultant. He had the opportunity to gain experience and acquire expertise abroad as a refugee in Germany during the authoritarian period:

When I was in Germany as a refugee, I had the opportunity to work for three years in a diocese, the administrative division of the protestant

22 Author’s interview with a former activist of the MIT, Tunis, October 2017.

church in Germany. I used to collaborate as a management assistant. I was also 'fortunate' enough to familiarize myself with a social crisis [unemployment]. We created a social center for crisis management. Moreover, I also worked in an association for refugees by implementing EU projects in partnership with Greece and the Netherlands. All these experiences helped me to become familiar with charitable activities and their management. Therefore, I exploited this expertise once I returned after the revolution and decided to create a charitable association. We are the most professionalized charitable association in Sfax. All the other associations in Sfax depend on our skills and resources. We are a model for the Tunisian associational system.²³

M. discourse is suffused with technical and market-oriented terminology. He stresses the need to keep the civic and political spheres separate the civic and political spheres, venturing the opinion that other charitable associations are still too linked to political parties. When referring to the association and its beneficiaries, he employs phrases like 'strategies of communication,' 'organization strategy,' 'outputs,' and 'clients,' all terms that sit comfortably in a neoliberal frame. Moreover, he acknowledged the real challenge of working through horizontal networks, noting too many subjectivities to align. He claims there is a need for an umbrella association that can work professionally and competently, and can assume a leading role over others, such as S. which should incorporate the work of other associations. More minor charitable associations in Sfax substantiate these observations: "Our organization has the ambition to bring together the Sfaxian charitable sector under its control, and it is for this reason that the Sfaxian project of a network of Islamic associations failed in 2013."²⁴

Beyond the restyling of discourses and organizational practices, religious-based associations have also broadened their activities to other sectors, such as social development (*tanmia ijtima'ia*). Activists I interviewed justified this decision because it prevents beneficiaries from forming relationships of dependency with the charities who serve them:

We want to spread a new concept, that of *social development*. Charity is important, but it risks fostering dependency among beneficiaries. We need to specialize in *development* to contribute to social change.²⁵

23 Author's interview with M., consultant of a charitable association in Sfax, January 2016.

24 Author's interview with the President of the charitable association N., Sfax, May 2016.

25 Author's interview with the Vice-President of OTDS, Tunis, January 2017.

According to other people interviewed, the idea of “social development” is in line with the dominant model of “social solidarity economy” spreading throughout the country and promoted by international donors via development associations. Moreover, when asked about the reason for doing so, volunteers explained that it was a rational choice intended to “create more of an impact and therefore be more efficacious.”²⁶

Many associations have changed their names due to this changing set of circumstances. For example, the charity ‘Rahma’ (Mercy) changed its name in 2014, adopting a new name with no religious reference. In doing so, it has expanded its sphere of activity to social development and local governance. The charitable association Marhama, whose president is the former Ennahda leader Moshen Jandoubi, changed its name to the ‘Organisation tunisienne pour le développement social’ (OTDS). Indeed, the OTDS has led the *normalization* of Islamic charities at a national level. The OTDS brochure shows that the association’s mission is divided along four “strategic axes.”²⁷ These are: promoting the *social solidarity economy*, developing *partnerships and networks* among local associations, facilitating their collaboration with local administration and international institutions, contributing to consolidating the technical skills and institutional capacities of civil society actors, and reinforcing the OTDS capacities according to the principles of quality management. Moreover, the association built up a parallel observatory called ASDI, with the task of providing legal services to the members of its association and the network of local associations under its umbrella. This professional device is strategically important due to the state’s periodic legal injunctions against charitable associations.

Overall, this discourse reveals a strategy of seeking legitimation at the international level by shedding any religious connotations the organization once had. This rebranding has significantly affected how charities present themselves to the public, especially foreign interlocutors. During interviews, several respondents avoided the terms ‘Islamic’ and ‘religious’ altogether, referring to themselves as “good Muslims in a Muslim country, that’s all” (Sigillò 2016b).²⁸ We can find evidence of the transformation of Islamic charities according to this new logic even in the most conservative regions of southern Tunisia, where religion has historically influenced social mobilization activities.

26 Author’s interview with President of the association R., Tunis, April 2016.

27 Data retrieved from the analysis of the association’s firsthand material provided by the interviewees during the interview.

28 Author’s interview with the president of the association A., charity based in the district of Bargou, Siliana, November 2016.

The association I., located in the disadvantaged rural area of Sidi Makhlouf, added 'social development' activities to its everyday charitable work in 2014. The association actively pitched the UNDP with an SSE project to create a recreational area in the town. Then, I. went to the Maison de France, proposing a project to create a space for arts and crafts (traditional clothing, ceramics, carpets). The goal was to replenish the productive chain to create employment opportunities for rural women in disadvantaged zones of the delegation (Sidi Makhlouf). Their project aimed to create a circuit of alternative tourism and an artisanal zone by reinvigorating the area's traditional industries, boosting local rural women's expertise, integrating them into the productive economy, and developing commercial exchanges.

I. applied for grants in the spring of 2016. Still, the Maison de France responded that the project was too ambitious in terms of resources, somewhat vague, lacking in precision as to the planned activities, and seemingly unclear about the needs of the beneficiaries. According to the project manager:

The project was interesting, but we felt a part of the project was well written and good on paper. However, it would not work concretely because there was no mastery of the issues they discussed (women in rural areas, the craft industry itself). In other words, the association lacked good governance and sound knowledge of 'social solidarity economy' practices. Therefore, it was excluded from the selection.²⁹

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5 Civil society as an arena: networking strategies beyond hegemonic actors

Abstract

The chapter is divided into three sections, describing how and why three socio-political groups neglected during the Ben Ali's regime have engaged in the associational system. The first section describes the nature of power relations in the social solidarity economy ecosystem in marginalized areas of the country, where *local NGOs experts* act as pivotal actors. The second section highlights the rising *urban middle-classes* previously excluded from the political game and now looking for new partnerships with local institutions at the sub-national level. The third section is focused on the reorganization of *Islamic networks* under the new frame of professionalization. As we will see, different forms of civic engagement ultimately reveal a reconfiguration of power relations.

Keywords: urban middle-class, Islamism, NGOs experts, political opportunity structure

5.1 Mobilizing at the margins: the social solidarity economy networks

As mentioned in the previous chapter, after 2011, the 'social solidarity economy' (SSE) became the development model exported by international donors in Tunisia but implemented from the bottom by social actors, such as local associations, which have progressively upgraded to the role of development agents. Therefore, due to the heterogeneity of actors involved, SSE development projects formed an ecosystem characterized by different relational dynamics. The cases of Medenine and Siliana are notable for illustrating the nature of power relations in the framework of mobilization for development. As we will see, SSE practices are characterized by different configurations according to the specificity of the territory. However,

they have in common two features: the tendency of international donors and states to exert control over local associations in marginal areas and opportunities exploited by social groups engaging with the associations to activate local networks under the new political opportunity structure.

The SSE model has diffused throughout Medenine since 2011 through the work of international donors. As mentioned in previous chapters, this development model foregrounds local participation and stresses the vital role played by local associations in the formulation and implementation of development policies. In other words, development associations should play a complementary or subsidiary role to the state in contributing to local development. Therefore, most programs set up by international actors focus on developing the region by supporting civil society actors.

An excellent example of this approach is the SSE roundtable project for development (TREMED), funded by the SDC mentioned in the previous chapter. Since its inception, TREMED has financed associations geared toward micro-projects in agriculture and local crafts. The aim is twofold: to address regional unemployment and regional development through investments in local resources. Agricultural projects have been a large part of this work. For example, after completing SSE training courses provided by the SDC in 2015, the Zitouna Association for Agricultural Development created the cooperative 'El Amal.' Another project supporting local crafts, implemented by La torche de la liberté (Mshar Hurria Association), sought to showcase local human and material capacities by nurturing the artisanal products of rural women. Besides these micro-projects, TREMED has also developed actions in partnership with the 'Union des Diplômés Chômeurs' (the Association of Unemployed Graduates of Medenine, UDC) to encourage and mentor young entrepreneurs in establishing start-up ventures.

The TREMED has been very well received in Medenine, mainly due to the success of the participatory approach, which associations consider a workable way to contribute to local development policies in collaboration with the Tunisian state. Indeed, this project created an unedited synergy between local actors, particularly between the decentralized administration and regional associations. This synergy has also produced positive externalities for the political life of the local community, such as a project to establish a participatory budget (PB) in the municipality of Medenine,¹ implemented

1 The participatory budget (PB) is a process of participatory democracy in which citizens can allocate part of their local authority's budget, usually to investment projects. Born in 1989 in Brazil, this democratic innovation has spread throughout the world, including the MENA region, by international donors.

by the association *Massar pour le Développement*, which has set up an awareness-raising project for the creation of a community development plan. Moreover, this consensus set the conditions for a fruitful discussion about the sustainability of TREMED, given that the Swiss funding was due to expire in 2017. The administration representatives at the roundtable proposed establishing an official network of associations according to the Decree-Law 88/2011, which would allow the participatory scheme to continue once the SDC involvement ended. However, this entity would continue to have the indirect presence of members of local administration among the participants. Therefore, the associational network would not be autonomous from the state apparatus.

As mentioned above, the round table is not the only SSE initiative activated in the region. The same features characterize programs implemented by the World Bank, the Mercy Corps, and the UNDP: provision of training cycles on SSE key concepts, good governance and capacity-building, and selection of the best associations to implement development projects. Associations are selected strictly based on skills acquired after participating in training cycles open to everybody. Several associations in Medenine and Siliana were inspired by this model, with a significant concentration in the most difficult rural areas of the two governorates, which are considered a potential market for alternative tourism. However, while the opportunity to participate was widely publicized, only a few local associations were able to make the most of the opportunity. Indeed, several associations that strived to professionalize and reach the needed level of expertise nevertheless failed to pass the selection process and expressed a degree of frustration at the hurdles involved.

Therefore, the ‘participatory approach’ has increasingly become more an ideal than a lived reality and increasingly appears as a hegemonic practice, a pedagogical vision of participation, the primary goal of which is not inclusion but the assimilation of local associational life to a strict model of civil society. Indeed, many associations interviewed in the regions of Medenine and Siliana complain about the exclusivity of the selection criteria of these programs: only the ‘best pupils’ of the associational classroom are selected for funding, and only the selected associations are legitimated by international donors and the state as ‘true representatives’ of civil society.

This dynamic is apparent in the discourses of local administration officials during the interviews, who, when talking about civil society, refer only to those associations that have received grants from international donors: “in Siliana civil society is very weak, there are only two associations receiving

funding from international donors.”² Associations confirm the trend: “We are legitimized as civil society actors only if we receive grants from international actors. We feel judged by donors and the state like children judged by their parents.”³ A telling observation is the response that unsuccessful bidders make about the role that depoliticization plays in the selection process: “associations are strictly chosen based on their distance from politics and their professionalism; thus, if they are not selected, it means that there is a problem.”⁴

From this vantage point, it is not surprising to find a sense of intense competition among local associations that aspire to obtain funding for their activities and to acquire legitimacy vis-à-vis authorizing institutions. This competition is directly or indirectly produced by international donors and exploited by the state itself to exert control over civil society. Even if the SSE has often been presented as a neoliberal model, the state continues to be active and exert control in all the critical stages of project implementation. In Medenine, for example, TREMED, the most important SSE project, is coordinated by the general director of the southern development office. Indeed, the decentralized administration is present in the steering committee, which is responsible for decision-making, including the selection procedure of associations. The local administration’s role is like other development programs active in the region, such as those implemented by the UNDP and the Mercy Corps.

Based on rising criticism that the approach has become too state-centric, we find alternative associational networks that have emerged beyond TREMED in the Medenine region, including the ETILEF (in Arabic meaning “network”) Ben Guerdane and the Civil Pole for Development and Human Rights of Medenine. These vary among themselves in scope and mission. ETILEF Ben Guerdane is a network of associations formalized in 2012 in the city of Ben Guerdane at the border with Libya. It comprises nine associations that deal with local development and work together on projects to integrate unemployed graduates into the job market. The bonding agent in this network belongs to a frontier territory and tribal ties, which in the south of Tunisia have a specific weight in socio-political relations (Meddeb 2014). Due to its tribal and territorial connotation, ETILEF Ben Guerdane is considered by the associations outside the network as a kind of impregnable

2 Author’s interview with Guermezi Houcine, the General Director of the regional development office of Siliana, June 2016.

3 Author’s interview with the President of an association, Siliana, June 2016.

4 Author’s interview with the President of the association ADESM, Djerba, February 2016.

enclave. However, for the associations that are part of it, it is the only solution to avoid exclusion and marginalization, as they can rely only on the strengths, means, and resources of a cross-border space.

The second example is the Islamic-oriented Civil Pole, which deals with electoral observation and development. The Civil Pole is an extensive national network with smaller sub-networks in all the governorates; it was founded after 2014 under the impulse of Ennahda's militants in the perspective of the transformative frame of professionalization of Islamic associations presented in the previous chapter. In the governorate of Medenine, it implements SSE projects. Indeed, according to Aziz, the Regional Coordinator of the Civil Pole, the SSE can be well integrated into Medenine rather than in the other governorates. Moreover, this region is characterized by strong solidarity networks composed of large families with a powerful social impact. Family relations are transversal to political socialization; therefore, the SSE can succeed because it can be supported by close social ties. Mahdi also emphasizes that this network works without the direct intervention of the state in their activities and with a less asymmetrical relationship with donors: "we developed as a free network of associations, free from state control and free to choose donors that are convenient for us, without strict technical constraints. We work a lot with Americans, notably with the International Republican Institute."⁵

Thus, as we can observe, these two different associational networks are intrinsically different, as different kinds of social groups traverse them. They have in common that they entered the SSE ecosystem by presenting themselves as *counterbalancing actors*. Indeed, even if these two networks do not directly conflict with the TREMED network, they criticize its 'state-centric' approach, which is selective and overly focused on complying with the good practices imposed by international donors. Moreover, according to other associations of the region, this mechanism, besides its official rhetoric on the participatory approach, "does not include civic actors, but it just exploits them, as executors of public policies."⁶ Therefore, in some cases, we observe that the associational life emerges as a reaction or a counterbalance to overly state-centric realities or as a competitive strategy in an overly selective environment.

Paternalistic practices of the state that recall the pre-revolutionary era can also be observed in the governorate of Siliana, where most associations

5 Author's interview with the president of the association Civil Pole-Medenine Section, Medenine, February 2016.

6 Author's interview with the President of the association ADDCI, Djerba, May 2016.

are not financially independent but where the intervention of international donors is not massive as in other regions of the interior, such as in Kasserine. International donors implementing 'extended' regional projects (including Siliana, Jendouba and Bizerte) are just the UNDP (through Japanese funding), with the project 'Génération d'Emploi pour les Jeunes en Tunisie,' launched in 2012, and the ILO (International Labour Organization) with the project PEJTUN. Only the latter has its permanent office in Siliana, in the offices of the ODNO (Office du Développement du Nord-Ouest), which directly reports to the Ministry of Development. It is not a coincidence that the only association in Siliana receiving a grant from the ILO is an ancient micro-credit association active since 2002 and which was part of the RCD's network (associations under the control of Ben Ali's hegemonic party).

The effort of associations to overcome the hegemonic control of the state is present in the governorate of Siliana as well, even if with lower intensity, due to the scarcity of local resources at the disposal of the associational system. For instance, *Les Aventuriers de Siliana*, a small association composed of young Tunisians (mainly university students), was able to bypass the control of local administration thanks to its capacity to attract international funding due to members' personal contacts abroad. In fact, donors investing in the association are atypical according to the general trend. They are foreign embassies (Finland and Spain) and not like the classical international NGOs operating extensively in the country since 2011, such as UNDP and the Mercy Corps (among others), which look for local associations to which they can export their ideas and practices of civil society.

Certainly, the example of '*Les Aventuriers de Siliana*' is an isolated case in the region, as most associations do not have the power to disenfranchise the international and national institutions upon which they are totally dependent. Due to the scarcity of resources, small associations strive to make themselves attractive to the few international donors operating in the region. Therefore, the few associations that obtain international funding are absorbed and transformed by international donors' requests.

As Challand has noted in the Palestinian territories, the phenomena described above may result in patron–client ties developing between the international donor and local associations rather than horizontal networks of civic engagement connected to a domestic audience (Challand 2009). Moreover, the persistence of a controlling attitude by local administrations can trap associations in a spiral of dependency that can eventually leave little room for maneuver. However, the social solidarity economy ecosystem allows us to also read the relation between local associations and public (national and international) institutions from the perspective of the agency of civic actors.

Besides the constraints that international donors impose, they also indirectly provide local associations with opportunities. International donors have opened *opportunities* for associations to join new networks at the international, national, and local levels. This is especially evident in the field of SSE, where local associations play a central role in the implementation of local development projects and where they can create ad hoc social networks that, in turn, can be functional also for other purposes. For example, the K. association (based in Tunis and whose members are close to the leftist Front Populaire party) has activated relations with members of an association in Siliana thanks to the opportunities offered by an SSE international program. Concretely, the association I. was selected as a local partner of K.T. to help implement a development project in the Kesra delegation, one of the most disadvantaged areas in the Siliana region. Thanks to such cooperation at the association level, members of the local association sized the opportunity to participate in political collectives in Tunis organized by the Front Populaire sympathizers engaged in K.T.

In other words, the associational sphere has also become a new arena allowing for the reconfiguration of intra-national political networks. Other associations rely on early integration into the local fabric to capture international funding for development programs. Creating a local network in the delegation of Bargou, always in the region of Siliana, is one such example. It was activated ad hoc to frame a regional development project in response to a call from the EU. This network then continued after the project to promote different activities linked to the territory.

Moreover, it is particularly relevant to note that local associations are invested with new social figures emerging after 2011. Indeed, in the post-revolutionary arena, the massive intervention of international donors has allowed people engaging in associational life to create the professional profile of the NGO expert. International donors in the field hire local staff to manage their development programs. These staffs are recruited chiefly from middle-class Tunisians with the resources to access education in Europe or the United States and participate in relevant training in Tunis. The professional profile of 'SSE expert' is one more specialization of the NGO expert. Indeed, the significant diffusion of SSE's projects has created a new competitive professional figure who is supposed to play a pivotal role in the association, the latter being considered the driving force of local development by international donors. Against this background, Tunisians' engagement in associational life has been increasingly perceived as the privileged launch pad of international careers, as associational life is positively exposed to international opportunities.

Thus, I argue that the professional figure of 'SSE expert' flows into the social category of *development brokers* (Bierschenk et al. 2000; Lewis and Mosse 2006), which refers to those figures who make up the so-called developmental *configuration*.⁷ However, the peculiarity of this social group is that it unavoidably crosses the associational system or, in other words, exploits the associational system to emerge in the post-revolutionary arena. Indeed, if, on the one hand, the emergence of these figures in the associational system can be read as the result of adaptation an association makes to meet the international and national requirements of professionalization, on the other hand, thanks to the analysis of individual trajectories, we can highlight some interesting patterns suggesting complementary explanations, which ultimately enrich our understanding of the role of local associations in the post-authoritarian setting.

It is important to note that the professional figure of the SSE expert engaged in the associational system is far from being neutral. While this trend can be considered as a mere individual opportunity for unemployed people to be inserted into the job market, alternatively, through the analysis of individual trajectories, we can trace common features of a specific social group progressively investing in the associational system and that is more and more interconnected so that we can easily talk about a *network*. Therefore, they have a specific weight in the post-revolutionary arena. Presidents and other key figures of local associations create contacts with professional figures working in international organizations, undoubtedly thanks to their activity of fundraising but also, and mainly, because of their societal connections.

Indeed, the people grasping the new socioeconomic opportunities offered by the revolution mostly belong to a middle-class network that can count on symbolic and material resources. Thanks to these contacts, key figures engaged in the associations can build relationships of trust with local professionals in international organizations, which can open reciprocal windows of opportunity in the long run. Therefore, these figures, which can also emerge from the most marginalized areas of the country (even if not necessarily),

7 The *developmental configuration* is a socio-anthropological term by Olivier de Sardan (1995). According to this notion, 'development' is not a fixed category to search for existence (or absence). Instead, development exists merely because some actors and institutions take development as an object or an end to which they devote time, money, and professional competence. The 'developmental configuration' is essentially an *arena* of experts, bureaucrats, NGO personnel, researchers, technicians, project chiefs, and field agents, who make a living, so to speak, out of developing other people and who, to this end, mobilize and manage a considerable amount of material and symbolic resources.

are not isolated individuals looking for a personal career. Instead, they are nodes in a multilevel (regional and national) network composed of different actors who contribute to the functioning of the development machine while remaining anchored in the social fabric.

Therefore, these figures involved in the ‘development machine’ are often positioned between local associations and the professional world of international agencies located in the country. Excellent examples include C., who works as the regional coordinator of the PASC focal point in Siliana and is also president of an association in the same region, F., working as PASC regional coordinator in Medenine and with his own association in Zarzis, and the president of the association I. in Ben Guerdane, who is also engaged as regional coordinator of the Dutch NGO CILG-VNG. In addition, in certain cases, there are some figures not officially involved in the two spheres but who, in practice, have developed strong social ties and consequently strong relationships of trust with other organizations, so that in practice, they are embedded both in the local associational life and in the international NGO life.

Thus, thanks to their role as ‘resource mobilizers,’ these actors have acquired important legitimacy in their regions and cities of belonging. Their popularity is primarily because they function as a bridge between international donors and the local associational system. This social category produces social change, especially in those regions with the greatest socioeconomic problems, such as Siliana and Medenine. Indeed, these people are pivotal actors, firmly anchored in the social fabric, that, thanks to their social action, can connect weak and isolated local associations with international NGOs. It is no coincidence that they define themselves as ‘social entrepreneurs.’⁸ In other words, the *multi-positionality* of these figures is the key factor explaining their legitimation at a local level. In some cases, future municipal elections are considered a possible testing ground for some figures belonging to this social group.

5.2 Emerging urban middle-class networks

As described before, the opening of opportunities in the aftermath of the fall of the authoritarian regime allowed social categories to emerge in the post-revolutionary landscape. Due to their flexible structure and officially neutral status, associations became privileged organizations through which different social groups could acquire visibility.

8 Author’s interview with Faiçal, Djerba, May 2016.

In this section, we present another example related chiefly to developed urban areas of the country. Indeed, in at least all the urban areas of the regions under analysis, we observe the phenomenon of a rising class of heavyweights and influencers, who have decided to invest their human and material resources in the associational system. Therefore, in contrast with the preceding case, where a social group decided to invest in the association to emerge, here we present a social group already with a status that decided to invest in the associational system to broaden its consensus at the local level. Unlike the previous social group, these figures are already embedded in the local socio-political life of their regions, delegations, and cities of belonging. Therefore, they do not necessarily need international opportunities. Their embeddedness in the local contexts is evident from their *multi-positionality* between local associations and local administrations. Their idea is to invest in associational life to constitute a lobby; in other words, to influence decision-makers and practice politics by other means. Therefore, in this case, the association acts as the mouthpiece for an urban elite looking for a larger consensus, whereas in the previous case, it is a springboard to establishing the basis for political legitimacy.

The associational system emerging in Sfax represents an exemplary case for analyzing this phenomenon. Sfax is the second economic pole of the country, a dynamic port, and an industrial city: its economic development dates to the protectorate period characterized by French investments and work in agriculture, which continued in the 1970s with the implementation of the national industrial system, that operates on a kinship logic of work and accumulation (Denieuil 1992). Therefore, alongside the discourse of endogenous development based on the myth of regional growth nurtured just by local resources (Bennasr 2005), a narrative of the specificity of Sfax emerges. It consists of a discourse that stresses the fundamental contribution of Sfax in the struggle for the country's independence, emphasizing its work ethic and ultimately highlighting the city's feeling of abandonment by the government, which instead privileged the Sahel region and Tunis.⁹ Therefore, this narrative identifies Sfax as an ambivalent space, one of domination in relation to its hinterland and one of marginality in relation to the central power (B'chir 1994).

In this scenario we observe a group of local associations led by prominent people belonging to the Sfaxian upper-middle class: the ADDS (Association pour le développement durable de Sfax), the ADSS (Association de

9 Sahel, deriving from the Arabic word *sāḥil* (ساحل), meaning "shore" or "coast", refers to an area of eastern Tunisia. It stretches along the eastern shore, from Hammamet to Mahdia, including the cities of Monastir and Sousse.

développement solidaire de Sfax), Beit el Khebra, Horizon, CORAC (Collectif de réflexion et d'action citoyenne), and APNES.¹⁰ Presidents of these associations present themselves as the Sfaxian elites: "We are people with a certain weight in the city, we make the difference, and after the revolution, we decided to put our energy into a development project."¹¹ These people were educated abroad and, after the revolution, were able to take a prominent role in the local scene thanks to their symbolic and material resources. Individuals in this social group have different backgrounds. Most of them come from Bourguiba's linked-families, faithful to the Neo-Destourian party, but became critical figures within the RCD during Ben Ali's regime. Therefore, they turned away from the party. Others, instead, were opponents of the regime, either leftist or Islamic movement supporters. In any case, they are part of a social group that was able to make its presence felt only after the revolution.

What these figures have in common is not their political stripes but a characteristic that is transversal to party competition. They are particularly powerful people who have the means to contribute to the symbolic and material development of the city of Sfax. Beit el Khebra, for instance, was born after 2011 and brings together figures considered influential for the city's development. Its president is a well-known doctor who is particularly well-connected in the community, largely thanks to his profession. For two years, the association was a kind of exclusive club; one needed to be referred by a member to have any chance of getting in.

Therefore, despite their quite different political sensitivities, their status, and a commitment to work for the development of their city are transversal and allow them to come together in common cause: the "political and economic redemption of Sfax."¹² Indeed, thanks to these common characteristics, key figures of these associations comprise an informal network. Ties are not formally recognized, yet they are, for example, expressed by the *multi-positionality* of some prominent figures in more associations. For example, the president of Horizon is also a member of Beit el Khebra, and the president of Beit el Khebra is a member of APNES; such linkages are legion. Moreover, it happens quite regularly that associations conduct several activities in partnership.

10 APNES was founded before the revolution. To have survived before 2011, it must have necessarily been linked to the RCD. After 2011, its membership base turned over completely. Several associations scattered throughout Tunisia have a similar trajectory.

11 Author's interview with the President of ADDS, Sfax, May 2016.

12 Author's interview with the President of Beit el Khebra, May 2016.

In general, the associations these figures engage with are presented as strategic for the development of Sfax and the democratic consolidation of the country. In light of this, their purpose is twofold. First, they formulate and propose development projects to the local administration. Second, they drive local urban mobilizations, usually against national public policies deemed detrimental to Sfax. In proposing projects, the associations bill themselves as professionalized policy think tanks. Indeed, while they implement some small regional development projects within the SSE framework, their main activity is to shepherd large-scale infrastructure projects, which are considered the engine of local development. These associations have conceived projects to regenerate the Sfaxian port, the airport, and the rail and tram network as part of long-term development programs. In line with their self-identity as policy think tanks, these associations typically produce technical reports and feasibility studies relating to the city's long-term development. One of the most important was a regional strategic plan for Sfax, called 'Stratégie Sfax 2030,' spearheaded by ADSS in collaboration with Beit el Khebra, the Friederich-Ebert Stiftung, the University of Sfax, UTICA, the Sfax municipality, and several private organizations. 'Sfax à l'horizon 2050' is another strategic plan developed by the association ADDS, led by a popular Sfaxian entrepreneur, in partnership with other local institutions.

Moreover, in October 2016, the association Horizon, in partnership with the association Beit el Khebra and other institutions (especially local private and public universities), organized the 'First International Conference on Resource Allocation for Sustainable Regional Development.' The idea behind this conference was to gather local and international experts to formulate projects for endogenous development in Sfax. This space for study and reflection was initiated by prominent associations, intending to be a point of reference, and it is conducted in collaboration with local partners. In all these examples, we observe associations that are linked to and working with other actors, forming a sort of satellite system around the association itself. In other words, thanks to the key contacts of their presidents or other leading figures, these local associations are embedded in a complex arena composed of private and public local institutions, international actors, and local businessmen.

Their presidents stress the professionalization of these associations, as entrepreneurs might their own enterprises: "the three keywords characterizing our associations are independence, competence, and professionalism."¹³ Another noted that "we are all competent people, [and our] different skills

13 Author's interview with the President of Beit el Khebra, May 2016.

are at the service of the association. Therefore, everything in the association is undertaken on a professional basis. Thanks to our capacities, we are at the service of the state."¹⁴ Similarly, one president observed: "our expertise is at the service of institutions."¹⁵

Thus, associations become spaces to produce ideas and formulate development programs to submit to the local administration. Furthermore, it is essential to note that these associations have privileged contacts within public institutions, as several members of these associations are engaged as civil servants. An exemplary case is the general director of regional development, who is also a member of the association Beit el Khibra; he acknowledged that these types of associations are fundamental resources for local administration. Indeed, the most important difference between this and the other association for development is that in this case, "it is the local administration that needs us and not vice versa."¹⁶

Besides researching development, these associations are also intensely engaged in advocacy activities, thus mobilizing urban protests, and acting as pressure agents vis-à-vis the national administration. Indeed, their civic struggles generally target the central power in Tunis. The most prominent mobilization recently was the awareness campaign related to the city of Sfax, particularly for the closure of the phosphate factory SIAPE, which was installed in 1952. The 'Mouvement Fermons la SIAPE' was born after 2011 and gathers many actors reunited by the strong sense of belonging to Sfax, which is transversal to political persuasion or other cleavages. Thus, the movement goes beyond the specific issue at stake and reflects the willingness to be engaged once the revolutionary process has opened political opportunities. Indeed, the emblematic phrase *ily a eu une revolution, donc il faut changer* ("there was a revolution, so we have to change") shows this willingness to actively define a new system. This strong sense of engagement involving associations is evident in the organizational practices of this mobilization. Indeed, the 'Collectif pour l'environnement et le développement de Sfax' is an informal group of 45 local associations that coordinates, especially via social networks, all the city's mobilization activities. The associations mentioned above are the most active actors of this network, playing the role of mobilizers.

Urban mobilizations for territorial claims in terms of socioeconomic equality and access to natural resources are also widespread in other cities of the country, including in the other two regions under analysis: Medenine

14 Author's interview with the President of the association H., Sfax, May 2016.

15 Author's interview with the President of CORAC, Sfax, October 2016.

16 Author's interview with the President of Beit el Khibra, Sfax, May 2016.

and Siliana. There is evidence of territorial claims in the relatively developed region of Bargou, in the governorate of Siliana, and the city of Medenine. Interestingly, these mobilizations occur in the most developed areas of the regions, always in urban areas, and they are organized by a network of associations whose leader stands out in the social fabric for their symbolic and material resources.

Therefore, based on this data, we can generalize this phenomenon by arguing that in most developed urban areas of the country, mobilizations are led by elites investing in the associational system. Yet, Sfax represents an exemplary case due to the strong interdependence between economic and social capital that characterizes the city's associational system. This interdependence is what makes it possible for a social network (in this case, the top stratum of people in Sfax) to emerge and achieve common objectives. In this specific case, the main goal of the Sfaxian upper-middle class is to broaden its political influence and to draw a slice of the state's power through associational engagement. Indeed, within the existing power structures, membership in these associations allows actors to gain legitimacy and get a piece of the state funding pie.

Moreover, strong relationships between the leading figures of local associations and local administration confirm the fixity of this social network within the administrative machine. In addition, the hesitation of some influential figures as to whether to stand in the municipal elections (held in December 2018) was another fact confirming that associations are sometimes 'leveraged' for other purposes. Finally, the goal to promote a specific network in the socio-political arena is confirmed by the willingness of these associations to maintain partnerships in most of their activities:

We are a network of associations reflecting on the development of our region. We can define ourselves as social entrepreneurs as we are very active in the social sphere. However, we still need to be anchored to the ground, like the Islamist associations.¹⁷

5.3 The reconfiguration of Islamic networks under the frame of "specialization"

This section investigates different trajectories Islamic associations followed under the technocratic frame of *specialization* diffused by international

17 Author's interview with the President of the association H., Sfax, May 2016.

donors, encouraged through coercive measures by the Tunisian state, and since 2016 also emphasized by the Islamist party, Ennahda. Data show that the sectorialization of Islamic associations described in the previous chapter did not prevent religious-based associations from perceiving themselves as part of an Islamic community. In other words, the professionalization of Islamic associations does not necessarily imply their autonomy or depoliticization, and new competences acquired by associations might exist alongside codes and customs that reflect a greater or lesser extent Islamic principles. Thus, professionalized associations can maintain close relations with Islamist politics (or not) while rationalizing their activities.

Using a relational approach to study the reconfiguration of the Islamic network allows us to unpack the trajectories of movements that are often studied as a single block in the literature. The findings reveal the agency of Islamic activists by highlighting the variety of strategic choices associational players can make in a fluid context of reconfiguration of power relations. As shown, the modes of action of Islamic activists may depend on different logics. If, for example, after the revolution, several religious associations developed as a social force close to Ennahda, after the critical juncture of 2013, they have gradually taken an ambivalent stand toward the party. The findings below outline the various trajectories Islamic associations have followed in recent years.

The reorganization of a solidarity network between international anchoring and local rootedness

As the interviews with several association executives showed, the professionalization dynamics go hand in hand with rebranded networking strategies. The latter can be international as well as national. Thanks to the new law on the associations, which facilitates establishing international partnerships, activists started to count on their transnational contacts to foster their skills and competences. For example, Moshen Jendoubi, vice-president of OTDS, spent his exile with his family in Germany during the regime's repression in the 1990s. This long period spent abroad allowed him to acquire sound expertise and to develop several strategic contacts who remain linked to OTDS today.

It is no coincidence that the largest pool of foreign support for these associations is in Germany. OTDS is not an isolated case. Mondher, a consultant at a charitable association in Sfax mentioned in the previous chapter, has followed a similar trajectory, as he was involved in the same network in Germany. The president of the association N. in the governorate of Medenine

spent his exile in France, and nowadays, the association is supported by a solidarity network in Paris which “helps the association to find international funding.”¹⁸ Indeed, following the securitization campaign of 2013, Islamic associations ran into difficulty getting international funding. Until 2013, they could count on the help of the Gulf countries. But with the start of the government’s restrictive measures, they found themselves without resources, unlike the secular associations that had access to large Western donors, such as the EU, the UN, and the World Bank.

Thus, the network of ancient militants developed during their exile in Europe is an important factor explaining the reconfiguration of the Islamic network at a national level after the revolution. The solidarity network of friends, comrades, and family members built up abroad by prominent figures of the Islamist movement is extremely important for the survival and legitimacy of their associations, especially since the crisis of 2013. Indeed, diasporic groups function as *anchors* for local associations struggling to survive in an increasingly constrained environment. *International anchoring* includes various types of transnational interactions. For example, activists can communicate online with other activists in host countries to get relevant information. Or they can set up different forms of solidarity networks to attain political goals or to carry out specific campaigns at the local level. They can also solicit material resources for the everyday activities of their associations or tap intangible resources, such as training cycles and other types of information. Finally, they may establish fully institutionalized international partnerships.

To be sure, the charities’ original work is rooted in local solidarity ties as well, especially among those who did not leave the country during the years of the authoritarian repression and went to prison. As one elderly militant recalled, the solidarity network was strengthened during the period of imprisonment:

The time spent in prison was very hard as I was far from my family. But at the same time, it was an amazing experience as I reinforced my friendship with my comrades in an extremely difficult environment. We have established a sort of solidarity network which is still alive.¹⁹

18 Author’s interview with a member of an association located in Medenine, living in Paris. Saint Denis, December 2016. This member acts as a ‘connector’ between the local and the international dimension, by providing symbolic and material resources to the association.

19 Author’s interview with a member of an association located in Medenine, living in Paris. Saint Denis, December 2016.

Therefore, Islamic-based associations created after the 2011 liberalization represented the institutionalization of a solidarity network characterized by strong kinship ties, strengthening the activists' participation in social work. Indeed, as McAdam and Paulsen state, interpersonal ties not only encourage the extension of an invitation to participate but also ease the uncertainty of participation (McAdam and Paulsen 1993). For instance, interpersonal ties are pivotal in the day-to-day functioning of charitable associations, which rely on deep social networks for collecting *zakat* and other forms of donation and recruiting volunteers or employees. Within these horizontal networks, ties of trust, solidarity, reciprocity, and a sense of mission held firm even after the securitization campaign of 2014. And within these interpersonal ties and this sense of mission, the potential lies for the expansion of Islamic activism after 2011. These strong personal bonds are highly conducive to norms of reciprocity and shared solidarity, in other terms, to developing a social capital (Sigillò 2016b).

From this perspective, there is nothing exceptional about Islam that means social movement theories are not suited to analyze Islamist movements (Wiktorowicz 2003; Clark 2004; Donker 2013). What differentiates Islamic NGOs from their secular counterparts, Wiktorowicz argues, is not the Islamic nature of their activities but the belief of volunteers that they are promoting Islam through their work (Wiktorowicz 2001: 65, 67). Networks of shared meaning are created through the provision of charity: raising donations, contracting merchants, distributing aid, and providing medical care. Communities of participants accept, internalize, and promote a particular set of values in these networks. The act of participating in charity activities within the legal framework of the association thus reinforces the solidarity network. In this manner, Islamic charities indirectly facilitate the potential expansion of Islamic worldviews.

The transformation of Islamic associations from a market perspective has dramatically impacted the reconfiguration of networks in light of the dominant paradigm of specialization. The political failure of the Tunisian Front of Islamic Associations and the Sfaxian network Attawanou has given way to rising professionalized networks specialized in specific sectors of activity. OTDS fostered the activation of a new network of charitable associations throughout the country (Table 5) only after having assured a training package on capacity-building. The primary objective is to create a "specialized network"²⁰ that can divide work into zones of interventions and create shared databases of beneficiaries. Overall, the associations in this

20 Author's interview with the president of the charitable network in Siliana, June 2016.

network want to maintain their identity and continue living their Islamic values while adapting to the new environment and prevailing norms. The president of an association involved in this network recounted: “we must become professional and create networks in order to resist the aggression of secular forces; we must coordinate.”²¹

Table 5 Localized networks of professionalized charitable associations in each governorate

Governorate	Name of the network	No. of associations
Beja	Réseau associatif “Essanabel”	24
Bizerte	Réseau associatif “Benzartouna”	22
Jandouba	Réseau associatif Jandouba	24
Nabeul	Réseau associatif pour le développement participatif	36
Kef	Unité de coordination pour le travail benevol	16
Siliana	Réseau associatif de droits et de développement	22
Kairouan	Coordination pour les leaders du développement	13
Sousse	Coordination de groupement des associations	15
Sidi Bou Zid	Unité de coordination entre les associations	56
Kasserine	Réseau régionale des associations	42
Sfax	Unité de Coordination “Ezzeytouna”	7
Gabes	Unité de Coordination entre les associations de développement	42
Kebili	Unité de coordination entre les associations	56
Medenine	Unité de coordination entre les associations	14
Tataouine	Réseau regional des associations	34

Source: Author’s elaboration based on the OTDS brochure.

Islamic middle-class networks

As highlighted by other scholars (Bayat 1998; Clark 2004; Wickham 2004), Islamic associations are dominated by one social category that reproduces itself over and over within the social network itself. In Tunisia, this is the Islamic middle class that was repressed under the authoritarian regime but, after 2011, could emerge in the public arena (Merone and De Facci 2015). As mentioned before, presidents of associations and their contacts are pivotal in developing and maintaining the network, given their solidarity ties. Yet, they also belong to a new urban Islamic-oriented bourgeoisie. They are well-educated doctors, engineers, teachers, and other professionals who

21 Author’s interview with the President of a charitable association, Sfax, January 2017.

have organized themselves by investing in the associational system in a changing context after decades spent in prison or in exile. Therefore, this specific social group has invested in the Islamic network through its material and symbolic resources. Indeed, Islamic charities represent a dense web of overlapping, growing, contracting, and evolving middle-class networks. Moreover, the personal contacts of these figures constitute an ecosystem that embeds associational life. As one association member told me of his director: “he is the head and arms of the association; without his leadership, material and symbolic resources and connections, the association would struggle to exist.”²²

In most cases under analysis, members of associations’ executive committees are prominent professional figures who present themselves as resources investing human capital in the association. Thanks to their *multi-positionality*, these figures have contacts with other worlds outside the associational system, such as international donors or public administration. Several presidents of associations are engaged as project managers or consultants in international NGOs located in Tunisia, or they work as civil servants or have contacts with them (after 2011, former militants of the Islamic movement were given preference in public administration recruitment as compensation for past repression).

An exemplary case is the social profile and trajectory of Aziz, a former MIT militant who entered the public administration of Medenine after 2011, decided to convert to a civil society activist, and now bills himself as an NGO expert. All his rhetoric is oriented toward emphasizing the need to conduct a political struggle considering the first municipal elections held in May 2018:

I consider myself a newcomer to civil society. I was arrested when I was only 17 years old because I belonged to an unregistered political party [Ennahda]. I spent more than two decades, almost half of my life, in prison or under house arrest. When I was released, the authorities ordered me to leave the city and not to return. I stayed in Libya for a short time. I returned to Tunisia and resumed my dissident activities. When the revolution broke out, I enthusiastically joined the uprising against the regime that had stolen the best years of my youth. I did what I could to explain the revolution to my children, and I took them with me to protests. Proud of the first democratic elections that followed the revolution in October 2011, I brought my children to witness this solemn event. A comment from

22 Author’s interview with a member of a charitable association, Sfax, January 2017.

my 6-year-old son at the polling station convinced me to withdraw from politics and devote myself to civic struggle. He said: 'I want to vote when I am older.' Since that day, I have promised my son that I will do all I can to protect the gains of the revolution. So, I felt that I would be more useful in post-revolutionary Tunisia as a civil society activist than as a political party member, and, at a personal level, being involved in civil society has helped me heal the wounds of my years of detention. Today, my focus is on managing my association. Charitable associations are closer to the grassroots, unlike leftist associations that have no connection to local areas and bend to the will of international actors. Therefore, I am sure about the results of the local elections.²³

The professionalization of Islamic associations through the middle-class network is linked to a broader phenomenon, which could be referred to as a sort of 'gentrification' of Islamic movements (Haenni 2002). This transformation does not necessarily mean a depoliticization of social movement organizations or disenfranchisement from the movement itself. Rather, Islamic activists redefine their network under a new frame, that of 'specialization.'

An axiomatic example of the intersection between these two social categories is data on the logistics of Islamic associations and their network configuration. In Tunis, most religious-based associations established their new headquarters in the affluent neighborhoods of Les Berges du Lac and Centre Urbain Nord, partially built by Gulf investors. Charitable associations and other types of religious associations are part of an urban network creating a sort of Islamic-oriented mutual aid service area that connects different types of Islamic organizations. This ecosystem draws its stability from a middle-class professional network: teachers provide meeting places, traders provide contacts, doctors provide beneficiaries, and lawyers can defend the association in cases of controversy with the state. Such is the case with the ASDI Observatory, a legal organization alongside OTDS that provides legal advice to the association's members and the network of local associations under its umbrella.

In Sfax, the second most developed city in the country, the new commercial part of the city (Sfax el Jadida) has been almost entirely covered by a vast network of social institutions, such as *da'wa* associations, the imams' association, the association of Islamic economics (ASTECCIS), the

23 Author's interview with the President of the association Pole Civile-Medenine Section, Medenine, May 2017.

Zakat Association and charities with religious missions or creeds.²⁴ Each association has its specific competence. For instance, ASTECIS functions as a think tank and has the task of broadening research on the applicability of Islamic values to the market economy.²⁵ In addition, the association has several connections with the University of Sfax.

The Zakat Association is another important node in this network of associations. It was created in Sfax in 2012 and cooperates with Islamic banks operating in the country: the Tunisian bank Zaytouna and the bank Al Baraka founded in Bahrain, both located in the same neighborhood. The creation of this association in Tunisia under Law No. 88 of September 24, 2011, acquires a political sense as up to now, the management of *zakat* has never been regulated at the governmental level, as it has in other Arab countries. Indeed, the original goal of the association was to act as an advocacy group vis-à-vis the ANC to create a National Fund of Zakat.²⁶ During the interview, the association's vice-president, posited that it shares the same values as the Ennahda party.

However, despite its central place within the Islamic movement, the Zakat Association embodies the model of a professionalized organization, as required by international institutions, by emphasizing the competences and skills of its professional figures. The most rewarded professional figure is the 'accounting expert,' who provides a consulting service to the association's client members. They calculate the *zakat* over the amount of their salary. The Zakat Association is a pivotal actor in mobilizing resources from the Sfaxian Islamic ecosystem in that it can, on the one hand, serve as an advisory service for those who wish to pay *zakat* to charities and, on the other, it can provide valuable contacts directly to charities for their fundraising.²⁷

Middle-class networks also allowed Islamic associations to penetrate new arenas of urban participation. Indeed, the professional middle-class nature of Islamic charities implies that members' interests—professionally, personally, and politically—align with the state. Islamic associations no longer represent a specific antagonistic challenge to political authority in this regard. Instead, within the existing power structures, the service orientation of Islamic associations provides opportunities for members to gain legitimacy and consequently share power with national authorities. This indicates that

24 Without doubt, there is a complementary explanation for this specific spatial configuration. The polarization of the city center between Bab al Bahr (the seat of former associations, trade unions and political parties) and Sfax al Jadida speaks to the marginalization of the Islamist movement during the old regime and its return to the civic and political scene after the revolution.

25 Author's interview with a member of ASTECIS, Sfax, November 2015.

26 Author's interview with the Vice-President of the Zakat association, Sfax, November 2015.

27 Author's interview with a member of the Zakat association, Sfax, November 2015.

the professional middle class invested in associations ultimately seeks 'a piece of the state pie' (Clark 2004). Presidents of associations rely on their professional networks to create opportunities for collaboration with different institutions. First, the transformation occurs within the association itself, as associations increasingly welcome secondments from young civil service trainees (social workers often in conjunction with the government). These are not necessarily part of the Islamic network, but they are the by-product of ties between presidents of the associations and the public administration.

Furthermore, charitable associations ultimately join multiple arenas of urban mobilization that are external to the Islamic cause, thus creating a sort of hybridization of the movement with other civic spheres. This is the case of the involvement of Islamic charities in mobilizations for territorial claims and secular associations. The most important example is the investment of charity organizations in local mobilizations, especially concerning environmental causes. For instance, in the governorate of Siliana, the association A. has integrated a local network to defend the development rights of the delegation and to fight against a polluting enterprise. Similarly, in Sfax, the charities have invested in campaigns to close the phosphate processing plant SIAPE. The same associations have also actively supported the implementation of the PB in the municipality of Sfax. Indeed, charities have been included as facilitators of the participatory mechanism thanks to the personal contacts of the presidents of the associations with the city's mayor. The latter example reinforces the hypothesis that the hybridization of the Islamic movement does not necessarily mean its weakening. The massive participation of Islamic charities (more than 50% of associations are involved as facilitators) in Sfax is that the municipality is politically close to Ennahda. Therefore, in this case, the middle-class network contributes to transforming the political project but does not undermine the Islamic movement (Som-1 and De Facci 2017).

Against the background of this dense overview, one might wonder: what is left of Islamic activism after the specialization? Overall, the mechanisms of reconfiguration of Islamic networks under the framework of the 'specialization' led to hybrid pathways of Islamic activism and a differentiated relationship with the political party Ennahda. In the following two sections, I will present two main trajectories which seem to go in different directions.

Islamic associative activism: a complementary sphere of engagement to the party

While, on the one hand, several associations downplayed the religious motivations underlying their activities to defend themselves against the

accusation of politicization, on the other hand, they did not question their political positions. Thus, many activists engaged in the civil society sphere continue to mobilize for the defense of Islamic values. The mobilizations organized against the report from the Individual Liberties and Equality Commission (COLIBE) represent an exemplary case.²⁸ In August 2018, members of Islamic associations took to the streets to protest against proposals for legislative reforms relating to individual freedoms in the country, which protesters claimed were at odds with Qur'anic norms and principles.

However, this mobilization was far from spontaneous; a network of *da'wa* associations organized it. The demonstrators marched with a banner bearing the inscription 'The Qur'an before any other text,' affirming the sacred text's primacy over civil law. They accused COLIBE of having acted against the teachings of Islam. This mobilization echoed the demonstrations organized by the Front of Islamic Associations in 2012–2013, but with one significant difference: the initiative was qualified by its promoters as a "civil society mobilization" and not as a political action.²⁹

This shifting narrative seems to reflect Ennahda's specialization strategy from the civil society perspective. In turn, it allows the party to skirt accusations by secular forces that it is pursuing an Islamist agenda at the political level. According to a former MIT militant and secretary general of the Dwl association: "we mobilize because Ennahda cannot overexpose itself; it must compromise with the country's secular forces."³⁰ Also, as stated by the spokesperson for the Collective for the Defense of the Qur'an and a former MIT militant:

This movement is not with Ennahda. Some Islamist activists are participating but are no longer with the party as they decided to engage in the associational sector. So, it is a different logic, even if we share the same values.³¹

Several activists thus justify specialization as a way to legitimize their work. As posited by some activists, the specialization helps to improve things: "According to our religion, we have to develop preaching activities from the grassroots, and not from the top. The party structure is too hierarchical."³²

28 COLIBE was a presidential consulting committee created by Béji Caïd Essebsi, former president of Tunisia, on August 13, 2017. It was responsible for preparing a report on legislative reforms designed to enhance individual freedoms in the country.

29 Author's interviews with demonstrators, Tunis and Sfax, October 2018.

30 Author's interview, Tunis, July 2018.

31 Author's interview, Tunis, July 2018.

32 Author's interview, Medenine, May 2017.

Thus, Islamic activists rooted in the social fabric consider associations to be the actual activators of Islamic values, which the party cannot always champion publicly. In this way, they rationalize the party's pivot in the political sphere as it has now formally engaged in a policy of compromise with the secular forces. This position is confirmed by party officials, who see the mobilization of associations as a kind of 'delegation' of religious affairs to civil society within the framework of specialization:

The party cannot use religion as an argument. The specialization process has made it possible to distinguish the two fields, politics, and religion, so it is civil society that must mobilize for religious issues.³³

The analysis of the 2018 mobilizations thus brings out a dynamic of re-configuration of a network of Islamic inspiration, which distances itself formally from the Ennahda party but is compatible with the process of party specialization, according to a logic of complementarity. Some activists who are part of the Collective for the Defense of the Qur'an underline the positive effects of specialization for the Islamic movement. As stated by the secretary-general of DwI, the association founded by Habib Ellouze:

Thanks to specialization, the Islamic public sphere has been diversified, which reduces the risk of being undermined as a movement by the attacks of our political enemies. We are an elastic force; we adapt.³⁴

From this perspective, the sectorialization of associational activities appears as a survival strategy for religious associations in the wake of a political crisis that had weakened and undermined the legitimacy of the country's Islamic actors.

Political distancing: an emerging alternative "from below"

The anti-COLIBE mobilizations involved participants other than Ennahda's activists, namely Salafi actors that had broken off relations with the Islamist party in 2013 and that since then had joined the associational field. As stated by one interviewee: "We are not at all with Ennahda and its political agenda, but in this particular moment, we have the same objective: the defense of

33 Author's interview with the party's spokesperson, Tunis, October 2018.

34 Author's interview with the Secretary-General of the association Dawa wa Islah, Tunis, June 2018.

Islam with all possible means. So, it's a moral duty to mobilize together."³⁵ A closer look shows that the 2018 protests represented an opportunity to re-establish ties between the two groups. A reconciliation below has recently occurred between Islamist and Salafi actors through establishing and developing localized informal networks and shared associational activities in several cities of the country.

This phenomenon pertains to the third trajectory of Islamist activists who distinguished themselves in their critical positions vis-à-vis Ennahda due to frustration and a sense of betrayal, leading them to consider joining others with alternative political solutions. These activists mainly distanced themselves from the party after its break with the Salafi movements and the alliance with the secular forces linked to the old regime. Discontent has notably increased among Islamist activists following the party's new compromise policy with secular forces and specialization strategy.

Against this backdrop, the associational field has progressively emerged as an alternative political arena for defending Islamic principles and practices, given that the party is thought to have abandoned this mission. Interviews show a growing theme in Islamic activists' narratives that the "revolution has been betrayed," with the state and Ennahda coming in for criticism. In this regard, several see complicity in a "corrupted establishment disconnected from real society:"³⁶

The party is now playing professional politics, negotiating compromises with the old regime. Because of its settlement with the old regime, the party has distanced itself from the Tunisian people and the values of Islam. I prefer to focus on real things, like getting involved in civil society in the name of God.³⁷

The so-called Jaouadi affair is emblematic of this new trend. During the government's campaign against unofficial imams in its 'war against terrorism,' launched in 2015, imam R. Jaouadi was dismissed by the government on the grounds of "inciting radicalization."³⁸

The exclusion of the young sheiks and imams acclaimed after the revolution prefigures a new phase of relations between government and religion, in which

35 Author's interview with the President of a Salafi association banned in 2015, Tunis, August 2018.

36 Statements retrieved from activists' Facebook and Twitter profiles.

37 Author's interview, Tunis, July 2019.

38 Retrieved from: <http://kapitalis.com/tunisie/2015/09/15/mosquee-sidi-lakhmi-de-sfax-limoageage-de-limam-radical-ridha-jaouadi/>

the party is a primary decision-maker. Jaouadi's replacement was an imam chosen by the Minister of Religious Affairs. The Lakhmi association, of which Jaouadi is the president, launched a protest campaign against the 'government of compromise,' of which Ennahda is a part, and accused it of violating freedom of worship. The mobilization of the Sfaxian Islamic community in support of Imam Jaouadi echoes the contentious period of 'state Islam,' the system of state religious control in place during Ben Ali's regime. As one exponent of the protest put it, "the imams must be chosen by the Tunisian people, not by the state or party officials, as happened during the authoritarian regime"... "we must resist state's repression"... "Ennahda has become like the RCD."³⁹

In this context, some activists engaged in the associational sector seized the opportunity to recombine the link between the political and the religious dimensions, a core nexus eventually dropped out by the party's agenda. As stated by the imam Ridha Jaouadi: "*da'wa* is the true politics, and it must be built from the grassroots, not from bourgeois parties, like Ennahda."⁴⁰ From this perspective, several activists engaged in the associational sector conceive their social engagement as the purest (political) form of Islamic activism (when religion and politics are two intertwined parts of the same unity), in so doing following the logic of reconfiguration of a unified Islamic arena outside the party.

At the time of the 2019 elections, several activists with roots in this milieu joined the political Itilaf al-Karama or 'Dignity Coalition.' As mentioned, Itilaf has no official religious orientation and gathers a heterogeneous group of activists with variegated backgrounds. Several of them stem from the associational field of Islamic activism. Interestingly, many Itilaf members participated in the demonstrations supporting the Ennahda party in the 2012–2013 mobilizations. However, after the party's pragmatic turn, they decided to join a political alternative.

Itilaf presented itself as a disruptive political force during the electoral campaign. It castigated the compromise between the Islamist party and the old regime, "an elitist agreement established at the expense of the revolutionary principles."⁴¹ In doing so, it adopted radical registers against the 'corrupt establishment,' defined as "the people who now rule Tunisia, the true terrorists who kill the Tunisian people with their corrupt policies."⁴²

39 Author's interview extracts, Sfax May 2016. See also: <http://kapitalis.com/tunisie/2015/11/06/sfax-un-syndicat-islamiste-appelle-a-manifester/>

40 Retrieved from the Facebook page and Twitter profile of the imam Ridha Jaouadi.

41 Author's interview with a member of Itilaf Karama, October 2019.

42 Author's interview with former Ennahda activists who joined Itilaf Karama, Tunis, October 2019.

As stated by some Ennahda activists who joined the coalition: “I could not stand a compromise with those who tortured my family”; “Ennahda made alliances with the old regime, I can’t forgive the party for this choice”; “I joined Itilaf Karama because I want to recover my dignity as an Islamic activist.”⁴³

Despite its non-religious character, the coalition presented itself as a conservative force seeking to restore the traditional values and institutions neglected by the old regime in the framework of the national reforms inspired by a Western model of the modern state, the latter not sufficiently rejected by the Ennahda party once in power. However, the coalition’s primary mission is to fulfill the unfulfilled goals of the revolution, first and foremost socioeconomic justice, not to pursue an Islamist agenda (Blanc and Sigillò 2019). In this regard, this third trajectory of Islamist activists also represents a hybrid form of Islamic activism.

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43 Author’s interview with former Ennahda activists who joined Itilaf Karama, Tunis, October 2019.

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Conclusion: On associations’ *permeability*: doing politics through other means?

This concluding chapter summarizes the main findings of my ethnographical research on civil society in post-authoritarian Tunisia. The analysis presented in this book allows the reader to rethink the current conceptualization of civil society in the context of regime change through the study of relational dynamics in which local associations are embedded. This embeddedness is empirically observable in the formal or informal *multi-positionality* of prominent members of local associations. Indeed, the findings presented in this volume indicate that associations do not act as isolated units. Still, their members occupy multiple positions and are involved in complex relational dynamics with actors outside the so-called ‘civil society sphere.’ In other words, associations are *permeable* to interactions, and civil society ultimately emerges as the by-product of relational dynamics. Furthermore, *the concept of arena* highlights that association contours are not set in stone but, on the contrary, fluctuate and depend on the interactive dynamics between all actors involved in the process of political change, where the civil and the political spheres are not separate dimensions.

Thus, associations can be spaces of militancy, arms of the state implementing public policies, and agents of development under the normative influence of international donors. However, they can also be vectors for urban elites, political groups, or classes to enter politics. This book shows that adapting local associations to a neoliberal civil society paradigm has a political function. In other words, the professionalization of local associations is an effect of a two-way power relationship. On the one hand, the consequence of pressure on the part of hegemonic actors, such as the international donors or the state, and on the other hand, the result of the willingness to align on the part of the association’s founders as a strategy to pursue their interests. Civic activism framed according to the acknowledged general rules of professionalization ultimately becomes a vehicle for emerging socio-political

groups to adapt to, emancipate themselves from, and survive in the renewed post-revolutionary arena.

In this regard, the findings presented in this book question the dominant conceptualization of civil society diffused in the post-revolutionary environment by international and national institutions, according to which associations must be autonomous and separated from the other spheres. Indeed, we observe that even though local associations adapt to dominant norms and standards by formally following procedures and ethical rules, they act according to various logics that go beyond the diffused notion of civil society. This paradox is also essential to rethink the effects of civil society promotion.

1 Deconstructing the notion of civil society: new perspectives on an old object of study

This book provided new inputs at the empirical, epistemological, and theoretical levels on the study of civil society in a post-authoritarian setting, based on an analytical approach that transcends the predominant normative and deterministic interpretations in most literature dealing with civil society. Adopting a strategic relational approach, I have emphasized how civil society is best understood as a social construct based on the interactive dynamics of different actors.

In the introduction, I highlighted how the concept had assumed different meanings based on the historical periods and the socio-political issues at stake. Since the end of the 1970s, with the welfare state crisis, the notion of civil society has been permeated by the neoliberal ideology diffused by international actors, which in turn informed academic studies on civic activism. Thus, the main challenge of this work was, on the one hand, to deconstruct the interpretation of civil society permeating the academic literature and, on the other hand, to consider the neoliberal conceptualization of the notion of civil society as an *emic* category, thus looking at how the term is used and exploited by social actors playing in the field. To achieve this goal, I considered the transition process as a dynamic playground, where associations interact with other actors making up the post-authoritarian arena.

Based on these assumptions, this book presents the findings of intense ethnographical research in Tunisia, which allowed me to trace how local associations, according to their interactions with other actors, perceive and categorize the world, their rules for behavior, what has meaning for them, and how they imagine and explain things in a context of political

transformation. The governorates analyzed, Grand Tunis, Sfax, Siliana, and Medenine, constitute the scenes of observation of local associational action and commitment, which are the by-product of three intertwined (power) relational dimensions: international, national, and local. Adopting a strategic relational approach allows us to bring the agency back into the theoretical picture of 'civil society promotion' and 'democratization processes' (which structuralist theories overlook) and raise some hypotheses regarding the strategic dilemmas of local actors. Indeed, this approach allows us to challenge the duality of 'dominant vs. dominated' actors and highlight the complexity of roles and behaviors in a fluid process of redefinition of power relations.

Thus, by looking at the daily practices of local associations, I could grasp debates, demands, expectations, tensions, and micro-clashes involving associations and other actors around them. This allowed me to identify (often between the lines) the dynamics related to power relations, forms of behavior, and ways of thinking that partly reveal how associations participate in a political game. Therefore, this work also aims to provide an empirical contribution by understanding the Tunisian transition process through the prism of a systematic study of the associational system. In these following sections, I draw some concluding remarks on the approach used in this book and the related findings.

2 Civic activism after authoritarianism: old dynamics, new opportunities

The analysis of civic activism after 2011 makes sense if compared with civic activism dynamics during the authoritarian regime. Thus, in this book, I have adopted a *double comparative approach*, by studying, on the one hand, the relational dynamics of associations in an authoritarian context and then in a context of pluralism and, on the other hand, by studying different types of associations during the period of post-revolutionary transition.

The study of the institutionalization of local associations during the authoritarian period was done retrospectively through an analysis of stories of associational actors of the time, which had to be compared with the literature on associations in the Arab world. This was complemented by analyzing the regulations and discourses of the Tunisian public actors and international cooperation. As observed in Chapter 1, before 2011, associations were also integrated into a system of power relations. Under the authoritarian system, associations represented both a cog in the RCD party's

patronage system and a substitute political space subject to domestication policy. In this context, associations were largely absent from insurgency dynamics. Indeed, the hegemonic party, merged with the state, acted as a player adopting strategies to exclude challengers and co-opt like-minded groups. The promulgation of laws on the associational system and their restrictive amendments were also part of a political strategy.

Moreover, although under heavy constraints, local associations acted as players in a political game (at least those associations co-opted or tolerated). As we have observed, the weak associational system was divided into those associations subjected to the authoritarian machine and others, mainly advocacy associations, opposing the regime. This was a situation where political activism was mixed with associational activism. From this perspective, the revolutionary process did not represent a break with the past; with the benefit of historical analysis, we can highlight a form of continuity of the *embeddedness of the associational system* in the political game. Indeed, the second part of this book has been entirely dedicated to interpreting the dynamics of civic activism and the role of associations in a period of shifting opportunities and reconfiguration of power relations. From this perspective, the democratization process presents new opportunities and challenges to new players, reshaping the balances and roles within the civic arena and its interplay with the political sphere.

As we have observed in this study, the ideas, and *practices of participation* in civil society have become part of a normalization process of the revolutionary logic. In particular, the rise of thousands of associations after the fall of the authoritarian regime was also due to the incentives given by opening funding opportunities, thanks to the massive intervention of international donors. As a result, the associational system became the privileged target of *civil society promotion* policies and the agents of development programs, packaged at the international level, and transferred into the domestic setting. From this perspective, Tunisia represented an interesting case to investigate how the local associational system of an Arab country has internalized the diffusion of a Western paradigm of civil society and what the effects are of this diffusion from a local perspective. Indeed, the concept of civil society broke into a renewed socio-political scene. Associations emerged in the post-revolutionary setting as fluid spaces of alternative engagement with political parties. They became pivotal actors taking up all the subjects appearing in the post-revolutionary debate.

Therefore, after the revolution, the space that the hegemonic party almost entirely controlled under Ben Ali's regime was replaced by new actors who, after decades of repression, reactivated and invested in the field of

civil society. From the first observation, we note the structuration of the associational field according to the growing potential for conflict in the new political game. Indeed, on one side, the associations whose members are affiliated with the ruling party (Ennahda) or its allies and, on the other, so-called ‘modernist’ or ‘leftist’ associations whose members are affiliated with ideologically heterogeneous parties but marked by the same opposition to political Islam. This associational structuration, based on partisan affiliations, partly reproduced the logic of action between advocacy and service while taking different, more intertwined forms.

It bears repeating that this research has aimed to go beyond this *political interpretation* to highlight the deeper *sociological processes*, allowing us to understand political processes better. Indeed, in this book, I highlighted the mechanism within the associational system that, in turn, explains how civic activism contributes to the redefinition of power relations in the post-authoritarian setting.

3 Crafting civic activism after a revolution: doing politics by other means

This book deals with processes and dynamics in a phase of political transition, a setting characterized by fluid dynamics of redefinition of power relations. Thus, the second part of this work was dedicated to analyzing how local associations stemming from the revolutionary process have been acting as players in reconfiguring a *new pact with public institutions*. From this perspective, I highlighted how the Tunisian associational system emerged also as a playground, exposed to different forces stemming from the interactive dynamics involving the plethora of actors composing the post-authoritarian landscape.

First, after 2011 international donors have massively penetrated the country along with the ideological frame of a neoliberal political economy through a system of incentives and constraints. Second, the state is still not fully democratized, and even if, under more legitimate forms, local administrations continue to exert a form of hegemonic control over local associational systems. Third, political parties, and in particular the Islamist party Ennahda—which was institutionalized in an authoritarian context and had no access to political power—have tried to extend their hegemony over civil society to broaden its constituency. Therefore, associations stemming from the revolutionary impulse can be *imprisoned* in a relationship of dependency on other actors.

Ethnographical research on the strategic interactions involving the associations allowed me to trace how they behave in a context characterized by dynamics of reconfiguration of power relations. Notably, I have observed that even though actors external to the associational system impose their influence on the civic sphere, associations have also become the launch pad for social groups that aspire to emerge politically in the post-authoritarian scenario by engaging in the associational system. Thus, norms and standards of civil society diffused by international actors represent the 'access code' for those actors exploiting the engagement in the associational system to mobilize for the reconfiguration of power relations in the post-authoritarian setting.

From this point of view, adapting to the dominant model of civil society represents a strategy to acquire legitimacy to participate in politics through other means (Sigillò 2020). Therefore, I posit that associations are also arenas, subject to the hegemonic intentions of actors around them and agents for reconfiguring local power networks. Thus, I introduced the concept of *permeability of associations* to indicate that their process of institutionalization is subject to external drives, which allow their instrumentalization from above and below. In other words, associations are not autonomous entities but permeable spaces penetrated by a plethora of actors composing the post-authoritarian setting.

Notably, by fusing a Foucauldian and a Bourdieusian approach, I have highlighted how civic activism in a phase of political transition is shaped by heterogeneous power dynamics, questioning a stereotyped interpretation characterized by fixed roles of 'dominant vs. dominated' actors. Based on this theoretical perspective, associations can be interpreted as *surrogate political arenas* where various actors compete to control symbolic and material resources. In other words, associations can be contemporarily objects of hegemonic control and vectors for the reconfiguration of power relations in a post-authoritarian context. Associations can be arms of the state to implement public policies, agents of development under the normative influence of international donors, and spaces of party hegemony. At the same time, they can be vectors for the entry into politics of urban elites, NGO experts, or a rising Islamic middle class. In other words, associations can simultaneously be a space of hegemony and a vector of production of local notables. Therefore, while some associations carry emancipatory practices about social groups, they contribute to forms of reproduction of a dominant political order, where the 'domination' results from an unconditional internalization of consent.

Moving from the assumption of the embeddedness of the associational system in the post-revolutionary landscape, I analyzed the interactive

dynamics of local associations with the other actors composing the post-authoritarian arena to see how this interplay affects civic actors' frames and their mobilizing structures. This investigation allows us to understand two intertwined processes: how the national and international political systems wish to influence the local associational sphere and the strategic dilemmas of local associations vis-à-vis those actors promoting civil society.

The intersection of these two dynamics produces a better understanding of the trajectories of civic activism in a post-authoritarian context. In turn, it offers new theoretical perspectives challenging the existing literature dealing with civil society and civil society promotion. Chapters 4 and 5 observed that the norm of professionalization attached to a neoliberal conceptualization of civil society diffused by international actors has massively penetrated and shaped the associational world after 2011. In line with this idea, associations are considered vectors of the democratization process, and to achieve their task; they need to professionalize to be detached from the political sphere. Associations' professionalization is intended to create expertise in an organizational and managerial sense, allowing them to become agents of socioeconomic development. Thus, I described a mechanism of professionalized standardization of local associations based on transforming the associational organizational structure, constructing professional figures and competences, and specializing in their activities.

In the analysis, I demonstrate that local associations' transformation is far from producing an autonomous and apolitical associational system. The liberalization after 2011 created political opportunities for those socio-political groups that were repressed or neglected during the authoritarian regime, namely the Islamist network, the urban middle class living in regions that were marginalized from the RCD network, and, finally, a new social category that emerged after 2011—'NGO experts'—which act as a bridge between associations and international donors. As shown in Chapter 5, these three categories are *not mutually exclusive* and represent rising notabilities wishing to contribute to the reconfiguration of power relations in the post-authoritarian arena. This process implies complex relational dynamics between associational members and other actors in the post-revolutionary landscape. These relations ultimately are political, paradoxically in contradiction with the dominant model of autonomy of civil society, which promotes an autonomous civic sphere. I argue that these political relations, in turn, inform practices and transformations of local civic activism, which are built on the willingness to reconfigure socio-political networks after the fall of the authoritarian regime. Therefore, I traced the process of *politicization of the associational system* through the

study of the *activation of new local networks* (or reactivation of older ones), using associational life as a point of entry.

The case of Islamic associations is particularly interesting as it offers an important empirical contribution and a new theoretical perspective for analyzing a socio-political movement in its institutionalized configuration. The process of managerialization, professionalization, and specialization in development issues led them to reshape their relationships with the state, donors, and politics. Yet, as we have observed, the strategies of adaptation of Islamic charities to the neoliberal model of civil society can coexist with a differentiated relation to political Islam. Thus, institutionalized charitable associations can maintain close ties with the political movement while rationalizing their activities.

We have observed that this new market-oriented approach restyles ideas and practices of associations, and it even represents an opportunity for reconfiguring local networks. Furthermore, the strategic relational approach adopted in this book has allowed me to deepen the analysis by looking at the agency of activists engaged in the associational sphere, thus highlighting the variety of strategic choices open to these players in a context of strong fluidity. In this regard, the findings allowed me to shine a light on the hybrid trajectories of Islamic activism, showing that the link between the Islamist party, Ennahda, and associations is far from being a priori structured and that Islamist activists can play within and outside the Islamic constellation depending on the interactive dynamics involved.

Postscript

This book is built on ethnographic research covering a specific timeframe, from the fall of Ben Ali's regime until the last legislative and presidential elections in 2019. The study encompassed ten years, a time that in qualitative research is considered reasonable to make some insightful inferences. However, this rule of thumb is weaker when the investigation is situated in a socio-political context subject to deep and continuous transformations, such as a post-revolutionary setting.

Although this book has not analyzed the outcome of the democratization process, it nevertheless seems appropriate to conclude with a few remarks on the political developments of Kais Saied's regime. Following the harsh measures taken on July 25, 2019, under the legitimacy of art. 80 of the Constitution, several politicians, businessmen, judges, and members of parliament who lost their immunity, were banned from traveling abroad or put under arrest. Even if most of these measures had the partial support of a frustrated and disenchanted Tunisian people, the extension of the emergency clause over the delay of 30 days and the dissolution of the Superior Council of the Judiciary in February 2022 cast a shadow over the 'democratic exception.'

On July 25, 2022, Tunisians voted for a referendum on a new constitution that significantly expands the powers of a president who has sidelined the other branches of government to rule alone. The referendum passed 92% of the "yes" vote. The turnout was around 27%, but it matters little as there was no quorum. With the official start of the third republic, the measures taken by President Kais Saied precisely one year earlier to centralize power in his own hands, weakening parliament and other controls over the president and giving the head of state the ultimate authority to form a government, appoint judges and propose laws, were definitively institutionalized.

These changes seem to mark an *involution* of the democratization process that Tunisia has arduously built after abandoning dictatorship a decade ago. Eventually, the new constitution returned Tunisia to a hyper-presidential system very similar to the one under Ben Ali. In this shrinking space of democratic action, further research should investigate the contemporary reconfigurations of power relations crossing the associational sphere by looking at the hegemonic and emancipatory strategies of all the actors involved who seize new opportunities under new constraints. Moreover, further analyses shall enlarge the sample. Local associations are not representative of all the practices of civic activism. During a significant political change, *civil society* is the name we give to *players and arenas* with blurred boundaries,

whose membership is continuously in flux and where power balances are altered by shifting interactions for the reconfiguration of power relations. Future studies on civil societies in transition will, I hope, keep alive this dynamic perspective.

Appendix

List of interviews

Number of developmental and charitable associations interviewed per governorate

Grand Tunis	24
Sfax	23
Siliana	13
Medenine	20

List of international donors interviewed

	Donor	Type	Function	Location
1	UNDP	Multilateral	Communication Coordinator	Tunis
			Regional project coordinator (southern regions)	Medenine
2	PASC	Multilateral	Project coordinator Sfax focal point	Djerba Sfax
			Medenine focal point	Medenine
			Regional coordinator Siliana (North-West regions)	Siliana
			Regional coordinator (Medenine)	
3	Democracy Reporting International	ONG	Consultant	Djerba Tunis
4	Search for Common ground	ONG	Project assistance	Tunis
5	Italian Cooperation	Governmental	Project coordinator	Tunis

	Donor	Type	Function	Location
6	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)	Governmental	Project coordinator	Tunis
7	Swiss Cooperation	Governmental	Program coordinator	Medenine
8	CILG-VNG	ONG	Consultant	Ben Guerdane (Medenine)
9	Maison de France	Governmental	Regional coordinator of the civil society program	Sfax
10	CEFA	ONG	Country coordinator	Hammamet
11	Mercy Corps	ONG	Program Coordinator	Tunis
12	Islamic Relief (UK)	ONG	Program director	Tunis
13	Agence Française de Développement (AFD)	Governmental	Office director	Tunis
14	ILO	Multilateral	Project coordinator	Siliana
15	Qatar Charity	Semi-governmental	Country director	Tunis
16	Herbert Stiftung	Foundation	Program coordinator	Tunis
17	Konrad Adenauer Stiftung	Foundation	Program coordinator	Tunis
18	World Bank	Multilateral	Country coordinator	Tunis
19	COSPE	ONG	Program coordinator	Tunis
20	USAID	Governmental	Desk officer	Tunis

List of administrative officials interviewed

Interview 1: General director of the regional development office, Walid Triki, Medenine, 28.4.2016

Interview 2: Major of Sfax, Mabrouk Kossentini, 18.5.2016

Interview 3: Governor of Siliana, Slim Tissaoui, 4.6.2016

Interview 4: Director of regional development office of Siliana, Guermezi Houcine, 6.6.2016

Interview 5: Director of regional development office of Sfax, Khaled Hachicha, 8.11.2016

List of party members interviewed

Interview 1: A. Khammari, Ennahda, Hammamet, 22.5.2016

Interview 2: H. Ellouze, Ennahda, Hammamet, 22.5.2016

Interview 3: R. Abdeslam, Ennahda, Hammamet, 22.5.2016

Interview 4: A. Temimi, Ennahda, Hammamet, 22.5.2016

Interview 5: B. Draouil, coordinator of the Ennahda section in Italy, Hammamet, 22.5.2016

Interview 6: Y. Ben Mohamed, Ennahda (*choura* administrative office), Hammamet, 22.5.2016

Interview 7: O. Sghaier, Ennahda, Hammamet, 22.5.2016

Interview 8: I. Ben Mohamed, Ennahda, Tunis, 5.11.2016

Interview 9: T. Chaabouni, Nidaa Tounès, Tunis, 20.1.2017

Interview 10: C. Ayadi, Front populaire, Sfax, 28.3.2017

Interview 11: Party member of Itilaf Karama, who requested anonymity, Tunis, 14.10.2019

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This book illustrates the results of ethnographical research designed to shed light on the notion of civil society in a context characterized by the transformation of power relations. Such transformation is given by shifting resources, renewed local and international opportunities, and a general reframing of goals and objectives. The academic literature has usually relied on a substantialist understanding of the notion of civil society – referring to the latter as something that exists a priori or does something. This volume relies, instead, on a relational approach – where civil society becomes the name we give to a host of complex interactions in which local associations are involved in a time of reconfiguration of power relations. Building on this approach, this volume analyses the relational dynamics affecting Tunisian associations after the fall of the authoritarian regime in 2011 and their implications for the changing political order. Findings show two main interrelated trends: the nationwide professionalization of local associations and the localized networking strategies of various socio-political categories crossing the associational sector. The book shows how their members understand the standardization of local associations as a strategy to have guaranteed access to the public sphere and, therefore, to influence the changing political order.

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