

Chapter 1: An Outlook on Tunisian Elite Stakeholders' Perspectives on the EU and Its Policy Preferences in Tunisia and the Mediterranean

In view of the large-scale transition to a functioning democracy after the Jasmine Revolution in 2011, understanding the stance of Tunisian 'elites' towards the recent developments in domestic and regional affairs proves very significant in analysing the course of relations between the EU and Tunisia and the changing dynamics in the Mediterranean region overall. With a strong historical background on civil society movements—especially the labour uprisings which date back to the 1970s—Tunisia has followed a different course of conduct compared to the neighbouring countries on the northern shores of Africa. Adding to its geographical position as the closest door to the EU, Tunisia has been of strategic importance to the EU and the neighbouring countries in the region.

The present chapter introduces the findings of the elite survey carried out in Tunis, the capital of Tunisia, during the month of February 2018. The aim of this field study is to map out the perceptions of Tunisian elites towards the European policies in the Mediterranean area with a focus on analysing the current expectations and potential areas of co-operation in the near future between Tunisia and the EU. The study attempts to provide a multi-dimensional analysis on the country's perception of the

1 Robert P. Parks authored the background section of this chapter and was commissioned by PODEM, as Work Package 3 leader for the MEDRESET Project. Zeynep Gülöz Bakır authored the section of Elite Survey analysis with contributions of Gülşah Dark Kahyaoğlu. Zeynep Gülöz Bakır, Gülşah Dark Kahyaoğlu and Aybars Görgülü were among the research team carrying out in-depth interviews in Tunisia.

EU and the Mediterranean region as well as the overall European policies in the region.

Looking at the main findings in short, perceptions of Tunisian elites towards the Union's policies in the Mediterranean region cluster around the criticisms directed at the EU's securitizing and stability-first approaches towards the region. From a constructive point of view, the senior-level experts from diverse professions highlighted the need to build an integrative approach towards the regional challenges. Rather than adopting a defensive position against the security threats present in the region, the interviewees emphasised the need to cooperate in addressing the origin of problems underlying these regional challenges.

Based on the Tunisian experience in democratic transition, a successful co-operation between the EU and Tunisia is considered as a must to push the countries in the region towards democratic governance practices. In that sense, Tunisian elites highlighted the need for their country to be considered not as inferior to the EU in its conduct, but as a co-partner sharing common concerns and observing mutual interests. However, as frequently mentioned during the interviews, the conditionality principles enforced by the EU and the priority put on the migration and readmission issues—without addressing poverty, exclusion, youth unemployment, and economic opportunities in the region—are considered as destined to fail in bringing regional and domestic prosperity. From that perspective, Tunisian elites' remarks centred on the need to adopt a developmentalist stance towards the challenges at stake and create a platform where relevant regional and local stakeholders would be able to voice their demands and contribute to the policy-making processes.

This chapter is comprised of three main sections: the first is a brief country profile on Tunisia; the second section, an overview on the historical background of EU–Tunisia relations; and finally, the findings of the elite survey are detailed in the third section with a concluding part on the prospects for co-operation in the Mediterranean region.

1. Country profile of Tunisia

1.1 Demographics

Tunisia has a population of 11.53 million inhabitants.² Ninety-eight percent of the country is Arab, with remnant Berber communities in the south-east of the country. Ninety-nine percent of Tunisians come from historically Sunni-Muslim households, small Ibadi-Muslim, and Jewish communities largely based on the Island of Jerba and in major urban agglomerations. The population is largely urban; in 2015, close to one-fifth of the population resided in the Greater Tunis metropolitan area (17.68 percent), 49.16 percent in mid-sized cities, largely massed on the Eastern coast, or Sahel, and a remaining 33 percent in rural communities. Tunisia's annual population growth rate is stable, and has hovered at close to 1.2 percent for the past decade.

Access to education is free and the public healthcare system is subsidized. In 2017, the government expended 6.2 percent of annual GDP on education, and 4 percent on healthcare. Unsurprisingly, Tunisia's Human Development Index rating is high (97), ranked between its hydrocarbon-producing neighbours Algeria (83) and Libya (102). Eighty-two percent of the adult population is literate: 88.2 percent of the school aged population is enrolled in secondary school, and 35 percent in higher education. Despite these positive indicators, unemployment is high. In 2017, 68 percent of the population is of workforce age, of which 14.8 percent is unemployed. That figure, however, masks the 22.2 percent of the workforce that has vulnerable employment, the 4.6 percent of the workforce that earns less than PPP 3.10 dollars per day, and the 34.5 percent of unemployed Tunisians between the ages of 15 and 24. Part of the structural weakness of the economy is linked to relatively high levels of income inequality. Tunisia's GINI coefficient is currently around 36.1, compared to 27.6 in Algeria, and 31.8 in Egypt. Perceptions

2 Unless otherwise indicated, all figures are taken from the World Bank and the UNDP online databases. See World Bank Data: *Tunisia*, <https://data.worldbank.org/country/tunisia>; and UNDP, *Human Development Indicators: Tunisia*, <http://www.hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/TUN>.

of chronic unemployment, lack of opportunity for a skilled workforce, and social inequality were important triggers of the 14 January 2011 revolution that overthrew former dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali,³ and remain key points in the continued social unrest dually affecting economic performance and institutional development in the current multi-party regime.⁴

1.2 Relevant stakeholders at the domestic, regional, and global levels

There are many stakeholders concerned with the outcomes of the current economic and political debates taking place in Tunisia. At the domestic level, Tunisia is currently embroiled in a series of protracted conflicts pitting (1) groups that support the return to a more authoritarian model of government centralized on the presidency (business and political elites close to the former regime);⁵ (2) groups that are happy about the political opening, but that are content with the economic status quo or that call for further economic liberalization (business people and political leaders excluded from the former system);⁶ (3) groups that support greater political decentralization and income redistribution

3 For a discussion on income inequality as a measurement tool or as an argument for the Arab uprisings, see Facundo Alvaredo and Thomas Piketty, 'Measuring Top Incomes and Inequality in the Middle East: Data Limitations and Illustration with the Case of Egypt', in *CEPR Discussion Papers*, No. DP10068 (July 2014), <http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/files/AlvaredoPiketty2014MiddleEast.pdf>.

4 See Hamza Meddeb interview with Malek Lakhali, 'The System Keeps Youth at the Margins of Society', in *Nawaat*, 27 January 2018, <https://nawaat.org/portail/2018/01/27/interview-with-hamza-meddeb-the-system-keeps-youth-at-the-margins-of-society>.

5 Especially members of the Ben Ali's former ruling party, Democratic Constitutional Rally, and business and political elites closely linked to the former ruling family. See Bob Rijkers, Caroline Freund and Antonio Nucifora, 'All in the Family. State Capture in Tunisia', in *World Bank Policy Research Working Papers*, No. 6810 (March 2014), <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/17726>; International Crisis Group (ICG), 'Stemming Tunisia's Authoritarian Drift', in *ICG Middle East and North Africa Reports*, No. 180 (11 January 2018), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/5915>.

6 Specifically, Islamist Ennahdha, secularist Nidaa Tounes, and liberal Afek Tounes ['Tunisian Aspirations'], three parties in the current ruling coalition.

(political and economic outsiders);⁷ and (4) groups that violently oppose the Tunisian state and political order enshrined in the 2014 Constitution (i.e., jihadists). While the current ruling coalition is composed of the first two groups, and holds close to 70 percent of the seats in parliament,⁸ proponents of a more radical reordering of the former regime, especially in the economic sphere, are vocal in the parliament, and are supported by a number of well-organized civic associations and loosely organized movements that have played an active role in street mobilization against liberalizing economic reforms.⁹

Tunisia's historically strong unions continue to be key stakeholders in the political and economic reform debate. Noteworthy are the Tunisian Union of Industry, Trade, and Handicrafts (UTICA) and Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT)—two of the four organizations that received the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize for the role they played in negotiating a path through the fierce rivalry between former enemies and now partners in the ruling coalition: secular Nidaa Tounes ['Call of Tunisia'] and Islamist Ennahda [Renaissance], in late 2013.¹⁰ Both organizations seek to actively promote their broad organizational interests—economic reform for UTICA, worker rights for the UGTT—while, at the same time, seeking to broaden their hold over the corporate bodies they represent. While UTICA's capacity to project business interests is proscribed to the elite level, the ability of individual businessmen

7 Parties and movements outside of the ruling coalition and in direct opposition with the government's current policies. Especially former President Moncef Marzouki's political party, Congress for the Republic; Marzouki's current Al-Irada ('The Will'); and the communist Popular Front.

8 After the 2014 parliamentary elections, the current ruling coalition held 81 percent of parliamentary seats. Since then, the coalition has seen a number of parliamentary defections, primarily linked with a schism in President Beji Caid Essebsi's former party, Nidaa Tounes, in November 2015, following an internal party leadership conflict.

9 See Nadia Marzouki and Hamza Meddeb, 'Tunisia: Democratic Miracle or Mirage?', in *Jadaliyya*, 11 June 2015, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/32181>.

10 For a good historical analysis on the evolution of those two organizations during Tunisia's authoritarian period, see Eva Bellin, *Stalled Democracy. Capital, Labor, and the Paradox of State-Sponsored Development*, Ithaca/London, Cornell University Press, 2002.

to receive political or administrative intervention in their favour or to financially support political movements, groups, or parties has increased since the revolution—this especially among businesspeople engaged in the significant informal economy.¹¹ UGTT has the capacity to organize nationwide strikes and its force is most potent in heavy, concentrated industry, such as hydrocarbons and phosphates, and within the state administration, making the union a key veto player in not only in the economy, but also in public-sector reform.

Formal and informal civic groups are also closely watching the political debates and have actively taken to the streets to voice their opinion since the 2011 Revolution. A number of registered associations played an active role in surveilling the constitutional reform process (2011–2014) in the National Constituent Assembly. The NGO Al Bawsala, for example, maintained a permanent presence in the proceedings of those discussions, posting on its website in real-time the debates and votes of elected representatives.¹² Informal movements like the Union of Unemployed Graduates have implanted cells throughout the country and regularly work with local populations to organize wildcat strikes, sit-ins, and other forms of loud claim-making against perceived injustices by national and international business interests, as well as calling for more populist employment schemes that integrate educated unemployed youth. Another group, *Manish M'sameh* ['I Will Not Forget'], led a very active campaign against the current government's proposal to give amnesty to political and economic elites for crimes they might have committed during the *ancien régime*, forcing the government to restrict its project.¹³ Finally, in January 2018, the *Fech Nestanneh* ['What Are We Waiting for?'] movement took to the streets to protest the 2018 Finance Law, leading to nationwide demonstrations and government proposals to alleviate economic stress among the poorest of Tunisian families. While the

11 See International Crisis Group (ICG), 'Blocked Transition: Corruption and Regionalism in Tunisia', in *ICG Middle East and North Africa Reports*, No. 177 (10 May 2017), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/5455>.

12 See Al Bawsala official website: <http://www.albawsala.com>.

13 See Laryssa Chomiak, 'The Revolution in Tunisia Continues', in *MEI Articles*, 22 September 2016, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/revolution-tunisia-continues>

regime has passed a number of laws to reduce public protests, the power of formal and informal associations and movements to stall government plans is non-negligible.

Regional and global stakeholders in Tunisia include neighbouring Algeria,¹⁴ the European Union—especially France, Italy, and Germany—the United States, as well as Turkey, and the Gulf States. While interests vary, three main themes hold the attention of foreign powers: the success of the Arab world's only democracy; economic liberalization; and security. Algeria has a clear stake in promoting security in Tunisia, and actively participates in high-level security co-operation as well as joint military operations on its border, along the Tebessa–Kasserine axis, where fears that operators in informal economic activity¹⁵ and armed terrorist groups with links to both Algeria and Libya are joining forces. Algeria views the security of Tunisia as a key arena for preventing the expansion of groups linked with Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) along its eastern border. While investing in the symbolism of a successful democratization, the European Union and the United States are also pushing the Tunisian government to deregulate its economy and revisit tariff barriers. Within the EU, France is Tunisia's primary trading partner, followed by Italy, Germany, and Spain,¹⁶ and leader in foreign direct investment.¹⁷ The EU as well as

14 While Libya too is concerned, the division of that state into mutually hostile concurrent governments excludes discussion of Libyan interests in this chapter.

15 E.g., untaxed gasoline and cigarette smuggling from Algeria to Tunisia. See Hamza Meddeb, *Young People and Smuggling in the Kasserine Region of Tunisia. Stories of Dispossession and the Dynamics of Exclusion*, London, International Alert, May 2016, <https://www.international-alert.org/node/13799>.

16 France runs a negative trade balance with Tunisia, making access to its market crucial to the Tunisian economy. For a breakdown of trading partners and relative trade balances, see WITS website: *Tunisia Exports, Imports and Trade Balance by Country 2016*, <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/TUN/Year/LTST/TradeFlow/EXPIMP/Partner/by-country>.

17 From 2013 to 2017, the Austria, France, USA and Spain led investment in Tunisia. See Arab Investment and Export Credit Guarantee Corporation, *Investment Climate in Arab Countries 2018*, November 2018, <http://dhaman.net/en/?p=2619>. In 2017, 38.1 percent of FDI went to the energy sector followed by electricity and electronics (26.4 percent). See Santander TradePortal, *Tunisia: Foreign Investment*, <https://en.portal.santandertrade.com/establish-overseas/tunisia/foreign-investment>.

the United States are vested stakeholders in the security of the country, paralleling Algerian fears of an expansion of IS- and AQIM-linked groups from Libya that could cripple economic exchange, damage the Tunisian economy and possibly result in an increase in undocumented migration to Europe.¹⁸ Finally, the ongoing proxy battles between the GCC states over regional domination has spilled into Tunisian politics. While unconfirmed rumours that the Ennahda party was bankrolled by Qatar in the 2011 elections and that rival-cum-coalition partner Nidaa Tounes was financed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 2014, it is clear that the UAE is currently unhappy with Tunisia's unwillingness to support its position on a number of issues including the 2013 Egyptian military coup that ousted President Mohamed Morsi and banned the Muslim Brotherhood, Tunisia's unwillingness to break ties with Qatar following the June 2017 decision by the UAE and Saudi Arabia to sever diplomatic relations, and Tunisia's official position to tie its Libya strategy to Algeria's policy of dialogue between rival governments, rather than to support the UAE's preferred strongman, Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar. In late December 2017, the UAE banned Tunisian women from entering or transiting through its airports, ostensibly for security reasons.

2. Overview of Tunisia–EU relations

Tunisia–EU relations date back to 1976, accelerating most prominently following the 1995 Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (Barcelona Process), which removed tariffs on industrial products over a 12-year period, with a progressive reduction in tariffs on agricultural, agro-food, and fisheries projects. While a 2007 study shows the agreement had little effect on overall FDI flows into Tunisia but has diverse impacts on

18 See Stefano M. Torelli, 'Escaping from Tunisia', in *ECFR Commentaries*, 10 November 2017, https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_escaping_from_tunisia_7236

other areas¹⁹—similar lacklustre trends are also seen elsewhere in the EU neighbourhood—relations were nevertheless further strengthened in 2006, with the implementation of the 2004 Agadir Agreement. That agreement set in place the Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Area (EU-MEFTA), removing tariffs on trade between the EU, Tunisia, Jordan, Egypt, and Morocco. In July 2008, representatives of the EU-Mediterranean zone agreed to launch the Union for the Mediterranean. In 2011, a 2009 trade dispute settlement mechanism between the EU and Tunisia entered into force. And in April 2016, the EU and Tunisia held the first round of discussions to implement a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) to build on existing FTA protocols.

While Tunisia was the EU's 34th trade partner in 2017, the EU has been Tunisia's largest trading partner for two decades. In 2003, 13.4 billion euro in goods and services were exchanged between the two entities,²⁰ increasing to 20.5 billion euro in 2017.²¹ In 2017, the EU market accounted for 63.2 percent of Tunisian trade. In 2003, 79.2 percent of Tunisia's exports and 73.7 percent of its imports came from the EU.²² While access to more competitively priced Chinese and Turkish consumer products appears to have decreased Tunisian importation of EU products (down to 53.5 percent of imports in 2017) the EU continues to be Tunisia's major export market, holding at 78 percent.²³ The EU has a declining, but positive balance of trade with Tunisia in goods (1.3 billion euro in 2015, 1.2 billion in 2016, and 1.7 billion in 2017), while its balance of trade in services has been negative (-2.4 billion euro in 2014, -1.9 billion in 2015, -1.9 billion in 2016), likely reflecting the

19 Hakim B. Hammouda, Mohammed A. Chemingui and Mohammed H. Bchir, 'Ten Years after Implementing the Barcelona Process in Tunisia: A New Growth Regime or Improving the Efficiency of the Existing One?', in *ATCP Work in Progress*, No. 60 (January 2007), p. 23, <http://hdl.handle.net/10855/13479>.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

21 European Commission DG Trade, *European Union, Trade with Tunisia*, 6 November 2018, p. 2, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_tunisia_en.pdf.

22 Hakim B. Hammouda, Mohammed A. Chemingui and Mohammed H. Bchir, 'Ten Years after Implementing the Barcelona Process in Tunisia', *cit.*, p. 3.

23 European Commission DG Trade, *European Union, Trade with Tunisia*, *cit.*, p. 8.

dynamism of new Tunisian services available post-Revolution. In 2016, EU member states invested 4.4 billion euro in FDI in Tunisia.²⁴

2.1 *The changing structure and nature of interactions with the EU*

Prior to the January 14, 2011 Revolution, EU–Tunisian relations were primarily economic. Tunisia was vaunted as a ‘good pupil’ for the moderate successes it had in liberalizing targeted sectors of the economy, following the collapse of the co-operative movement and import substitution industrialization in the 1970s. During the 1980s, the Tunisian government partially opened the agricultural sector, promoted foreign direct investment in textile manufacturing, and partially liberalized its banking system. Economic reforms were accelerated in the 1990s, and in 1993, the government created special zones for foreign manufacturing.

Not surprisingly, under Ben Ali, the EU and its member countries—and especially France, Tunisia’s former colonizer—prioritized economic exchange and security co-operation, overlooking an increase in political, civic, and human rights violations in the country. While one of the 2005 Euro-Mediterranean Summit Annual Action Programme commitments was to promote peace, security, stability, good government, and democracy, EU mechanisms to support civil society and democratization in partner states were rarely applied to Tunisia. This has been attributed to multi-directional interests present in the EU’s various commissions, representative assemblies, and pressure from member states.²⁵ Created in 2006 to fund civil society groups, the case of the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) underscores this nicely. EIDHR programmes were managed under two institutional levels: EIDHR headquarters in Brussels, and EU Delegations in Tunisia. Between 2007 and 2010, the Tunis-based

24 Figures taken from the European Commission DG Trade website: *Countries and Regions: Tunisia*, <https://europa.eu/!jM63HN>.

25 Leila Mouhib, ‘EU Democracy Promotion in Tunisia and Morocco: Between Contextual Changes and Structural Continuity’, in *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (2014), pp. 351–372.

EU delegation resisted implementing programmes in Tunisia that would upset the Ben Ali government. To counter this, EIDHR-Brussels proposed integrating Tunisian groups into larger, region-wide programs. Those programmes were ultimately blocked by the Tunisian government, with no resistance from the local EU delegation, which apparently let these projects slowly die.²⁶

Following the Revolution, the EU allocated monies for EIDHR programmes, targeting democratization, electoral transparency, and media freedom (i.e., watchdog groups, election observation training) in 2011. Programme priorities shifted to tolerance, minorities, and marginalized groups in 2012, and then to democratization and supporting women's rights in 2013. Currently, the EU Delegation in Tunisia supports 70 projects worth 58.5 million euro to support NGOs and civil society organizations (CSOs).

Despite increased special funding to programmes that create democratic depth, the bulk of EU co-operation assistance targets key infrastructural sectors. The EU's co-operation assistance to Tunisia for the 2011–2017 period amounted to 2.4 billion euro: 1.6 billion euro in grants and 800 million euro in macro-financial assistance, much of it not only targeted but also with obligations. Under a new scheme, the 'umbrella fund', aid is distributed as a reward for administrative and economic reform. Tunisia received 50 million euro from this fund in 2014, 71.8 million in 2015, 90.5 million in 2016 and 95 million in 2017. The 2016 programme focuses on four areas: (1) modernization of public administration (73.5 million euro); (2) integrated regional development (60 million euro); (3) education reform (60 million euro); and (4) healthcare access to impoverished zones (20 million euro).²⁷

Given the intense level of economic and co-operative assistance exchange in the last two decades, the EU–Tunisia relationship is likely to grow even stronger in the near future. With this in mind, the EU should attempt to use monies from its 'umbrella fund' to specifically tackle the key issue of transitional justice and justice reform. Doing so would not only enhance the democratization process in Tunisia, but would put into

26 Ibid.

27 Figures taken from the European Commission website: *European Neighborhood Policy: Tunisia*, last updated 6 December 2018, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/countries/tunisia_en.

place a platform for a more equitable form of social distribution—if only by applying the rule of law.

3. Elite Survey: Research findings on Tunisia

3.1 Methodology

Building on the methodological framework presented in the Introduction, the present chapter aims to ascertain the stance of diverse and local stakeholders vis-à-vis EU policies in Tunisia and the Mediterranean region. From that perspective, the interviewees were selected among the featured local civil society, public, and professional actors based on their outreach and influence over policy-making processes or institutions at the social, economic, and political level. The civil society members selected for interviews were able to represent the diversity of views among different civil society groups inside Tunisia. The professional researchers and academic respondents were also experienced experts in their fields of study and able to address a wide spectrum of developments taking place in EU–Tunisia relations and dynamics between civil society and government in the country. The areas of expertise among the interviewees comprised youth studies, economics, democratization, social policy, journalism, foreign policy, and EU affairs.

Three researchers from PODEM were involved in this field research and a total of 11 interviews were conducted during the month of February 2018, in Tunis. The questionnaire designed for the survey included Tunisia-specific questions in addition to the main research questions of MEDRESET WP3,²⁸ used in other countries in this research. Country-specific questions were mainly focused on Tunisian domestic affairs and the country's bilateral relations with its neighbours.

28 Zeynep Gülöz Bakır and Gülşah Dark, 'Review of Surveys on Euro-Mediterranean Relations...', cit., p. 4.

During the field research conducted in Tunisia, face-to-face in-depth interviews were carried out with senior-level academics, researchers, experts, and professionals from diverse social and political backgrounds. The interviewees who agreed to take part in this research were aged between 30 and 60 and were all informed beforehand about the objective of the MEDRESET project. During the arranging of the interviews, there were instances when potential interlocutors either did not respond or expressed their unavailability at the time of the interview arrangements. One methodological limitation was encountered in reaching female respondents at the senior level. Only two female interviewees were able to provide in-depth interviews (see Annex for the anonymized list of interviewees).

All interviews were conducted so as to provide anonymity, and the research team only took notes during the interviews. The following sections present and analyse the research findings under four subsections: the first provides analysis on how the EU and the Mediterranean region are perceived; the second delves into details of geopolitical issues highlighted during the interviews, and the third discusses policy issues between Tunisia and the EU. The fourth part focuses on expectations and prospects for future co-operation between the EU and Tunisia in the eyes of local elites.

3.2 Perceptions of the EU and the region

When asked about the EU's presence and policy impact in Tunisia as well as in the Mediterranean region, perceptions towards the Union were split, encompassing both positive and negative. There was an established sense of strategic partnership between the two parties mainly in politics and economy. The elite actors count the Union a key stakeholder in trade, with its political support to Tunisia's democratic transition to be further detailed in the following sections. These two main areas seem to have a shaping force on EU–Tunisia relations and Tunisia's perception of the Union. Throughout the interviews, the local elites also gave the impression that since the post-2011 period, the Union is seen to be more involved in the country's political and economic landscape, and increased its political and financial support with the 2014 constitutional reform promulgated after the Troika regime. An interviewee remarked

that, ‘Since 2011, the EU’s financial support to Tunisia has almost tripled compared with the previous budget. The unconditional aid is mostly to support the reform process in the country.’²⁹

Perception of the EU in the Tunisian elite discourse indicates a clear division between the member states and the EU as an institution, which was stressed by almost all respondents. Tunisia’s bilateral ties with Southern European countries were mentioned along with varying interests of the member states, adding that the EU is viewed as ‘a composition of different voices’.

‘The EU is composed of 28 different countries; but our relations with the Southern Mediterranean are different. Bilateral relations are more with France, Italy, and Spain; there is more engagement with them.’³⁰

‘The EU is not one voice; member states have different aspects in their relations to Tunisia.’³¹

‘It is important to distinguish [between] the EU and Europe. Once we say Europe, it mainly means France and Italy.’³²

Subsequently, France is seen as a key partner in trade relations. With historical baggage going back to the colonial period, France and Tunisia are considered to be strategic and strong allies in Euro-Mediterranean trade relations. In contrast to its strong presence in the economy, France is falling short in its support to Tunisia’s democratic transition, notably at the public level.

‘France and Italy are the two featured European countries for the Maghreb region. In the eyes of the people in the region, France means the EU. Tunisia’s relations with France are more at the forefront compared with those with the Union.’³³

Italy and Germany are the next two countries with specific areas of interest in building their relations with Tunisia. Whereas perceptions of Italy’s presence were mostly limited to trade activities, the improving visibility of

29 Interviewee 1: Senior public official, male, Tunis, February 2018.

30 Interviewee 9: Senior public official, male, Tunis, February 2018.

31 Interviewee 2: CSO director, male, Tunis, February 2018.

32 Interviewee 3: CSO representative and research director, female, Tunis, February 2018.

33 Interviewee 4: Senior academic and researcher, male, Tunis, February 2018.

Germany was much more emphasized and prioritized, notably with regard to its increasing support to the transition period (political dialogue) and the recently rising trade volume between the two countries,³⁴ as well as its interest in the energy sector.

‘Germany is taking a big role in Tunisia’s transition; is important with its institutional capacity and technical expertise; as well as political foundations and economic initiatives.’³⁵

‘In recent years, Tunisia has expanded its relationship with other European countries like Germany as well. Germany is interested in the energy field and doubled its trade with Tunisia. It is perceived as generally positive at the state and public level.’³⁶

Despite the very limited number of female experts joining the elite survey, slight differences were still observed in perception between the female and male respondents. On one side, the responses of the male stakeholders mostly revolved around the political discourse of the EU and the economic outlook. On the other hand, the female respondents specifically pointed to the EU’s influence on youth, emphasizing that the Union has a significantly positive image, almost like a benchmark, in the eyes of Tunisian youth. According to the female respondents from the civil society sector, more young people are eager to learn English in the last few years and the Union is penetrating more into their daily lives.

‘Among the youth, the EU is seen a benchmark in terms of governance, human, and social rights, the rule of law and so on. Through emigrants a cultural link is there between them.’³⁷

‘EU has a presence in everyday life; more young Tunisians are learning English today.’³⁸

Similar to the EU, the perception towards other Western actors such as the US or Canada, as well as the countries in the Mediterranean, is also

34 For trade volume statistics see World Bank data. For more detailed information on Germany–Tunisia energy partnership see GIZ website: *The German-Tunisian Energy Partnership*, <https://www.energypartnership-tunisia.org>.

35 Interviewee 11: Researcher at an institute, male, Tunis, February 2018.

36 Interviewee 6: CSO director, female, Tunis, February 2018.

37 Interviewee 3: CSO representative and research director, female, Tunis, February 2018.

38 Interviewee 6: CSO director, female, Tunis, February 2018.

dependent on their support to the democratic transition in Tunisia. A civil society expert argued that there are different positions on the process, and while the EU, the US and Canada show their support, certain Arab countries like Algeria or Yemen do not favour seeing Tunisia as a success story.³⁹

3.3 *Tunisian perspective on geopolitics, Arab uprisings, and EU response*

In the Tunisian elite discourse, one major question and an important concern that directly relates to the Mediterranean countries (and also the EU) is ‘how to install democracy in the region’. Tunisia is viewed as a potential role model for the region with its efforts in democratic transition, and the stakeholders generally argued the need to push other neighbouring countries to go in the same direction. Subsequently, the lack of democratic governance is perceived as the underlying reason for socioeconomic problems in the region.

According to a Tunis-based academic, terrorism, youth unemployment, and rising poverty—notably in Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco—along with other formidable economic and social problems, are counted as the most visible geopolitical challenges faced in the region.⁴⁰ The insecurity continuum in Libya,⁴¹ which has heightened with the activities of jihadi organizations, is said to be a real political and social problem for the whole region, with smuggling and the lack of border security as the two factors further pushing terrorism.⁴²

Assessing the EU’s role and policy impact in addressing the regional issues, almost all respondents mentioned the Union’s securitizing approach towards the Mediterranean as a point of criticism. Themes such as security, fight against terrorism, illegal migration, and fragility dominate the discourse on how the EU views the Mediterranean.

39 Interviewee 2: CSO director, male, Tunis, February 2018.

40 Interviewee 5: Senior academic and researcher, male, Tunis, February 2018.

41 Interviewee 8: Journalist, male, Tunis, February 2018.

42 Interviewee 5: Senior academic and researcher, male, Tunis, February 2018.

‘There are high concerns for the EU such as security; yet we should note that this is not only the EU’s concern. Tunisia itself is also concerned about this. We have common concerns to stabilize the region, this is a common challenge.’⁴³

In that respect, the ENP is criticized for its security and migration policies that cater for EU interests notably since the post-2011 period. An academic described the current status as the new *modus operandi* of the EU’s engagement in the region.⁴⁴ The interviewed experts share the perception that the Union’s securitizing policies have won out over its democratization concerns for the region. The ENP’s approach to stability was further criticized in that rather than focusing on stabilization *per se*, the root causes of instability—both economic and political—should be addressed first:

‘Since 2011 the ENP’s focus has been [entirely] on stabilization. It is totally understandable, but it is a negative message to the region at the same time.’⁴⁵

On top of that, the Arab uprisings provide a major point of reference while describing the shift in the EU policies towards the region and Tunisia.

‘Before 2011, the EU supported its partners and expected more co-operation. After 2011, this has changed. Now the Union waits for its partners to ask for its support, and helps them under specific conditions. The logic of conditionality is fully in action, especially with Morocco.’⁴⁶

The interviewee further underlined that the EU adopted a prudent attitude towards the uprisings at the beginning, yet has used the developments as an opportunity to put pressure on mobility partnership. According to the respondents, the ‘more for more’ principle in the revised ENP is now echoed in the EU’s relations with the Mediterranean countries. As for Tunisia, the elite actors noted the changing nature of the relations with the EU after the revolution:

43 Interviewee 9: Senior public official, male, Tunis, February 2018.

44 Interviewee 5: Senior academic and researcher, male, Tunis, February 2018.

45 Interviewee 3: CSO representative and research director, female, Tunis, February 2018.

46 Interviewee 5: Senior academic and researcher, male, Tunis, February 2018.

‘The Union’s stance to Tunisia was very soft before 2011. The Union did not do much in Tunisia. But after 2011, it has become more vocal and started to put its finger on many issues.’⁴⁷

‘During the Ben Ali regime, the EU did not intervene much. However, after the revolution, the EU made a shift in its relations with the civil society and began to engage more with them. Now the EU has its own network among civil society groups here.’⁴⁸

While the EU’s support to Tunisia following the revolution is appreciated among the local actors, most of the interviewees mentioned that the Union’s assistance remains rhetoric and it is unable to address the country’s underlying political, social, and economic problems.

‘The Union perceives Tunisia as a success story. They always say it, and claim that Tunisia should be treated differently within the ENP, especially in line with its democratic reform agenda. Although the EU politically supports the democratic transition process, its support is not sufficient.’⁴⁹

‘There are Arab countries that see Tunisia as “a hope”, “a model for the region”. There is still an imbalance between the EU’s rhetoric and actual support. Morocco and Jordan receive more financial support from the EU. Tunisia comes 3rd or 4th. The EU has substantial capital and can make a better impact in Tunisia.’⁵⁰

‘The EU has an inspirational power. It should not see Tunisia as a fragile country but a developing one. The EU’s support should not remain in discourse. Actually, this would also work for their interest.’⁵¹

Finally, on Tunisia’ role in addressing the geopolitical challenges in the region, the elite actors emphasized its interlocutor role as a country trying to sustain balance in conflictual cases. According to a senior-level official, Tunisia has been a Western-leaning country in its policies since gaining independence, and this is why building balance between diverse power groups is a strategy that the country pursues in its relations

47 Interviewee 10: CSO director, male, Tunis, February 2018.

48 Interviewee 5: Senior academic and researcher, male, Tunis, February 2018.

49 Interviewee 1: Senior public official, male, Tunis, February 2018.

50 Interviewee 6: CSO director, female, Tunis, February 2018.

51 Interviewee 3: CSO representative and research director, female, Tunis, February 2018.

with regional actors.⁵² To push for a solution in Libya, where the crisis has been threatening Tunisia's political and economic stability⁵³, Tunisia assumed the role of political facilitator between the Libyan authorities.⁵⁴

'Tunisia has a long history in putting itself in the middle to balance relations in the region and it has done fairly good job even today.'⁵⁵

'Relations with Algeria and Morocco are good, yet certain problems exist with Libya. We think that a solution to the conflict can only be reached through political means. The Carthage Initiative is not an action in the sense of intervening, but aims to facilitate dialogue for the reconciliation in Libya.'⁵⁶

3.4 Policy issues in Tunisia–EU relations

The responses by the elite actors indicate that the pillars of Tunisia–EU relations are formed over four main policy areas: (1) security, migration, and mobility; (2) democratic and political transition; (3) economy and trade; and (4) civil society.

It is understood that, from the perspective of the respondents, the pressing domestic problems in Tunisia are reflected in almost all areas of EU–Tunisia relations. Socioeconomic difficulties and precarious living conditions are mentioned as the underlying causes of the challenges in Tunisia. It should also be noted that these challenges, which are briefly addressed in the following paragraph, are inter-sectional and brought to the table in all four dimensions detailed under the subheadings below.

Regarding the domestic challenges, most of the respondents drew attention to the issue of unemployment, especially the high rates of

52 Interviewee 7: Senior public official, male, Tunis, February 2018.

53 See Lamine Ghanmi, 'Tunisia Engages in Diplomatic Push to End Libyan Crisis', in *The Arab Weekly*, 22 July 2018, <https://theArabweekly.com/node/40308>.

54 Interviewee 9: Senior public official, male, Tunis, February 2018.

55 Interviewee 8: Journalist, male, Tunis, February 2018.

56 Interviewee 1: Senior public official, male, Tunis, February 2018. On the Carthage Initiative, see: Noura Ali, 'Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt Declare a Five-Point Initiative to Resolve the Libyan Crisis', in *Middle East Observer*, 21 February 2017, <https://www.middleeastobserver.org/2017/02/21/tunisia-algeria-egypt-declare-a-five-point-initiative-to-resolve-the-libyan-crisis>.

unemployment among the young and educated population.⁵⁷ In relation to this, regional disparities and poor living standards accompanied by high poverty rates were stated as the most challenging economic problems needing to be resolved.⁵⁸ On the political side, the democratic transition process occupies a large space; and to sustain political and institutional stability, the respondents stress the urgency of fighting against corruption on the domestic front, as well as legal reforms.⁵⁹ One criticism rendered by the civil society respondents was that the government seems to overemphasize economic progress at a time when the transition process is still underway, noting that more focus should be placed on the political structure and reforms at this time to implement strategies for economic development.⁶⁰

Security, migration, and mobility: The security issue is a two-sided debate in the perception of the elite actors; while it is described as a featured area of co-operation with the Union, the EU's securitizing stance is also a point of critique. Reflecting the divergences between Tunisia and the EU, the parallel negotiations on readmission and visa facilitation are seen to portray a 'clash of interests'.⁶¹

'Looking at the EU's mindset, security, migration, and mobility are correlated and directly relate to the issue of readmission. The EU's readmission clause is, however, hindering further progress in negotiations.'⁶²

'The EU's securitizing approach also affects how the EU looks at the region and regional issues as a whole.'⁶³

On the other side, the officials prioritize security co-operation with the EU, pointing to the Union's assistance to Tunisia, and positing that

57 For detailed info on youth unemployment rates, see World bank Data: *Unemployment, youth total (% of total labor force ages 15-24) (modeled ILO estimate)*, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS?locations=TN>.

58 Interviewees 1 and 4.

59 Interviewee 2: CSO director, male, Tunis, February 2018.

60 Interviewee 4: Senior academic and researcher, male, Tunis, February 2018.

61 Interviewee 11: Researcher at an institute, male, Tunis, February 2018.

62 Interviewee 5: Senior academic and researcher, male, Tunis, February 2018.

63 Interviewee 2: CSO director, male, Tunis, February 2018.

without sustaining security, economic development is not possible.⁶⁴ The respondents further indicate that Tunisia, Morocco, and Libya are the three countries helping the EU resolve the asylum problem.

As further retained from the interviews, Tunisia does not want to give concessions to the EU on free movement and readmission, which is also strongly supported by the local civil society groups.⁶⁵ At the same time, the EU is seen to be highly concerned about the readmission issue, especially the return of illegal migrants, and is not in favour of concessions to Tunisia on visa facilitation as long as the readmission clause is fully implemented. While negotiations on mobility partnership and migration continue at the diplomatic level, the respondents reported a level of tension around this issue, stressing that Tunisia is neither a migrant nor a transit country and thus, should not be treated as such.

According to the respondents, the EU–Tunisia dialogue on migration and mobility is also in the public eye. A higher awareness among female civil society respondents on how the mobility issue affects the public perception was observed during the interviews. The respondents pointed out Tunisia’s designation as a ‘non-co-operative’ country due to tax haven blacklisting by the EU in 2017.⁶⁶ Although the EU withdrew its accusation with no explanation, the experts argued that the EU’s decision had a negative impact in public discussions.

Democratic and political transition: Not surprisingly, the political transition process occupies a significant part of the agenda and the perception of the Tunisian elite actors. The respondents agree that democratic and political transition is the most urgent topic in the country, and an area where EU support is much-needed.

Here lies an important divergence between the official discourse and expert-level perception. According to the officials, the political transition has been accomplished, and it is time to concentrate on economic development. The experts, however, insist that more work should be done to improve the

64 Interviewee 1: Senior public official, male, Tunis, February 2018.

65 Interviewee 5: Senior academic and researcher, male, Tunis, February 2018.

66 Dania Akkad, ‘Why Tunisia Landed on the EU’s Tax Haven Blacklist – And How It Got Off’, in *Middle East Eye*, 16 February 2018, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/why-tunisia-landed-eus-tax-haven-blacklist-and-how-it-got>.

reform agenda in order to tackle the diverse challenges on human rights, corruption, institutional stability, decentralization, and accountability.

The interviewed experts from the civil society sector put specific emphasis on transparency of governance and building monitoring mechanisms as two crucial requirements of a well-built transition to democracy. Great significance is also accorded to building trust between the local community and local governance, with a functional decentralization mechanism to reinvigorate the democratic transition, eliminating corruption.

‘Without institutional stability you cannot introduce reforms or resolve social problems. And you need reforms to stabilize the political system; only afterwards can you find a solution to the issues.’⁶⁷

‘The people are evolving through democracy as well. Now they are becoming more interested in rendering their opinions; not just electing but monitoring the process and creating agendas. Accountability is getting more important.’⁶⁸

‘Corruption is present in Tunisia and has resulted in tension at the local level. There is a lack of trust between local authorities and local people.’⁶⁹

In the elite discourse, there appears to be a tendency to differentiate Tunisia from other countries in the region, saying that the country should be treated as a developing country, not a fragile one, by the international institutions including the EU.⁷⁰ Further co-operation with the EU at the institutional level is thus seen as necessary to strengthen the democratic process and proceed with political and economic reforms. There is subsequently an expectation that the EU should become more involved in Tunisia’s political transition through sharing its institutional experience on good governance and providing financial support. An academic, however, did express some doubt about whether the Union would genuinely be willing to support the process, mainly due to its persistent approach on the migration/mobility issue.

67 Interviewee 10: CSO director, male, Tunis, February 2018.

68 Interviewee 6: CSO director, female, Tunis, February 2018.

69 Interviewee 8: Journalist, male, Tunis, February 2018.

70 Interviewee 3: CSO representative and research director, female, Tunis, February 2018.

‘The EU has said the readmission agreement will adhere to the human rights standards, and also says they have a new strategy now. Tunisia has shifted to a democracy regime and is obviously in need of democratization and human rights reforms. However, the EU’s hidden agenda is migration. If there is no mobility partnership, then it means no support to your democracy.’⁷¹

Economy and trade: Where economic relations are concerned, the EU is viewed by the interviewed officials and experts as the major financial actor, by virtue of being Tunisia’s largest trade partner. The dialogue on economy mostly centres on advancing the DCFTA⁷² within the Euro-Mediterranean free trade framework, EU-MEFTA. Currently negotiations on terms continue, through consultation meetings organized with multi-stakeholders such as civil society and the private sector in Tunisia.

The main criticism on the DCFTA comes from local civil society groups, pointing to the agreement’s unfavourable impact on Tunisia’s already-wounded economy due to the EU’s broad concessions at the expense of the country’s social and economic conditions.

‘What the civil society groups say is that priority should be given to economic and social issues and political reforms, but the EU prioritizes security. The civil society does not want Tunisia to negotiate or make an agreement on readmission. For the trade sector, the EU is also trying to put pressure on the Tunisian government not to conclude the DCFTA agreement.’⁷³

On the other side, as stated by another interviewee, Tunisia is dependent on the EU and other international funds for its economy today, drawing attention to Tunisia’s IMF debt and the accompanying public protests against the IMF measures. Economic challenges are thus viewed as urgent, and great emphasis is placed on the importance of creating employment opportunities and remedying income inequalities.

Also on the EU support to Tunisia’s agriculture and industry sectors, the presence of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) appears significant, notably in relation to the investment in green economy. The EU’s efforts in supporting the development of the private sector in renewable energy are said to be an important step to

71 Interviewee 5: Senior academic and researcher, male, Tunis, February 2018.

72 See the dedicated website: <http://www.aleca.tn/en>.

73 Interviewee 5: Senior academic and researcher, male, Tunis, February 2018.

address regional development in Tunisia. During the interviews, a higher awareness was observed among the female respondents on environmental concerns. ‘The EU gives particular importance to invest in green economy. This distinguishes the EU from other organizations. They say they will support development but in an environmentally friendly way.’⁷⁴

As a final point, the rapid growth of Tunisia’s informal economy is described as a shortcoming of the state, yet it is also a way to survive for many citizens who have no choice other than joining the informal economy, because the state is incapable of providing economic opportunities for its people.⁷⁵ An oligarchic structure of big companies was mentioned by the same respondent, notably in the agriculture and trade sectors. In the respondent’s view, there is no room for newcomers to the Tunisian market in these areas and ‘they have their own empire’.

Civil society: It was understood that the civil society sector stands in a critical place as an actor in EU–Tunisia relations, mainly because of its impact on the future of the country and its governance.

A director of a civil society institute noted that, ‘civil society in Tunisia has literally fought for its actorship and has succeeded.’⁷⁶

According to the respondents, the increasing level of co-operation between the EU and Tunisian civil society demonstrates itself at various levels, such as youth partnership within the framework of the Erasmus Programme or scientific collaboration through the Horizon 2020 Programme, programmes which also show the EU’s commitment to support Tunisian civil society.⁷⁷ The EU’s increasing engagement with civil society is also discussed as part of its support to the transition process.

‘The EU’s civil society initiatives centrally target the issues of law-making and centralization at the moment. Maybe afterwards, they will start to support decentralization.’⁷⁸

74 Interviewee 6: CSO director, female, Tunis, February 2018.

75 Interviewee 8: Journalist, male, Tunis, February 2018.

76 Interviewee 2: CSO director, male, Tunis, February 2018.

77 Interviewee 7: Senior public official, male, Tunis, February 2018.

78 Interviewee 2: CSO director, male, Tunis, February 2018.

On the other hand, both the EU and the Tunisian government receive immense criticism due to their approach towards Tunisian civil society, for several reasons. The civil society experts argued that the government is trying to keep civil society activities limited and is putting pressure on CSOs.

‘The government has the habit of not dealing with CSOs and treats them as an ordinary public service. In the last few years it has pushed back.’⁷⁹

‘Old habits die hard [...] Before the revolution, CSOs were under government control. After the revolution, now there are “satellite CSOs” that the government tries to attract, as they appear distant from the government.’⁸⁰

Furthermore, the government’s support to civil society is also criticized due to its ineffectiveness. A senior-level academic mentioned that civil society is generally against the DCFTA agreement and in case of pressure from the EU side,⁸¹ the government makes use of its civil society card to slow down the negotiation process to gain more time.

‘The Tunisian government is playing with the EU. Once they see the EU putting pressure on them, they make use of civil society groups to slow down the process. However, their action remains [at the level of] rhetoric and is used as a showcase. It is not really effective.’⁸²

Critique of the EU’s approach towards civil society in Tunisia rests on the argument that the EU is selective in its support to civil society groups and only provides financial support to those that are close to its own ideologies and principles. It is claimed that the EU is intentionally very limited and selective in its capacity to support civil society in Tunisia and therefore does not genuinely aim to broaden its support to diverse and local groups.⁸³

‘Neither the EU nor the member states are willing to widen their network of Tunisian CSOs. They have a selective stance.’⁸⁴

79 Interviewee 10: CSO director, male, Tunis, February 2018.

80 Interviewee 2: CSO director, male, Tunis, February 2018.

81 Interviewee 5: Senior academic and researcher, male, Tunis, February 2018.

82 Ibid.

83 Interviewee 2: CSO director, male, Tunis, February 2018.

84 Interviewee 10: CSO director, male, Tunis, February 2018.

'Another problem is that the EU grants are offered to certain groups, who do not know Tunisia well. European NGOs are opening branches in Tunis, but they should prioritize others already present in the country.'⁸⁵

To engage with more local civil society groups especially in the southern regions of Tunisia, the interviewed CSO experts pointed to the need for the EU to reach the poorest and the most disadvantaged areas. The language barrier and the lack of technical knowledge support to manage EU-funded projects were highlighted. Among the CSO representatives, more awareness was observed among the female respondents, particularly on accessing the larger segment of civil society.

'Dialogue channels are mostly in French. It is a quite elitist perspective to push people to submit proposals in French or English; to reach farther they need to do work in Arabic. Also, for events, Arabic should be used so more local people can be involved in the civil society work.'⁸⁶

3.5 *Expectations and prospects for co-operation in the Mediterranean*

The insight provided by senior-level officials and experts demonstrates that the Tunisian case may offer a chance to come up with a regional stance in the southern Mediterranean to push the countries one step forward to democratic governance. This is why, based on the elite perception, instead of attending only to the EU and what it should achieve in the region, it is necessary to figure out what Tunisia should and is able to do about the regional challenges, mostly on democratic deficits, together with the EU and neighbouring countries. This point of view is in accord with Tunisia's vision for a united Maghreb, including Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria, which could be an important co-operation platform for regional integrity with EU support.

Based on such reasoning, the respondents criticized the EU's securitizing approach towards the region, pointing out that this concern is not unique to the EU but is shared by the countries of the region. As understood from the interviews, the common concerns over terrorism,

85 Interviewee 2: CSO director, male, Tunis, February 2018.

86 Interviewee 6: CSO director, female, Tunis, February 2018.

migration, and regional stability are also in the agenda of Tunisia and are seen as the priority areas of co-operation with the EU at the regional level. The Libya conflict is especially perceived as an urgent challenge to be addressed, both for Tunisia and the EU.

In relation to regional stability, not only the security perspective but also the social and economic challenges at the societal level are mentioned as key policy issues to be addressed in the region. As emphasized by the respondents, policies dealing with security and migration alone, without addressing poverty, exclusion, youth unemployment, and economic opportunities in the region, are destined to fail in bringing regional prosperity. The region should not be seen as a source of trouble or fragility, and a country like Tunisia—which is at least perceived to be making better progress on its path to democracy—deserves significant support from international institutions, and policies should be tailored accordingly. There is a common expectation that the EU should establish a more effective and target-oriented engagement towards the underlying social and economic problems in Tunisia.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to provide a brief analysis on how Tunisian elites perceive the EU policies in their country and in the Mediterranean region. Based on the findings of the interviews conducted there, despite criticisms aimed at the EU's engagement in the country and the region, the EU is perceived as a significant actor in Tunisia's political and economic transition.

As understood from the interviews, the major criticisms directed at the EU's engagement in Tunisia are centred on the EU's securitizing approach and the conditionality in bilateral agreements with the EU. In the eyes of public and senior-level professionals of academia and civil society, this approach results in an atmosphere of suspicion towards the EU's real ambitions in Tunisia and the Mediterranean region as well.

While the EU has put greater emphasis on issues like readmission and migration, which are described as ‘sensitive issues for Tunisians’, Tunisian experts expect and indeed demand a more concrete presence of the EU in dealing with the most pressing issues of democratic transition and the social and economic problems underlying the regional disparity and political reforms. In that regard, the elites emphasized that rather than being described as a ‘fragile’ country, Tunisia should be considered as a developing country and treated as such.

In the elite discourse, Tunisia is described as a country which is largely dependent on international funding to address its domestic problems. This is why a successful co-operation between the EU and this country is said to be a necessity, especially in the areas of economic development and civil society support. Particularly regarding political and economic transition, the EU’s support to strengthen the civil society component is depicted as a key to mutual co-operation. Criticizing the EU as being selective and elitist—and thus technocratic in its relations to civil society groups in Tunisia—respondents agreed upon the need for a more diversified and genuine support from the Union.

From a regional perspective, Tunisia is seen as an important regional player in North Africa on a number of levels. Based on the insights derived from the interviews, Tunisia is seen as an important regional player and a model in the Mediterranean region to push the countries towards democratic governance. Regarding its domestic outlook, its workforce is relatively educated, and its citizens have access to subsidized health care. In addition to its mediator stance in the regional conflicts, it is a small, though growing investor in Algeria and Libya. And, its GDP per capita increasingly makes it an interesting market for EU producers. Its position could nevertheless be strengthened with greater economic integration not only with the EU, but also with Algeria and Libya in the future. Should greater co-operation between the countries of North Africa occur in the cadre of the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), Tunisia’s concurrent ties with the EU would significantly increase its economic role in the region and create more space to address the socioeconomic problems in the country. Finally, as the only Arab democracy, citizens in neighbouring Morocco,

Algeria, and Libya will continue to observe its progress (and failures), which will likely be used as a baseline for evaluating support for moves toward greater political, economic, and social liberation in their own countries. From a regional outlook, instead of expecting only support and guidance from the EU, the interviewees highlighted Tunisia's position in the region and emphasized the importance of working together with the EU in dealing with regional challenges. In that regard, the insights derived from the elite survey in Tunisia demonstrate that any co-operation with the EU based on mutual interests around socio-economic and political terms will prove highly beneficial, not only for Tunisia and the region, but also for the EU itself.

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Annex: List of Interviewees

- Interviewee 1: Senior public official, male, Tunis, February 2018
- Interviewee 2: CSO director, male, Tunis, February 2018
- Interviewee 3: CSO representative and research director, female, Tunis, February 2018
- Interviewee 4: Senior academic and researcher, male, Tunis, February 2018
- Interviewee 5: Senior academic and researcher, male, Tunis, February 2018
- Interviewee 6: CSO director, female, Tunis, February 2018
- Interviewee 7: Senior public official, male, Tunis, February 2018
- Interviewee 8: Journalist, male, Tunis, February 2018
- Interviewee 9: Senior public official, male, Tunis, February 2018
- Interviewee 10: CSO director, male, Tunis, February 2018
- Interviewee 11: Researcher at an institute, male, Tunis, February 2018

