

CIVIL SOCIETY IN A TIME OF TRANSITION

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At a time when countries around the world are experiencing some form of transition – political, economic, technological, demographic, ecological – as well as increasing levels of distrust in political institutions, what is the role of civil society? How is civil society facing an increasingly challenging operating environment in a context of rapid change?

Civil society is broadly defined here to mean institutions, organisations and individuals undertaking collective action that is independent from the state and not designed to achieve private profit or public office. The civil society space includes highly structured organisations such as trade unions and professional associations through to mass social movements and online networks.

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Tunisia is a useful case study through which to explore the changing role of civil society in a world experiencing multiple transitions. While Tunisia is going through a complex democratic transition that sets it apart in many respects, its civil society faces similar challenges to those to the South and North of the Mediterranean when it comes to operating in a context of dwindling trust in public institutions, rise in populist discourses, high levels of inequality, an urban/rural divide, and disengagement from traditional forms of political and social activism.

Civil society or civil societies?

Tunisia and the wave of protests around the Arab region opened up new spaces for citizens to mobilise.

The Tunisian revolution in 2010-11 and the ensuing wave of protests around the Arab region opened up the way for the proliferation of civil society by creating new spaces for citizens to mobilise. In Tunisia, the number of civil society organisations (CSOs) grew from 9,969 in 2011 to 22,844 in 2019; in Morocco from 44,711 in 2009 to 116,000 in 2014; and in Algeria from 81,000 in 2008 to more than 100,000 in 2019 (Desrues 2019, IFEDA Tunisia 2019, Bessadi 2019). This is alongside the emergence of social movements addressing a wide number of issues from natural resource management and regional development to women's rights and socio-economic exclusion.

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The Southern Mediterranean region has also witnessed the increasing **pluralisation** of civil society. While “old” civil society consisted mainly of established actors such as trade unions, employers' groups, professional associations and human rights associations, recent decades have seen the emergence of new civil society actors who choose to mobilise outside these structures.

An example are the unions of unemployed graduates in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. Another is the growing community of “start-uppers” in Tunisia, a network of young tech entrepreneurs who successfully campaigned for new legislation to make it easier to launch start-ups. Both of these examples demonstrate how civil society structures are changing in response to changing relations between labour and capital and growing demands for socio-economic inclusion.

This pluralised civil society has also provided space for young people who do not see themselves reflected in older established CSOs, political parties or traditional union structures that tend to be dominated by an older generation. In Tunisia, a plethora of new organisations have

been established by young people on a range of political, economic and social issues. These range from civic education clubs in schools and local associations working on environmental protection to nation-wide social movements such as the 'Manich Msameh' campaign against the proposed bill on economic reconciliation.

While the emergence of a more pluralistic civil society is positive, we still need to ask, how representative and inclusive is civil society in the region? According to studies on the Arab region, participation in civil society structures tends to be lowest among youth who are less educated, unemployed or from rural areas (Mercy Corps, 2012). This means that the same groups who are under-represented in political institutions and public debate also under-represented in organised civil society, resulting in double exclusion.

However, Tunisia's experience shows how democratisation can open space for the emergence of CSOs in marginalised regions suffering from the centralisation of economic and political power by authoritarian regimes. Since 2011, the number of CSOs has risen sharply in the South, Centre and North-West of Tunisia, where poverty rates are far higher than the capital. The number of new associations in Gafsa (in the Centre) doubled in 2011-12. In the Southern region of Medenine on the border with Libya, new associations created in 2011-12 represented 31.4% of CSOs in 2013 (Foundation for the Future, 2013). While there is still a big gap between urban and rural areas, marginalised regions are experiencing a civil society renaissance, with the emergence of networks of CSOs working together to make their voices heard at the national level, particularly on issues of regional development.

The socio-economic and urban/rural divides within civil society, alongside political and ideological ones, naturally reflect broader fault lines within society. International donors need to be sensitive to these dynamics and seek to engage with all categories of civil society actors equally. Civil society actors in Tunisia complain that international donors fail to engage adequately with regions beyond the capital, and that they demonstrate a bias towards secular civil society actors to the detriment of faith-based actors (Kausch, 2013). Such perceptions of discrimination or bias can deepen polarisation within civil society, undermining the capacity for coalition-building that could lead to more effective mobilisation around shared objectives (Debuysere, 2016).

Changing forms of civic participation

To the North and South of the Mediterranean, there has been a notable decline in civic participation through membership in formal organisations. The idea of a life-long commitment to one organisation is being increasingly replaced by more 'free floating' forms of civic participation, which may be no less intensive or committed but tend to be shorter in duration (MitOst, 2016).

The rise of social media has also produced new forms of civic participation in the North and South. Cyberactivism uses online spaces for expression and mobilisation, creating a virtual public sphere that is particularly valuable where access to a physical one is limited. An example is the vibrant online discussions around Morocco's HIRAK and Boycott movements, which the Moroccan regime has tried to crack down on by arresting activists and journalists.

However, questions remain as to whether virtual spaces help to promote democratic debate and change or simply reinforce divisions by creating 'echo chambers' in which we consume information that confirms our existing opinions. More individualised forms of civic participation may leave traditional civil society actors struggling to reinvent themselves and adapt to these transformations. A good example of where this is happening is in the field of Social and Solidarity Economy, where the MAIF (teacher's mutual insurance fund) in France is supporting collaborative economy start-ups to develop new economic solutions that respond to social challenges.

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The changing role of civil society in Tunisia

Tunisian civil society is also working with public officials to develop their skills and establish new democratic frameworks and practices.

In an era of transformation, the roles and modes of functioning of civil society in Tunisia are changing. CSOs are still carrying out the traditional functions of advocacy and monitoring, seeking to hold governments and state institutions to account. In the context of a democratic transition that calls for strengthening new democratic institutions, civil society is also working with public officials to develop their skills and establish new democratic frameworks and practices. For example, Al Bawsala, a parliamentary watchdog, provides training for parliamentarians on a range of issues to support their legislative work. Jasmine Foundation, a CSO specialising in local governance, works to train and support newly elected municipal councillors to get to grips with their new powers, while also conducting citizen-led evaluations of municipal services to hold local government to account. Thus, Tunisian civil society is learning how to balance confrontation and collaboration in its relations with the state, supporting the building of a democratic culture while also holding public institutions to account.

Continuing authoritarian practices in security institutions, particularly the police, are one of the biggest threats to Tunisia's democratic transition.

However, there are certainly “no-go areas” in which it is proving hard for civil society to make a difference. One is security sector reform, a sensitive topic that CSOs engage in at their peril. Although continuing authoritarian practices in security institutions, particularly the police, are one of the biggest threats to Tunisia's democratic transition, few CSOs or international donors have come up with creative approaches to promote security sector reform. Judicial reform is also an area in which few CSOs have developed real influence, other than professional associations such as judges' and lawyers' unions.

There is a real need for citizens who are the ultimate owners of public services – the justice, policing, education, health and transport systems, etc. – to develop associations that represent their interests and push for deep-rooted reforms. Educational reform, for example, is an issue that concerns not only teachers, who are represented through their unions, but also students and parents. Yet much of the discussions around this sector are conducted as a bilateral dialogue between government and unions, without involving vast sectors of society that are affected by policy decisions.

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While civil society's power to influence policies is growing, there is still a need for greater specialisation and for organisations to build their capacity to analyse and evaluate policies. Tunisian civil society needs more support for policy research to enable it to hold government to account more closely by analysing the impact of public policies on different social groups and proposing policy alternatives. Without the existence of a civil society that is able to simplify complex policy debates for the public, identify where policies are failing, and involve the public, policy debate will remain dominated by government and a small circle of ‘experts’. The growth of think tanks in Tunisia is an encouraging phenomenon in this regard (Kherigi and Amiri, 2015), although the MENA region as a whole still contains only 6% of think tanks in the world (McGann, 2019).

Structural challenges for civil society

While civil society is thriving in an era of increasing contestation of public policies, it faces significant challenges. As the Euromed survey shows, civil society in the EU and SEM share some common challenges, the most important being limited funding, political pressures, lack of independence, and administrative hurdles.

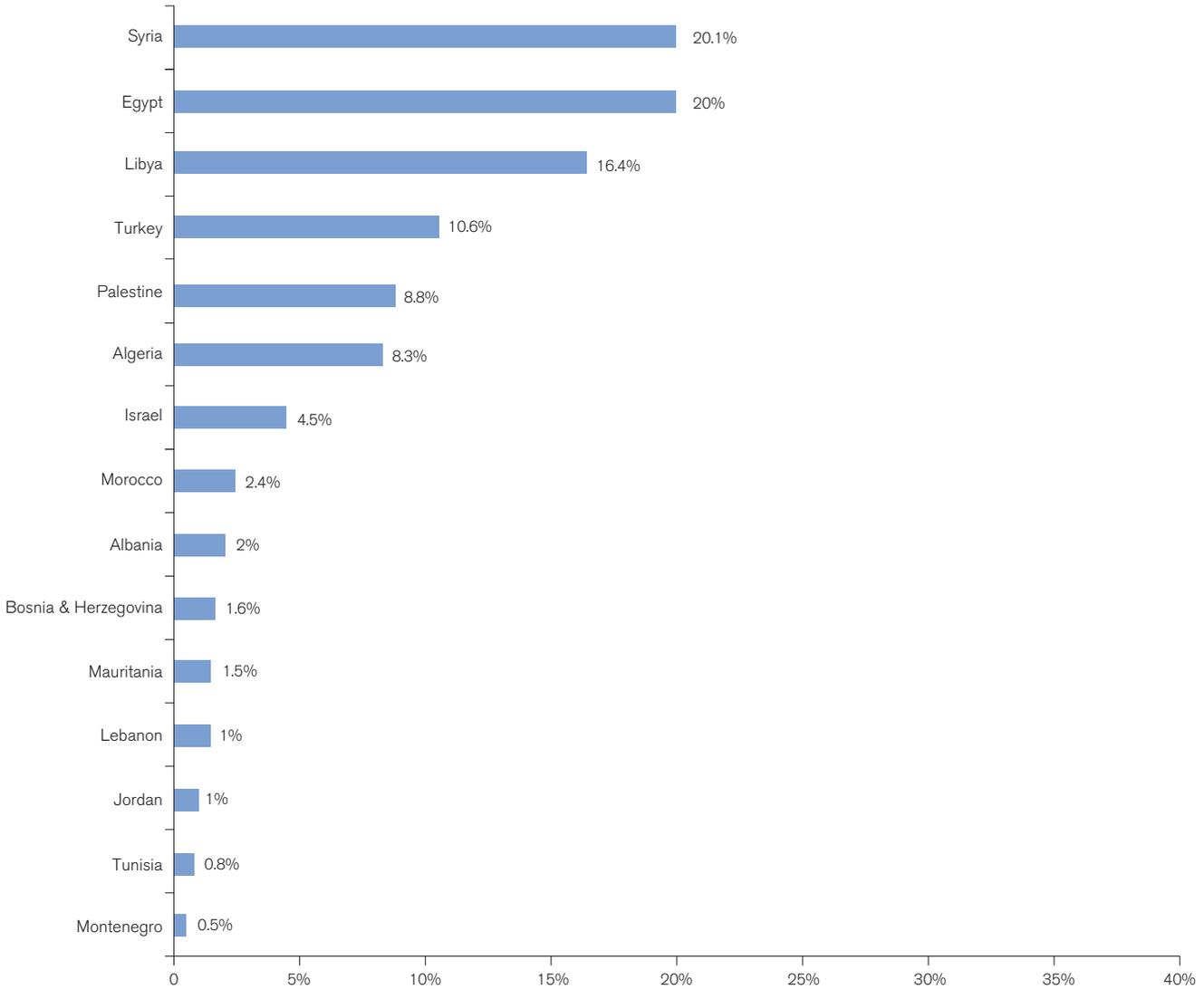
Shrinking civic space

In Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries, political pressures are cited as the main challenge for civil society. Civic space has shrunk as regimes react to the initial successes

of the Arab Spring by clamping down on freedom of expression, association and assembly. Notable examples are Syria, Egypt and Libya, which were cited in the survey as the three SEM countries in which civil societies face the biggest obstacles.

Graph 1: In which Southern and Eastern Mediterranean (SEM) countries do civil societies face the biggest obstacles?

(respondents were asked to choose 3 options out of 15)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 10th Euromed Survey

Tunisia, Lebanon and Jordan are bright spots in this regard, rated among the SEM countries in which civil societies face the fewest obstacles. However, governments in the region have used an arsenal of restrictive laws and security apparatuses to crack down on civil society. In Egypt, new laws have made it practically impossible for CSOs to operate. In Jordan, Law 22/2009 allows the state to dissolve any CSO board or even the organisation itself on vague grounds, and subjects board members to security checks.

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In EU countries there are growing concerns about the impact of counter-extremism policies on freedom of expression and association.

The policing of online space has become a particular challenge. In Algeria, Internet access was disrupted during recent protests for political reforms. In Morocco, press and antiterrorism laws have been used to shut down news websites reporting on protest movements, while in Lebanon, individuals have been arrested and prosecuted for online posts criticising government officials (Amnesty International, 2018).

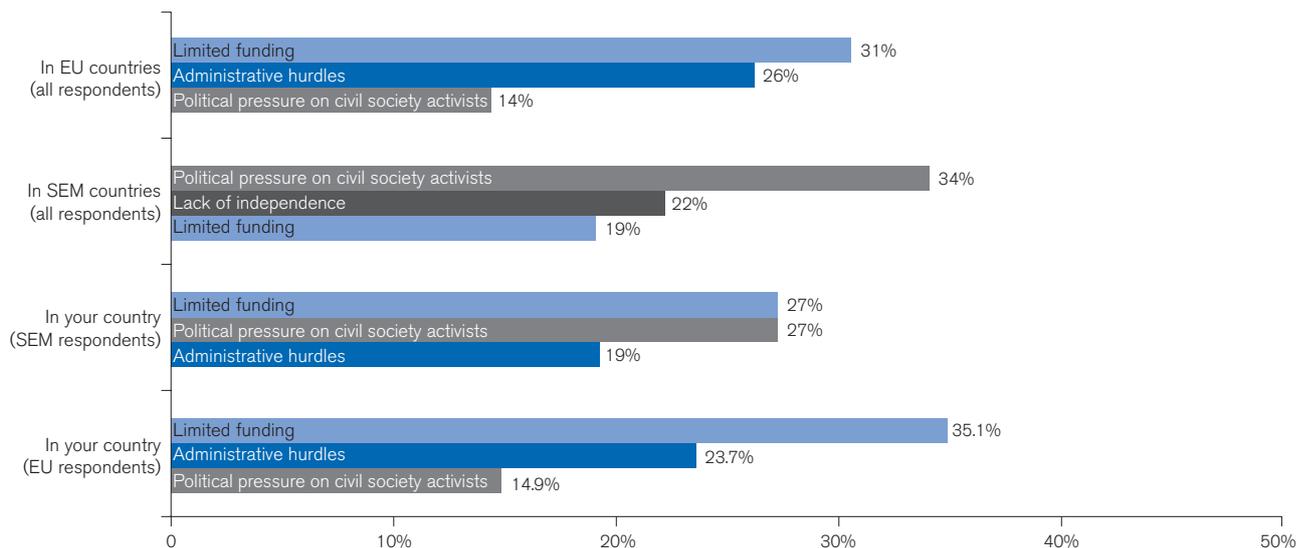
These developments are not limited to the Southern Mediterranean region but are part of a worldwide trend. According to the International Centre for Non-for-Profit Law, 64 new restrictive laws and regulations were adopted worldwide in 2015-16, leaving global civic space ‘severely narrowed’ (ICNL, 2016). While the EU has much more ‘open’ civic space, civil society is experiencing political pressures in Eastern Europe, particularly Hungary. Even in Western Europe, there are growing concerns about the impact of counter-extremism policies on freedom of expression and association, and the use of CVE funding by government to steer civil society activity.

Financial sustainability

Another top preoccupation for civil society is financial survival. In the Northern Mediterranean, austerity policies have contributed to a decline in public civil society funding (CIVICUS, 2016). In the Southern Mediterranean, while the Arab Spring brought renewed interest and support in civil society among international donors, this has brought challenges of a different sort. Attitudes towards foreign funding remain ambivalent in many countries, which may not necessarily express a reservation to foreign funding *per se* but to its modalities and the way in which it impacts on the way CSOs carry out their work.

Graph 2: What are the obstacles for establishing a successfully working civil society?

(respondents were asked to choose 2 options out of 5)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 10th Euromed Survey

In a recent study on counter violent extremism and its impact on CSOs in Tunisia, many activists said they felt that a reliance on international funding undermines civil society’s independence and its capacity to set its own priorities. Many expressed concerns that current funding mechanisms promote a short-term project-based mode of work that does not allow civil society actors to focus on long-term deep-rooted change, leaving them stuck in a cycle of how to prove quantifiable results in a short space of time. Furthermore, this model pressurises them to be upwardly accountable to donors instead of downwardly accountable to the people they serve.

The financial sustainability challenge calls for new solutions and funding models. In countries with a more open civic space such as Tunisia and Lebanon, new funding models should be encouraged, whether via charitable foundations, corporate social responsibility programs or engagement with the diaspora. Crowdfunding has emerged as a promising source of civil society support in recent years. In Tunisia, a new law on crowdfunding is being discussed, which for the first time would provide a legal framework for crowdfunding platforms to be used inside Tunisia, with the potential to raise “10 million annually by 2020” (SwitchMed, 2015). Another potential source is social enterprise, which is developing in many parts of Europe. While it has existed for centuries in the Southern Mediterranean in the form of *‘awqaf’* (foundations), current legal frameworks remain restrictive in many countries.

Organisational sustainability

For new CSOs in particular, another challenge is organisational sustainability. The new CSOs that emerged in Tunisia after 2011 have faced challenges in building their structures and teams while operating in an uncertain domestic and regional environment. They have faced a steep learning curve. In 2013, a study of CSOs in Tunisia found that an estimated 75% of staff had not received any training on project management or management of associations (Foundation for the Future, 2013).

However, six years on, the civil society field is becoming more professionalised and structured. It is also providing economic opportunities for young people, some of whom use it a steppingstone to employment in other sectors, while others are increasingly seeing it as a long-term career option. Around the MENA region, civil society is providing a learning environment that helps address the deficits of formal educational systems that are excessively focused on memorisation and failing to prepare young people for the job market.

Conclusion

The ultimate challenge for civil society on both sides of the Mediterranean is to create lasting, structural change. The rise of social media and new forms of civic participation generate opportunities for more rapid dissemination of information, formation of networks, and virtual and physical mobilisation. At the same time, the rise of looser, more individualised forms of engagement raises questions over how to support sustained collective efforts for structural change, particularly in post-authoritarian contexts in which deep-rooted institutional reforms are needed.

A key challenge is to build bridges between traditional and new forms of civic engagement. Times of crisis and rapid change are an invitation to civil society to update its conceptual toolkit and modes of action. Civil society actors, whether organised structures or new social movements, must find ways to collaborate across divides for the common good and draw on their comparative advantages.

In the context of high public distrust in political institutions across Europe and the Southern Mediterranean, civil society has a big responsibility. While civil society must maintain its independence, it has an important role in encouraging citizens to be more politically informed and active. In the Southern Mediterranean, where issues of social and economic inclusion are particularly prominent, civil society has a role in developing an informed public debate on how to create a new social contract that sets aside the old authoritarian bargain and builds new inclusive democratic societies based on respect for human rights, the rule of law and social justice.

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The survey also reveals that there is a desire for exchange between civil societies on both sides of the Mediterranean. Decentralisation reforms in Morocco, Tunisia and Jordan in particular, have energised local civil society and present new opportunities for subnational cooperation. In order to make the most of these opportunities, international partners need to get to grips with the changing civic space in the Southern Mediterranean and review the rigid and short-term nature of current partnership frameworks in order to enable civil society to focus on long-term sustainable results.

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THE RESHAPED CIVIC POLITICS OF EURO-MEDITERRANEAN RELATIONS

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The EU's support for civil society has improved but remains behind the curve, as it struggles to keep pace with the emergence of dynamic innovations in civic activism.

The Euromed Survey 2019 reveals that the civil society dimension of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) remains of pivotal importance but needs updating. In recent years, civil society has shifted shape in the southern Mediterranean, and indeed within EU member states too. While civil society has in some ways been on the defensive since the revolts of 2011, it has in some contexts taken on interesting new forms. The EU's support for civil society has improved but remains behind the curve, as it struggles to keep pace with the emergence of dynamic innovations in civic activism. Key policy changes are currently in the pipeline that will have a significant impact on the EMP's civil society component. The EU will need to consider a range of far-reaching changes if it is to improve its contribution to southern Mediterranean civil society.

A new civil society?

Mediterranean states were in the forefront of an intensive wave of social protests in the early 2010s. The revolts of the Arab spring came to symbolise the emergence of a more contentious form of civic politics. And this was a genuinely cross-Mediterranean phenomenon, as protests also erupted in many EU member states like Greece and Spain around the same time.

Of course, these citizen mobilisations did not achieve far-reaching political or economic change in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region. Even where they were strong enough to push regimes from office, they did not lead to democratisation – with the one partial exception of Tunisia. Yet despite the disappointment of the Arab spring, a willingness to protest still exists across the region. Indeed, such is the current upswing in protest activity that talk abounds of a renewed momentum of Arab reform.

Recently, of course, this has been seen in Algeria, where large protests involving a diverse range of social actors got the military to push president Bouteflika from power. The Algerian protests have been especially notable for continuing over many months and for their organisational acuity. The country is, of course, still only in the foothills of prospective political change and protestors have begun to face the challenge of engaging military leaders over the sequencing of political changes.

Lebanon's protests during October 2019 have been equally dramatic. These recent revolts came on the back of the 2015 You Stink protests that were triggered by the issue of refuse collection, but took on a broader set of policy concerns. It is these demands for a fundamental reshaping of Lebanon's inter-denominational power-sharing system that dominate the current wave of protest. At the time of writing, these protests have succeeded in dislodging the government, while it remains unclear how far they will bring about structural political reform.

While the Algerian protests have been in the headlines, mobilisations also continue elsewhere, albeit at a lower level. Some protests have occurred recently under the current military-

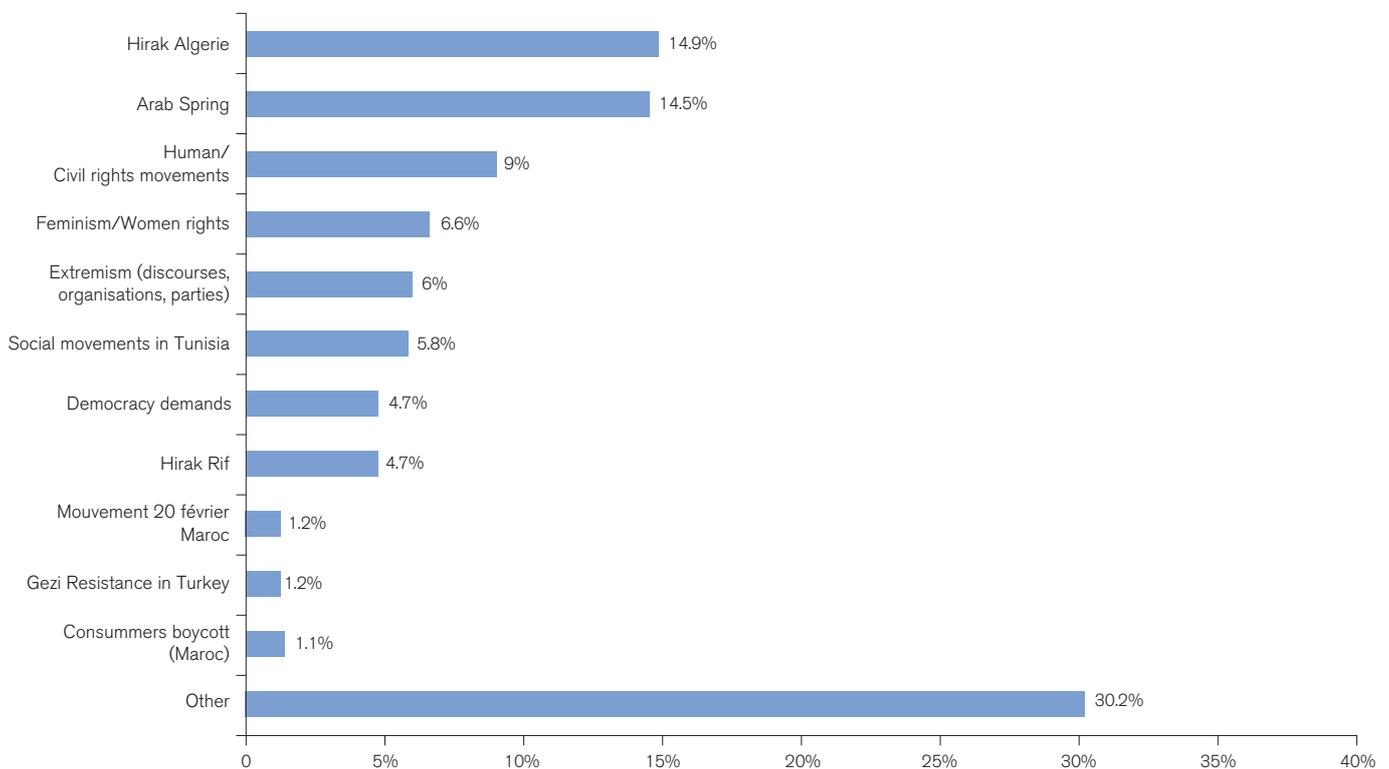
controlled regime in Egypt. In Tunisia, thousands of small-scale protests now occur each year, triggered by a whole range of grievances from university conditions, job losses, terrorism and security concerns, uneven regional development, the stalling of democratic reforms and religion. Tunisian activists define them as non-movements, more locally focused and spontaneous than the 2011 uprising. In December 2017 the so-called Hassebhom movement orchestrated protests against the government's proposed security law that would hand significant powers to the police. And in 2018 protests rocked a dozen Tunisian cities in response to price rises and tax hikes, orchestrated by a small informal movement called 'What are we waiting for?'

In the last two or three years large protests have flared sporadically in the Moroccan region of Rif, coordinated by the so-called Hirak movement – these have focused on issues of local infrastructure, health and education in contrast to the 2011 protests that homed in on constitutional change.

In Tunisia, thousands of small-scale protests now occur each year these protests, triggered by a whole range of grievances-

Graph 1: Among recent social movements, which ones do you consider had the greatest political impact in SEM countries?

(categories developed from the open-ended answers)

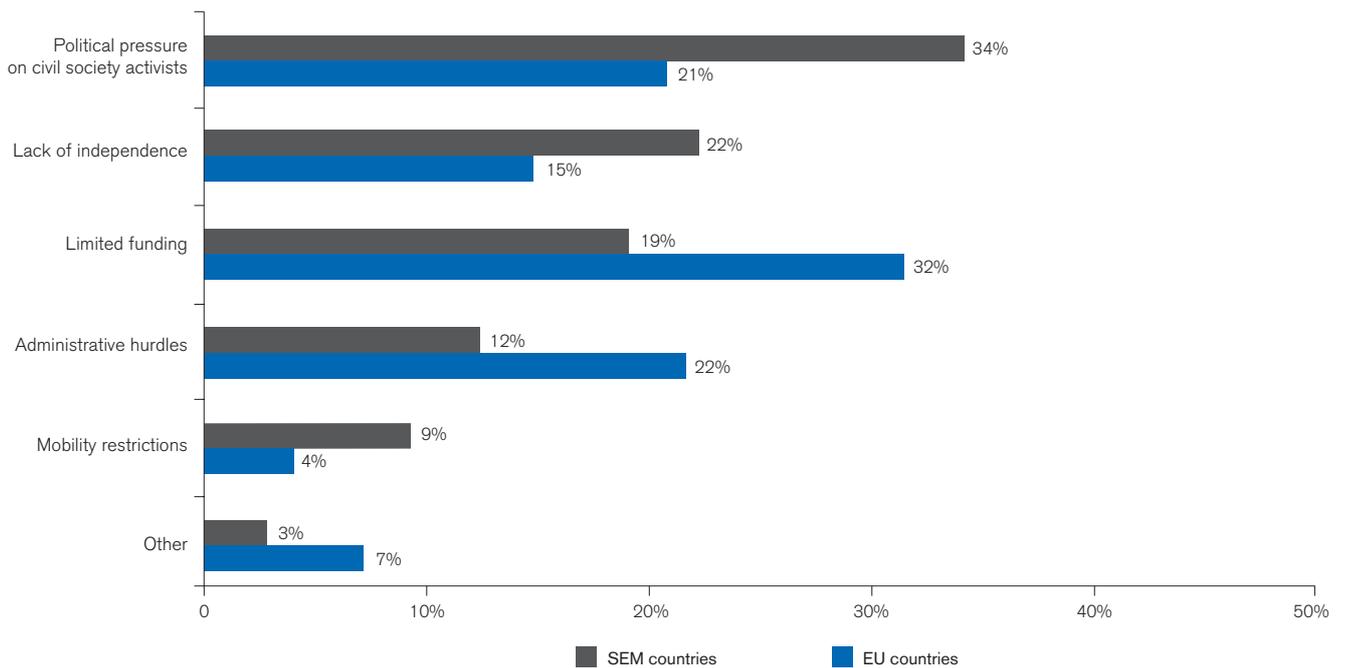


Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 10th Euromed Survey

While some protest ethos persists, most Arab governments have responded by trying to stifle civic politics. Civil society in the southern Mediterranean has in recent years faced more draconian repression. Regimes have introduced more severe restrictions on civil society organisations. While Egypt's restrictive NGO laws are well known, even supposedly more open governments like those in Tunisia and Morocco have found ways of constricting civil society operations. This is another common Euro-Mediterranean trend as many EU governments have introduced similar restrictions in an effort to limit and control civic activism.

Southern Mediterranean governments have found ways of constricting civil society operations. This is another common Euro-Mediterranean trend as many EU governments have introduced similar restrictions.

Graph 2: What are the obstacles for establishing a successfully working civil society?
(respondents were asked to choose 2 options out of 5)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 10th Euromed Survey

Activists in Arab countries have begun to articulate more informal and community-rooted forms of civil society activity.

The combination of these developments has spurred new forms of civic activism. As in other regions of the world, activists in Arab countries have begun to articulate more informal and community-rooted forms of civil society activity. Even if regimes contained the Arab spring protests, these revolts galvanised a new layer of dynamic activism that has moved away from the region's larger, formal and best-known NGOs. New civic initiatives have sprung up across the region to organise local communities in providing food, medical assistance, and vocational training. Young people are turning toward social entrepreneurship and volunteerism as alternatives to engaging with NGOs.

Much of the new activism is about making communities more resilient by circumventing dysfunctional government institutions – rather than about advocacy campaigns linked to the policies of the international community. Alternative social networks have grown in the region in the years since 2011. This emerging activism is diverse in nature: some of it is driven by conservative religious activists, while much of it is strictly functional – based around groups of like street vendors, doctors or urban-renewal specialists.

Fluid and informal activism is the incipient strategy for getting round regime clampdowns on NGOs.

This trend is in part a positive strategy to correct the perceived shortcomings of the bigger NGOs, but also in part a necessary adjustment to regime repression. Governments' new measures to narrow the civic space have in places like Egypt effectively driven activists into more cautious, subterranean and less overtly politicised activity. Fluid and informal activism is the incipient strategy for getting round regime clampdowns on NGOs.

In Syria and Lebanon organisations have emerged to provide humanitarian relief within communities scarred by Syria's conflict, relying on crowdsourcing for operational funds. Non-formalised civic groups have retained a deliberate looseness and fluidity of structure in an effort to pushback against the Assad regime. In Lebanon, this kind of conflict-linked activism has distanced itself from the formal civil society organisations that are linked to the patronage of political families and notables.

In Palestine, new types of civic organisations are detaching themselves from the parameters of two-state peace talks and organising for de facto and functional local autonomy from Israeli influence. In Libya, kinship groups have become more important, as NGO-type structures have struggled to take root in the years since Colonel Qaddafi was ousted from power. In Morocco, the February 20 Movement has moved from protest into so-called 'liquid' initiatives of self-organisation.

Taken together, these changes are significant, even if in many cases they are not a game-changer. In many ways, civil society is on the defensive, cornered by increasingly intrusive and repressive regime tactics, but there are also new avenues of civic dynamism and citizen initiatives to find more effective ways to influence local policies. Contrary to many assumptions, the uprisings of the Arab spring were not a one-off that have entirely subsided back into the status quo ante. Rather they have contributed, along with other factors, to alternative kinds of civic activism taking root, in some ways more dynamic and more locally resonant than the kind of formalised NGO campaigns that predominated before 2011. The formal NGO sector is still extremely important and has itself begun to adjust; but it is today one part of a more varied spectrum of civic politics across the southern Mediterranean.

The future of EU support

These trends suggest that the EMP's civil society dimension is still relevant – and indeed increasingly so. The EU's challenge is to keep pace with these civic changes if it is to offer effective support to Arab civil society. IEMed's expert survey uncovers concerns that the union is not doing nearly enough to help protect and strengthen civil society in the southern Mediterranean – in particular due to its security priorities.

In many respects, the EU has begun to react to the new civic politics in recent years. It has increased its use of sub-granting, to make sure that funds move from larger NGO partners into smaller civic groups out of capital cities. The EU has made an effort to broaden its support beyond highly formalised NGOs to engage with individuals and non-registered entities. The European Commission has begun to listen more to local Arab civic actors before defining its calls of proposals, in an effort to make its core funding procedure less top-down. It has also been exploring ways of providing CSOs with more core support rather than just funding one-off projects. The EU has moved towards a greater mainstreaming of civil society support by increasing support to civil society as part of its other areas of development aid.

The EU has introduced several innovations to get funds out more quickly to civil society activists, especially those facing arrest or physical attacks from their governments. Under a rapid response mechanism for civil society it can now get funds of up to 60,000 euros out to CSOs within two months. More of the EU's funding now goes directly to protecting activists from state repression, in particular from its so-called Protectdefenders.eu initiative. Egyptian civil society has been the largest recipient of these funds anywhere in the world.

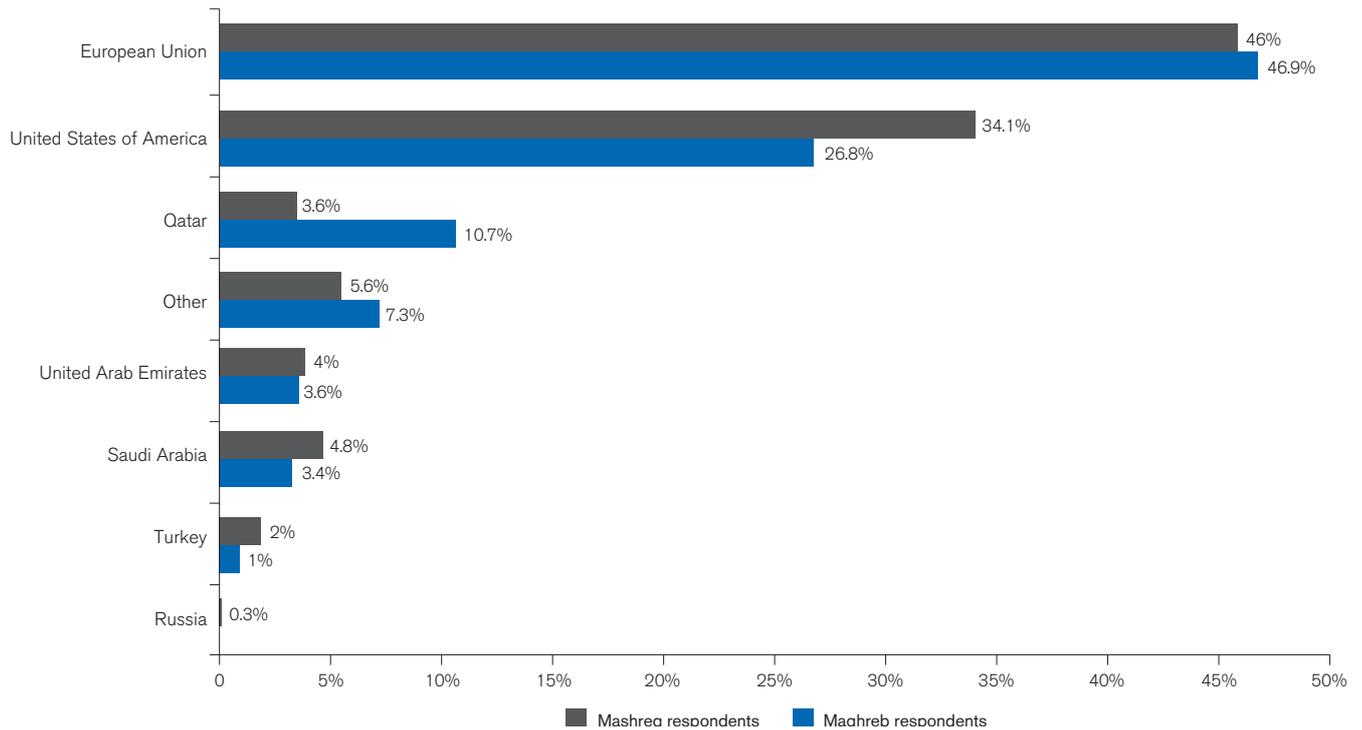
These changes are positive but for now remain tentative. In addition, there are on-going debates about funding levels for civil society. The European Commission's proposals for the post-2020 budget promise to ring-fence 1.5 billion euros for civil society out of a 68 billion aid total – a 6 per cent increase on the current period. However, some in the southern Mediterranean have expressed concern because funds that up to now have been allocated specifically for the MENA countries will be folded into a single financial instrument covering all aid recipients worldwide (except candidate countries).

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EU has begun to react to the new civic politics: broaden support beyond formalised NGOs, less top-down funding procedures, increased support to civil society as part of its other areas of development aid.

Graph 3: In your country foreign support to civil society comes mainly from:
(respondents were asked to choose 2 options out of 7)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 10th Euromed Survey

The Commission insists that the single instrument will simplify funding procedures and allow funds to reach civic activists in the south more quickly and on more flexible terms. It also indicates that civil society could receive more money from the bilateral aid programmes for each recipient country than is currently the case. Yet, there is uncertainty over whether Arab civil society actors risk losing funds to other regions.

In recent years, the union has in practice been reluctant to fund projects without the consent of governments.

The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) will benefit from a slightly increased amount of funding under the proposals. Through this, the EU will be able to fund projects without the consent of governments. In recent years, however, the union has in practice been reluctant to do this in Arab countries, reducing the potential value of the EIDHR to Euro-Mediterranean relations. In the current political climate and with a security-first EU foreign policy, it is not clear that this is likely to change in any positive sense.

Many member states want more flexibility to move funds away from civil society and human rights objectives into funding for security and migration-control purposes.

Even if there may be some gains for civil society actors under these proposals, there are remaining doubts. Many member states are pushing for changes to the Commission's proposals. They want more flexibility to move funds away from civil society and human rights objectives into funding for security and migration-control purposes.

If the EU is to help retain a meaningful and forward-looking civil society strand to the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership it will need to do more than simply guarantee a sufficient level of funding. The union will need to find ways of engaging helpfully with protests across the region. The EU cannot and should not seek to engineer protests and when these do occur it will often make sense to stand back and not interfere. But more could be done to help activists devise better strategies to keep reform momentum going after protests die down, to adopt more long-term political strategies and build broader alliances with other parts of society. These steps failed in the period after the Egyptian revolution in 2011; they will be

of vital importance in Algeria and Lebanon in the coming months and years and the union will face a crucial test case here.

The EU will need to add further to the flexibility of its funding to help reach the new forms of activism taking root across the southern Mediterranean. It should be able to ensure that a greater – perhaps even pre-set – share of its funding goes to new civic actors that have not previously received European support. It will need to rethink its traditional model of funding in an era when activists are often looking for more political support rather than the standard form of civil society capacity-building or training project. Part of this should entail helping civil society generate funds from local sources to reduce donor dependency. The EU will need to decide whether it has the political will to react as Arab regimes clampdown on the region's dynamic activists in increasingly harsh fashion – the IEMed survey reveals concerns that the union needs to do this without being counter-productive in leaving civic actors more vulnerable. A promising idea would be to shift more EU funds to civil society as and when regimes abuse human rights commitments.

These kinds of changes would take on board the evolution of civic activism in the southern Mediterranean. It is far from certain that member states have the political will to agree to them, in large measure due to familiar security and geopolitical reasons.

A final reflection: while there is scope for EU civil society support to improve in the southern Mediterranean, a deeper and intriguing trend is that many of the same civic politics are today evident within EU member states. Protests occur with greater frequency, a more dynamic layer of community-level activism has gained traction, and in response most EU governments have sought to restrict civic space. This calls for far deeper and more intense linkages and coordination between European and MENA civil society, quite separate from what formal EU support may or may not exist. A genuinely Euro-Mediterranean civic space may be emerging – in both positive and less benign ways – and may prove capable of making the EMP's civil society component more of a tangible reality than has previously been the case.

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