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TUNISIA AND THE ARAB SPRING:

THE EXCEPTION OR THE NORM?

by
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ABSTRACT
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Title: <u>Tunisia and The Arab Spring: The Exception or The Norm?</u>

The Arab Spring was conceived in Tunisia on December 17, 2010, when a street vendor, Mohammed Bouazizi self-immolated. On January 14, 2011, the Arab Spring was born under the name of the Jasmine revolution that echoed across the rest of the Arab world. Some regimes were toppled, others still stand till today but crumble from within. 12 years later, the West are still obsessed with how much of a failure the Arab Spring has been, looking at it with myopic lens, focusing more on the instability of the region, especially the Middle East, overshadowing the successful and peaceful transition Tunisians had after a 23-year long dictatorship under Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

In this thesis, I will attempt to flesh out the main reasons behind the case of Tunisia being the only Arab country that has transitioned into a democracy during the first 10 years of the Arab spring. To achieve this purpose, I will be adopting two approaches; A retrospective one that examines the history of geopolitics of the MENA region that will lay out key foundations for why the Arab countries did not experience democratic transitions unlike Tunisia. The introspective approach will lay the ground for the analysis of the internal factors that made Tunisia stand out and experience a successful democratic transition during the suggested target timeline. This will be based on a survey of the nature of foreign interference and influence in the MENA region, especially following World War II and ever since the beginning of the cold war.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Arab Spring has been a transformative event in the Arab world. Spanning 12 years to present, this phenomenon is far from being over. The Arab Spring started as a revolution in Tunisia on December 10, 2017, where a young Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in the city of Sidi Bouzid in an act of defiance and a rather desperate response to excessive police brutality. The following month would prove to be the most challenging yet to the 23-year long reign of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali as the young vendor's death would trigger a nationwide civil unrest. Soon afterwards, on January 14, 2011, Ben Ali had lost control over his regime and was overthrown by the people and the military, leading him to flee the country. As new as it was, the Tunisian revolution had a spillover effect in the rest of North African and Middle Eastern (MENA) countries. Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Yemen followed in the footsteps of Tunisia throughout 2011 as their people called for democratization. There were also tensions in the Jordanian, Moroccan, and Bahraini streets but they were met with promises of reforms by their respective kings (Moghadam 2017). The newfound socio-political standard that these nations were striving for was groundbreaking and has changed the geopolitical landscape in the region.

The Arab spring did not receive much international attention in the beginning especially from the West that have significantly contributed to building and sustaining the

threatened and fallen authoritarian regimes in the MENA (Bustos 2018). The unexpected buffer even resulted in some scholarly dilemmas, especially in International Relations (IR) Theory, that were further reinforced by the spilt of the western countries responses to the Arab uprisings later on, which varied between the absence of a proper response and the presence of excessive ones. The dilemma would then branch out into diverse new IR theory approaches to the Arab spring that demystified how this phenomenon is significantly interlinked with the international and regional dynamics (Lynch & Ryan 2017). Realists took it to the front line to explain how the MENA region has become the battlefield-playground- of global and rising powers. The region, especially Syria, Yemen, and Libya, has witnessed frequent military interventions from the US, Russia, Turkey, UAE, and Saudi Arabia, and has remained the subject of proxy wars till today (Bustos 2018). The liberal approach to the Arab spring has emphasized the role of the international community and institutions in designing a path of stability for this event and helping nation states join the globalized democratic project (Abderrahim & al. 2017). Indeed, as delayed, and as polarized as the international community's response was, especially the West, when slogans that contained the words "democracy and "freedom" filled the streets, the Arab countries started to receive some substantial support from them, whether it was tangible or lip service, namely France, United Kingdom (UK), Germany, Canada and not surprisingly, this event's biggest proponent was the United States (US) (Whitehead 2014).

The Arab spring marked the end of postcolonialism in the MENA region and birthed a new outlook on the fate of the Arab countries that have been the target and experimental playground of the American and European agendas (Dabashi 2012). It has

also challenged the orientalist western policies and views of the MENA region that has long denied them agency and reduced their uprising to an after effect of the liberal values rooted in the European and American views, that were campaigned for long ago in the region (Gani 2022). The aftermath of the uprisings would crown Tunisia as the only Arab country to have experienced a democratic transition for the decade that followed, which calls for an investigation of the circumstances of such a transition. Several factors, both internal and external, were at play to result in the latter and ensure it and what makes this investigation even more interesting is that Tunisia is part of a highly infiltrated region that has been experiencing foreign political interference and military interventions ever since the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War (Brown 1984). Among the key internal factors that have allowed for Tunisia's democratic transition are the nationalization of the military and its disconnection with Ben Ali's regime and the growing role of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in governance and transforming the local socio-political scene during the Arab spring and afterwards (Kao & Lust 2017).

A. Thesis Breakdown

In this thesis, I will attempt to flesh out the main reasons behind the case of Tunisia being the only Arab country that has transitioned into a democracy during the first 10 years of the Arab spring. To achieve this purpose, I will be adopting two approaches; A retrospective one that examines the history of geopolitics of the MENA region that will lay out key foundations for why the Arab countries did not experience democratic transitions unlike Tunisia. This angle would help provide a better understanding of the present events

of the MENA region and constitute a major segment of comparative framework of the research. The introspective approach will lay the ground for the analysis of the internal factors that made Tunisia stand out and experience a successful democratic transition during the suggested target timeline.

The research will be organized in a chronological manner, and it will refer to the literature review as context to better understand the geopolitics of the MENA region, especially the nature of foreign interventions and political interference. The review will also set up the foundation for the qualitative analysis of the major developments in the MENA region since the mid-20th century till present time, which will provide the comparative framework for this research to identify which kind of interventions Tunisia may or may not have been subject to. Finally, the analysis will allow me to capitalize on some of the major reasons why only Tunisia could transition to a democracy, such as the consolidated national identity and the robust presence of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs).

B. Theoretical Framework

It would be difficult to tackle such a vast topic without at least going over the main foundations of the IR theories of realism and liberalism. The very fact that the MENA has been exposed firsthand to the changing natures of the global system, from bipolar to unipolar to now multipolar gives the realist theory an edge on explaining the events of the Arab spring and how regional powers raced to helm hegemony over the MENA (Bustos

2018). It also stands to reason use this theory in critique to the West's excessive intervention in the region, especially the US, to understand its sociopolitical landscape right before the eruption of the Arab spring (Waltz 2010). The liberal standpoint complements this by emphasizing the role and importance of international organizations and state cooperation in a peaceful democratic transition, which is relevant in the case of the Arab spring especially with the different attempts of the international community to respond to the transgressions that followed (Bustos 2018).

However, I believe that these two theories alone are not enough to establish the theoretical framework of the thesis, which is why I will be combining them with a postcolonial contextualization of the Arab spring that would situate the Arab uprisings more within the complex experiences and history of the region, outside orientalism and western framing of thereof (Dabashi 2012). I will also seek to build on Edward Said's theory of orientalism that the West have long treated the Arab countries as uncivilized and violent, hence extremely reliant on the western guidance and "values" to transcend their chaotic cultures and societal norms to reach the rational and modern plane (1978). To further solidify my theoretical framework, I will be grounding my research in the IR theory of structuralism. According to Hinnebusch (2011), structuralism is useful to understand the interaction between states existing in a global hierarchal world that divides them unequally between "core and periphery". This theory helps establish a practical analytical lens to understand why Tunisia was the only Arab country to become a democracy introspectively. The theoretical framework will posit the regional events of the Arab spring as the larger context for Tunisia's democratic transition, placing it as part of the periphery, which

represents the states in the process of formation- the Arab states in this case. The core, which represents the states that are already formed and developed- the West- will be examined as a catalyst for the Arab spring and Tunisia's transition hence (Hinnebusch 2011). This theory is most suitable to reinforce this research since it will help dissect the circumstances of this particular development and explore its elements beyond the arguments of the people's right to self-determination and the inevitability of democratization in the Arab world.

C. Conceptual Framework

The gap being addressed in this context relates to the positionality of the literature which is often orientalist and selective in nature hence reducing the Arab spring to a series of uprisings to oust dictatorships, especially in the case of Tunisia. This assumption overlooks the history of the region and its power dynamics that were shaped out of proportion by the Western instigated conflicts and interventions, and how Tunisia was affected by them. Based on the theoretical framework, this research will address the democratic transition of Tunisia's during the Arab spring within the context of post-colonialism -interventionism- in the MENA region. This will add a chronological aspect to the analytical framework and shed light on some of the reasons behind the Westphalia that did not take place- rather not allowed to- in the MENA region unlike the Western countries.

D. Research Question

The suggested research is exploratory and aims at broadening the lens of analysis

through which we look at the Arab Spring phenomenon. To achieve this purpose, the

research will tackle the following question:

To what extent did interventions in the MENA region shape Tunisia's democratic transition

during the Arab spring compared to the rest of the Arab countries?

E. Methodology and Data Collection

1. Data Collection and Analysis

The research was conducted through referring to scholarly resources and peer

reviewed articles through AUB library and Google Scholar platforms. The data collected is

secondary in nature and it will consist of resources taken from academic journals and

publications of scholars from different universities and different academic backgrounds to

ensure diversity of information. The research employs a historical qualitative research

model which would help in classifying the collected data and then analyzing them

accordingly. Thies (2002) commends the use of the historical model in the field of

international relations given the reliability attributed to it by political scientists when they

are collecting and analyzing their data.

The research follows a deductive analysis approach since the main concepts to be

explored already exist within the theoretical framework previously established (Azungah

2018) and it serves to assess the practicality of this framework in setting up the contextual

ground of the collected data in a different setting (Kyngäs & Kaakinen 2019). The evaluative and interpretive tools of this approach help narrow the scope of the data generated by this research to suit its aim and objectives.

2. *Significance of Research*

The issue being researched has impacted the lives of millions socially and economically, and it has revolutionized global politics and inter-state relations. The topic of this research is regarded as critical in the discipline of Political Science as it tackles important areas within it such as geopolitics and IR theories. This research aims to bring to the reader's attention the different angles from which one can look at the Arab spring and develop the necessary understandings of thereof to better frame it. It also seeks to further include the case of Tunisia in the Arab spring literature. The work represents a build-up and a systematic review of some of the already existing literature about the topic and highlight the potential gaps in it through establishing a new conceptual framework that allows for studying it from a new perspective. This would help generate new ideas and broaden the horizons of research for this topic.

3. *Limitations of Research*

Naturally, the study ought to have some limitations as is the case for most interpretive research pieces. First, the topic to go over and is subject to different interpretation which could reduce the objectivity of the study when it comes to analyzing it. Second, the use of secondary data may help build a solid and rich study, but it may not

provide an all-encompassing understanding of the topic. Third, the absence of other qualitative research methods, such as interviews and surveys, and quantitative research methods, can be regarded as a weakness since the diversity of research methods can increase the validity of the study. Finally, the research emphasis may not be accessible to all audiences, as it may require the reader to have a background in International Relations or Political Science in general to understand some of the theories used for analysis.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

A. The Arab World in a post-World War II International System

Raymond Hinnebusch (2003) claims that towards the end of World War II and by the beginning of the Cold War Era, the Arab world was turning into a western influenced region contested by the Soviet Union (USSR) at the time. With Israel being in the middle of an unstable neighborhood and US interests aligning with the latter's especially regarding oil and gas resources, there was enough incentive for the West to establish a strong presence in the MENA region. Hinnebusch (2003) shed the light on the fact that western intervention was not just to contain the USSR's communist influence in the region in defense of the western liberal democratic views, but also to serve their political interests of maintaining the upper hand over the region even throughout the decolonialism era. Breaking it down following the core-periphery perspective, Hinnebusch (2003) also notes that the Arab region is a heavily penetrated area by the international system and more importantly by the emerging great powers of post-World War II, which represent the core. Unlike North Africa, the Middle East at the time, was an experimental playground for the West. Imposing a dysfunctional Westphalian model in the area, it was flooded with the imperialist wave. The Middle East market, economy and military had a bitter aftertaste of the western bad management of the area even after gaining independence. Britain and France mainly, then the US, had control over the region's energy sector and related

transactions and routes. On the social level, Britain and France continued to draw borders for new countries the same way they perfected the creation of Israel, which severely fragmented the Middle East which created a power vacuum later on when the western powers started politically withdrawing from the region but remained military present for security reasons (Lustick 1997).

However, the West had a major rival in the area that also wanted a piece of the cake. The USSR sought to gain access to the region that is rich in oil and fossil energy resources through Iran and the Turkish straits. The US did not like such an advance and western interests were at stake, so they devised the containment strategy. But an unlikely outcome for the US and its allies occurred as the Arab political independence movement grew towards the 1950s supported by the USSR. Soon after, Pan Arabism invaded the MENA region in the wake of Western Europe's support for Israel in the region at the expense of Palestine (Lustick 1997). Hinnebusch (2003) critiqued the western response to the Arab countries call for sovereignty hence the faulty Westphalian model argument. The right to sovereignty and self-determination seems to be in order as the full package for the west but as for the MENA, it did not seem much of an option. For instance, Britain and France punished Egypt militarily following the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956 because it would harm French and British economic and trade interests. Such tensions between the West and the Middle East made the latter favor the USSR which supported the newly independent Arab countries in breaking free from Western influence (Lustick 1997).

Nevertheless, the Western powers found a way to infiltrate the region through clientelism. The former had promised Arab leaders at the time secure rule and economic independence

from the region and even access to western military bases in exchange with regional presence. Supported by the US, France and Britain also promised an Arab-Israeli peace process to guarantee stability in the region and created "a regional security organization – what would become the Baghdad Pact and Central Treaty Organization (CENTO)" in another attempt to contain the USSR (Hinnebusch 2003). Slowly, this led to the fragmentation of the region again because the rise and decline of Pan Arabism until the 1973 which could be safely said as the last occurrence of Arab unity. With its fall, so came the decrease in sovereignty and the US finally had direct access and influence in the Middle East through Israel, exploiting a region that has been drowning in conflicts, civil wars and economic collapse. Indeed, the Arab focus shifted to the "non-Arab periphery" with the rising threat from Iran that sought to contest Egypt's hegemony over the region. The US also exploited Saudi Arabia's religious rivalry with Iran and Iraq which compelled it to require American protection (Hinnebusch 2003).

Meanwhile, the nuclear tensions between the US and the USSR were affecting the Middle East. The two parties were mapping the region, among others across the pacific, with nuclear bases and fleets. These tensions put international interests and security at stake which called for the nuclear proliferation treaty in 1968 to prevent Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) scenarios. The world had not recovered from the aftermath of World War II just yet and a similar, but deadlier, scenario could take place again but wreaking more havoc. States possessing nuclear weapons may either strike first to eliminate any potential threat or respond to a real one. However, it would not be in any state's interest to engage in a nuclear war given the human casualties and permanent infrastructural damage

in consequence but, possessing such weapons effectively deters enemy states, even the most powerful ones. Fortunately, a nuclear holocaust was prevented, and the Cold War ended with the collapse of the USSR (Sagan et al., 136).

B. **The post-Cold War era: redefining intervention and decolonization in the Arab world**

With the USSR out of the picture, a unipolar world dominated by US military and economic hegemony paved the way for more western and US led intervention. The era also witnessed a rising nuclear power, Israel, who wanted to remain the only one in the Middle East to possess nuclear weapons. On the other hand, Iran sought to even the odds especially that it was already surrounded by other nuclear powers- India, Pakistan, China, Russia- and given the rivalry between the two states, Iran decided to develop a nuclear program as well and it would only be logical to do so (Sagan et al 2007). At the time, western intervention, especially the US, became more military directed in the region and in 2003, following the events of September 2001, the Bush administration and Britain invaded Iraq and set a precedent for pre-emptive war. Makdisi (2017) claims that the US intervention in the Iraq remodeled international intervention in the region and set up a violent and expedited transformation process. Initially and supposedly aiming at dismantling the "axis of evil" comprising Iraq and Iran, the US and British intervention in Iraq destabilized the country after having infiltrated its institutions and military and causing catastrophic damage to the infrastructure. This left the country and its people in bad shape as poverty and hunger reigned over then and what was supposed to be a military operation to rid the country from

WMDs turned into a humanitarian catastrophe. The built-up frustration that came out of the forced state building later on resulted in civil wars and the creation of the terrorist group known as Islamic State. Makdisi (2017) critiques the invasion act through reminders of the previous US obligations towards democratizing Iraq in 1998 through the Iraq Liberation Act but failed to deliver before the September 11 incident.

The Bush administration did not stop there as it sought to eliminate the other threats to the welfare and security of Israel and US Gulf allies. The threats comprised of Syria, Lebanon and Iran with Hezbollah making its way to the top of the most imminent threats to Israel. The US tried to impose sanctions on Syria and Iran in vain especially after the 2006 Israeli retreat from Lebanon because of Hezbollah. This was a political defeat for the US because the aftermath of the war granted Iran more influence over the region and left the Gulf allies with a security dilemma (Makdisi 2017). Sagan et al (2007) reinforce this claim by arguing that Iran was acting in defense of its interests in the region and attempted to protect its national interests through starting a nuclear program since "there is no way to deter the United States other than by having nuclear" (p. 137).

C. Setting up the Arab Spring and Regional Make-over in the MENA region

In an area full of tensions, Herd (2011) argued that it was inevitable for the Arab spring to take place and attributed the reasons behind it to a certain power vacuum created by western and Russian interventions and meddling in the MENA region. During the Arab spring, he sheds light on the Russian and Western strategies towards the dilemmas that

resulted consequently under the umbrella of humanitarian intervention in the name of "responsibility to protect". On this note, he questioned the viability of Russian and Western approaches, especially that of the US, towards the region especially after the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel which set the premise for economic affluence and political stability for the countries that follow suit. However, the Arab states were growing militarily strong and had the upper hand over the people, silencing any opposition whether from activists or groups. Suddenly, the western liberal project in the Middle East did not matter much for the US as suggests the case of Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Herd (2011) claims that the US allowed Hosni Mubarak to remain in power as long as the peace treaty with Israel is respected with some promises of economic betterment to enhance the government relations with the Egyptian people.

However, like several other Arab countries, the economic situation was not getting any better as promised by Mubarak and to him by the US and the people were experiencing hunger and poverty (Herd 2011). Similarly, Inbar (2013) tackled the Arab spring from a geopolitical perspective while also addressing the economic and social consequences that the people have experienced throughout it. He claimed that the event made things worse and caused the economy in those countries to decline which shifted the balance in the region in favor of the Gulf countries mainly. Going through the Arab spring case by case, Inbar (2013) established a comparative analysis of the success of the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria. While Tunisia stood out as the intended model for the outcome of the Arab spring, securing a seat in the democratization process, the rest of the countries were not as fortunate. Foreign interventions defined the Arab spring reality

in a desperate attempt to prevent further instability and contain it from spilling over to other countries, especially in the Gulf.

Gabon (2018) also asserted that the instability the Arab countries have been experiencing is because the western countries did not really help them ensure a smooth democratization process. Proponents of the free world and liberal values such as the US instead supported a military strike by NATO in Libya that left it in chaos and then stopped being involved in the MENA region as before. Gabon (2018) called the lack of US interventionism "paying a hypocritical lip service to the Arab Spring, before resuming their full support to those repressive states, their new or old autocratic strongmen and despotic tyrants as fast as they could". Inbar (2013) supports this argument by saying that "during the Arab Spring the Middle East has been left with a bitter taste of US foreign policy performance" (p.11) since the Obama administration did not have much of a clear foreign policy regarding the events that took place. The latter also stood by and watched as Bashar Al-Assad fired chemical weapons onto the people in Syria and President Obama did not live up to his threats and promises of US reaction to Assad's crimes. The violence continued and the United States still did not bother intervening in Syria and stuck to condemning the actions of the Syrian regime. The US also did not comment on the Saudi military intervention in Yemen against the Houthis, which was a violation of international law and a breach of sovereignty. The passivity of the US throughout this period made Inbar (2013) describe its foreign policy as "inconsistent", and that the Obama administration acted as a bystander during the Arab spring which he thought to be a pointer for a decrease

in US influence and political power of the Middle East. Suddenly, the American democratic project in the region was no longer a priority for the U.S.

When explaining his "disastrous landscape" assumption, Gabon (2018) spoke of democratization and inclusive societies and how the Arab spring was supposed to bring these key concepts to the Arab world yet none of them were achieved. He asserted that the vision behind the Arab spring is not even close to coming true as the region is drowning in chaos worse than ever. He stressed the cases of Yemen, Libya, and Syria whom he believes fell apart because of several factors like the proxy wars. For instance, there are several parties involved in the Syrian conflict aside from the domestic ones including the US, Russia, Turkey, Iran and some Gulf States like Qatar and Saudi Arabia, each with their own agenda. Wastnidge (2017) believes that Iran is backing up the Assad regime due to their deeply rooted ties and having a common enemy, it being Israel, to maintain influence in the region and diplomatic ties between the two countries. By the time the Syrian revolution broke free, and Assad's regime seemed to be endangered, Iran tasked Hezbollah with fighting off the rebels in Syria. Saudi Arabia, a long-term rival to Iran, starts funding the rebels and arming them to overthrow the regime mainly because it is supported by Iran and the religious differences that they have, with Saudi Arabia being a Sunni led country and Iran being a Shiite one. So, basically, both states are going to war in Syria and the more Iran supports the Baath regime, the more Saudi Arabia arms the rebels which drew the attention of the US and other allied countries in the region to Syria, such as Turkey and Qatar which paved the way for them to use the country as a way to advance their own agendas and increase their influence in the region (Phillips 2017). Phillips (2017) also

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claims that Turkey grasped the opportunity to wage war on the Kurds that seceded from Syria and that was growing into a weighty political and military entity that was giving both Assad's regime and ISIS forces a hard time. Turkey already has a long-term rivalry with the Kurds, and it insisted on making them the enemy even in Syria where they created an even bigger division between the Arab Syrians and the Kurdish ones. But, with the Kurds fighting ISIS in the Northeast of Syria, the US training program previously directed towards the rebels to fight Assad's regime turned into an anti-ISIS program and rebel troops were being sent instead to fight ISIS forces alongside the Kurds. This move was perceived hostile by Turkey and sparked a controversy in its relationship with the US, since the latter was seemingly supporting the very group they want to defeat.

In the midst of the shackled alliance between Turkey and the US, Phillips (2017) argues that Saudi Arabia was thriving in Syria and was able to somewhat counteract Iran's influence in the region. Apparently, Iran was facing an economic downgrade because of funding Assad's regime and was running low on military supplies, which pushed Iran to take it down a notch even though Assad was not overthrown. Weakening Tehran would only mean one important thing to Saudi Arabia, which is strengthening its ties and alliance with the US and renewing that alliance by 2016 presidential elections. As for Russia, Phillips (2017) emphasized on how they managed to make their military presence in Syria legitimate. After a statement by Assad that he was the one to invite Russia to intervene in Syria to solve the civil conflict, the latter finally got the chance to spread its influence in the region with Syria being a key actor in the politics of the middle east. Not only did Assad granted such an access to regional politics to Moscow but, it also allowed it to establish

regional dominance in an attempt to flush out the US influence from the region after being there for the past decade.

D. The Arab Spring Dilemma and Disparities

In its assessment of the developments of the Arab spring, Gabon (2018) argues that despite the efforts put into revolutions and uprisings to ensure the success of the Arab spring, the current conditions in the region do not favor an effective completion of the democratization process and would need much longer to even near it. There are still countries in the MENA region that are suffering from repression and authoritarian regimes like Syria, others have fragmented governments like Yemen and Libya. In this case, Toby Dodge (2012) provided two sets of countries that the Arab spring created. The first being the one that includes the countries that are undergoing a peaceful democratic transition, like Tunisia, and the second being the unfortunate ones who are currently drowning in violence and conflict, like Syria and Libya. Tunisia and Egypt may have been the first states to demonstrate political mobilization and successful ousting of dictators but, this only means that it is possible for the rest of the countries to follow suite. The current conditions do not pave the way for democratic changes to happen anytime soon in the Middle East region especially since most of the countries in the region are still ruled by the same leaders.

Debeuf (2017) believes that we are yet to see the fruits of the Arab spring across the rest of the region as it is only passing through one of the stages that would ensure its success and a brighter future for the Arab countries. He proceeds to compare it to the

French revolution in terms of what led to it and mentions that "It took 80 years and 12 constitutions before France became a stable democracy in 1870." (2017). Debeuf (2017) also refers to the current condition of youth unemployment does not make things better but rather increases the frustration. The events of the Arab spring did not do the economies of the region any good, especially the tourism sector, because of the growing number of terrorist attacks happening, not to mention the ongoing armed conflicts going on currently. Lastly, he seems to share Gabon's opinion (2018) over the fact that repression still exists in the Arab world and the fact that media is still being censored in most Arab countries except for Tunisia is alarming and a living proof of his argument (2017).

E. **The role of Civil Society Organizations in the Arab Spring: Regional Imbalance of Participatory Influence**

Civil Society Organizations were one of the main driving forces and sponsors of the Arab spring. It is also important to mention that the UN and some of its organizations have tried to contain the development of this event across the region to complement the groundwork of the CSOs. Herd (2011) saw such attempts as these organizations and Western NGOs conspiring with security services to orchestrate the overthrowing of the dictatorships in the Arab world except that the movements in Tunisia, Yemen, Egypt, and Libya turned out to be led by the people themselves. CSOs played an important role in leading them and making the revolutions a success during the Arab spring events and afterwards. Bribena (2017) claimed that "the Arab Spring was the product of liberalizing coalitions" and civil movements that were significantly mobilized by CSOs. Tunisia stands

out as a pertinent example of such leadership. The emergence of the latter during and since the 2011 revolution contributed to democratizing the state and their role shaped the post-revolution Tunisian society (Ben Hassine 2018). Ben Hassine (2018) noted that Tunisia may not have gone that far if it was not for the work of CSOs at the time. The involvement of associations, labor unions and non-profit organizations during the revolution kept the country steady and prevented unwanted consequences that might have threatened to destabilize it. She claims that these organizations brought the people together and revived the sense of community in them. Such actions resulted in reducing the tensions between the people and the state thus reducing the intensity of the conflict. It is safe to say that the events that led to igniting the Arab Spring established a "collective consciousness" that has not existed before among the Arab people due to being ruled by authoritarian regimes and the civil society organizations paved the way for that across the rest of the Arab world (2018). As for Egypt, CSOs had already an active status during Mubarak's regime which allotted the strong leadership and influence it had during and after the revolution (Bribena 2017). In fact, Bribena (2017) claimed that Egypt, similarly to Tunisia, quickly found its way to mobilize the people through the use of social media and the internet thus helping the revolutionary momentum in the streets. This advantage was due to the fact that CSOs in Egypt already had their own platforms and influence on the people, though minimal and limited by the Mubarak regime.

However, the case was not the same for neighboring country Libya as the CSOs influence spill over did not achieve the same impact as it had in Tunisia and Egypt. Bribena (2017) described Libyan society as experiencing a "civil society vacuum" by the time the

revolution took place. He attributed this situation to the fact that the Qaddafi regime had

heavily restricted CSOs in Libya ever since 1969. Briebna (2017) notes that there is a

culture of armed regime change that reigned over the Libyan political system starting with

Qaddafi's coup in 1969 that rooted this concept in the people which restricted their "civic

capacity". This capacity was further restricted since Libya did not hold any elections all

along the 40-year rule of Qaddafi. Evidently then, there was a more violent response by the

people (Bribena 2017).

CHAPTER III

THE ARAB WORLD: REGION AT WAR

The Arab world is an interesting geopolitical area to say the least. Two major regions, North Africa and the Middle East, rich in history and composed of a complex ethnic makeup, yet so distinct in International Relations literature and world events. Evidently, when I speak of this distinction, I refer to the previous chapter of the literature review to seek to establish a correlation between imperialism and interventionism, and the reasons why both regions are so prone to conflict, with the Middle East being exceptionally more susceptible to it. Brown (1984) had referred to the MENA as a deeply "penetrated system" where the global and surrounding regional powers have significantly shaped and influenced domestic policies and the stability of the region. Most of the Arab countries have been affected by Western and regional interventions and interference to a certain extent. This chapter will seek to survey the nature of geopolitical developments in the region since the mid-20th century until the early 2000s in an attempt to determine how they affected the subsequent uprisings during the Arab spring.

A. Judge, Jury and Executioner: How Western Imperialism denied the MENA Region Stability

The period spanning the beginning of the 20th century until the end of the second World War was all about nations seeking to exercise sovereignty and the right to self-

determination introduced by President Woodrow Wilson in 1917, that every nation has the right to decide its own fate while guaranteeing collective security (Lynch 2002). The MENA region was no exception to this, yet it was prevented by Western Imperialism that extended an ideology that was deeply rooted in Europe ever since the Congress of Vienna of 1815 that introduced the concept of 'balance of power' (Anghie 2010). The Congress of Vienna also marked the beginning of Western Imperialism that pitted colonial powers like France, England, Belgium, Portugal, Germany and Spain against each other in a race of colonial conquest in Africa and the Middle East mainly given the riches these regions harbored. The colonial powers deemed the two regions as barbaric and ineligible for the standards of sovereignty they set so they would decide on their behalf and drew their borders on the map regardless of ethnic communities and cultural identities (Anghie 2010). The great power rivalry to claim who leads a European dominated world holds most of the interstate and proxy wars starting the beginning of 17th century until the 20th century which included two world wars in the name of expansionism and colonialism (Levy 2007).

Even after the seemingly collapse of the colonialism in the MENA, Western imperialism still persisted as the region was experiencing a security dilemma and a power vacuum following the establishment of Israel in 1948 (Lustick 1997). The post-World War II reality had several European countries retire from the international arena to recover, which paved the way for the United States to lead the way for a new world order joined by the Soviet Union. This coincided with the decolonization era supported by the former especially in the MENA region (Hinnebusch 2003). The 70 years that followed the end of World War II did not favor stability in the Arab region as it was always prone to

ethnopolitical conflicts and external intervention and influence that only served to make things worse. The combination of both factors culminated in explosive outcomes like the Arab Israeli conflict and the US and USSR using it as a proxy for their cold war.

The Cold War was about regional security and maintaining some sort of gridlock in the MENA regional system through supporting different parties to the ongoing conflicts there. The arms race that the US and USSR provided different parties also served to intensify the already present instability and make the region more hostile than it already was (Brown 2007). The US was doing solid efforts to protect the security and economic interests of Israel in the region through creating a suitable environment for it to have easy access to oil resources of the Gulf (Kamrava 2018). The US alongside its western allies also consolidated efforts to prevent the Middle East from fully controlling their oil resources and helped maintain this status and ensure a smooth insertion of Israel in the region especially with silencing Iran and Iraq (Hinnebusch 2011). Furthermore, the Western powers sought to ease in their domination of Arab affairs and military influence through the Bagdad Pact of 1955 which was complemented by the Eisenhower Doctrine in 1957 that attempted to attract the Arabs closer to the western camp. The latter helped solidify western influence in the region since the US made it clear that any Arab country would be able to request military and economic aid from it to stop the spread of communism (Hahn 2006).

What was an attempt to contain communism and maintain security in the region turned into tensions and security dilemmas between Arab countries and their common enemy at the time Israel, which caused the region to request the support of external actors

(Hinnebusch 2011). On the one hand, Jamal Abdel Nasser, who was a proponent of Pan-Arabism and Islamist expansionism, sought to spread anti-colonialism and anti-western ideology in the MENA region which pushed him towards seeking the help of the USSR (Slater 1990). On the other hand, when the USSR sided with Egypt and its allies, the US was further convinced that its rival had ill intentions despite its calls for peace and cooperation, and they proceeded to send troops and funnel weapons into the pro-Western governments in the region to "protect them" from the communist expansion starting the mid 1950's (Slater 1990).

The strategy used by the US included meddling in the fragile relations between political and ethnic opponents in the region pitting Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Iran under the shah at the time, against the rising Arab countries of Egypt, Syria and Iraq (Hinnebusch 2011). When the arms race began between the two superpowers, it put them on opposite sides of the conflict and almost direct confrontations in the 1956 Sinai War, the 1967 War, the 1970 Canal war and the Yom Kippur 1973 War (Slater 1990). Largely, these wars had the element of preventive war to them especially in the Sinai War where Israel waged war on Egypt out of a concern for its security and territorial integrity given the massive number of weapons being funneled to it from the USSR (Kemp 2007). By the end of this period, the number of interventions and their intensity had served its purpose of eliminating any chance of having a regional hegemon and prioritizing global politics and interests at the expense of those of the MENA region (Hazbun 2018).

B. The American Age in the MENA region

Towards the end of the cold war, several regional players would start making their way towards a potential leadership of the MENA region which included Egypt, Syria and Iraq given their rising military power. Iraq was one to try out projecting its power in the region in the Gulf War with the invasion of Kuwait but was met with an American-European military response that reaffirmed western objective of eliminating any rising regional hegemon (Hazbun 2018). The military response started as a call by President George Bush to end Saddam Hussein reign of terror in the Middle East (Nacos 1994) but the main motive behind it was to increase American influence in the region and perhaps even establish a regional order that would suit the US security and economic interests (Hazbun 2018). When the USSR collapsed and the Gulf War ended, the US was promoted to world leader by its European peers and praised by some of its allies in the Middle East like Saudi Arabia. For quite the long decade between the 1990s and the early 2000s, the US tried to promote its liberal project in the MENA region starting with the Iraq Liberation Act in 1998 in an attempt to overthrow Saddam Hussein and support the Iraqi democratic opposition groups (Makdisi 2017).

The American foreign policy in the MENA region following the end of the cold war and reinforced by the Bush doctrine aimed at spreading its liberal project of democracy across the region, echoing what Clinton and Wilson before him tried to promote as a "better world" where national peoples can thrive and prosper. The purpose of the Iraq Liberation Act was supposed to have a contagious effect across the rest of the MENA region and when it failed and the 2003 war erupted, the US intervention would not only put an end to

Hussein's "rule of terror", but it would also inspire other peoples to stand up to this kind of rule in their respective countries (Jervis 2003). However, the aftermath of the 2003 invasion was not an incentive to democratize the Arab world but simply a groundless attempt at eliminating a potential regional competitor and a threat to US interests which were interlinked with those of Israel.

The US groundless invasion of Iraq left behind a trail of destruction that result and humanitarian disaster that had crippled Iraq politically, economically, and socially more than it already was because of twenty years' worth of sanctions (Makdisi 2017). There were no Weapons of Mass Destruction unlike what Colin Powell and the motivations of the Secretary of State at the time were merely to assert American military dominance and a justification of preventive warfare (LaFEBER 2009). The US tried to solve this the humanitarian crisis it made by reaffirming its commitment to the democratization of Iraq and proceed to invest in remodeling its political system, but it failed to do so because the critical damage and failure the state institutions had endured during the invasion (Makdisi 2017). The most logical explanation of this catastrophic unforeseen unfolding of events is a strategic oversight by the US. Democratization needs a favorable environment to take place properly and if it is not ripe enough, the consequences of the process could have negative long-term effects on the people especially if they are already experiencing ethnic division. Coercive democratization has even worse outcomes on the stability of the country being forced to adopt a democratic political system (Ottaway 2007). The case of Iraq was that it was already experiencing ethnic division that was fueled by historic grievances (Holtmann 2014) and in a way it seemed that the US knew that it could exploit that division and the

growing resentment towards Saddam Hussein especially after the Iraq-Iran war (Taras 2006).

In its campaign to combat terrorism, the US created further opportunities for terrorism. By pushing Iraq over the ledge and failing to replace it with a tangible and legitimate alternative, the US invasion paved the way for the creation of a safe haven for jihadist extremists and the birthed the Islamic State. The result of what happened in Afghanistan should have been a major red flag for the US and global powers alike that intervening in domestic affairs of other countries, especially militarily, is an evil to beware because it can easily affect the global affairs, and consequently their own, that they were desperate trying to preserve (Ayoob 2007). It is also important to note that strength invites challenge and when the US and its allies wished to continue down this path of destructive democratization, resistance emerged and fought back. This was especially apparent during the western attempt to ease in Israeli hegemony in the Middle East which was met with the Iranian Syrian defense with the 2006 war that put a limit to American intervention in the region (Makdisi 2017). However, by the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the Middle East region was drowning in regional security issues (Hazbun 2018).

CHAPTER IV

ENTER THE ARAB SPRING

Ever since the end of the 19th century and beginning of 20th century, the Arab world has been caught in the crossfire of global powers who denied it autonomy because of their demeaning perception of the identities of its peoples and reducing them to savages and ignorant simply because a group of 'white men' deemed them so. The Arab states were not allowed to exercise their rights to sovereignty and self-determination, and they have been unfairly punished for it as well. The instability of the MENA region has been regularly experiencing the domino effect of western infiltration and intervention that resulted in nothing but brutalized and divided peoples who constitute the majority of refugees around the world and have the riches of their countries stolen from them. The instability of the MENA region continued beyond the cold war events with the Gulf war then the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 leading up to the Arab spring.

A. **The Reality of Democratization during the Arab Spring and the Role of Civil Society Organizations in Shaping it**

On December 17, 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor, set himself on fire following an encounter that he had with a police officer that ended up with him being slapped and humiliated by that officer. With the atmosphere already being full of tensions, this incident was the one to spark an entire revolution led by the rest of the

Tunisian people who have had their own share of frustration. They decided that it was time

to put an end to the reign of the existing authoritarian regime leader, Zine Al Abadine Ben

Ali. As a result, Ben Ali fled the country and the event that took place in Tunisia inspired

the revolt of the people in neighboring countries facing the same problems as well, such as

Libya, Egypt, Syria, and Yemen. However, it was not as peaceful as Tunisia's and there

was a lot of violence and bloodshed.

The international community, especially the West, looked at this event as the

immediate inclusion of the Arab countries in the liberal landscape, but it would be

unrealistic to even expect a proper transition over the next decade, let alone over the span

of a few months or years. Democracy takes time to grow, it cannot happen suddenly.

People who have lived in complete regression and oppression their entire lives would not

be able to cope with an unexpected surge of human rights (Gaffar 2017). One must also

mention the obstacles that prevented the shaping democracy in the Arab Spring. Some of

these problems were relative deprivation, lack of change of leadership and political elite,

and authoritarian regimes that lead to society's frustration. Relative deprivation is the gap

between high expectations and diminishing opportunities and uneven resource distribution

Studies have shown that there was an increase in supplement prices, and a high youth

unemployment rate of 35%, with 25% of them being illiterate. 40% of the population were

living in dire conditions as they were earning less than two dollars per day (Herd 2011). In

addition to that, there was a lack of change of leadership and political elite since the very

beginning of decolonization. Global powers such as the US, UK, France, and the USSR

during the cold war, have made sure to keep preserve Arab dictatorships that advance their

interests in the region and do not restrict their access to oil and gas resources there. Even when there were legitimate calls and attempts for democracy towards the end of the 20th century, Arab leaders who wanted to further such national aspirations were met with disapproval from the West (Mabro 1990).

Indeed, the Arab world has been ruled by dictators who silenced voices that directly or indirectly posed a challenge to imposed activities and policies (Bribena 2017), but the Arab spring has paved the way for the rise of CSOs who have effectively sponsored the Arab uprisings. The protests that took place in Tunisia and Egypt, which were directed by civil society organizations to a substantial degree, reached the rest of the Arab countries with an infectious spirit. The exceptional quality of such sponsorships in these state subjugated countries began to spread out across neighboring countries, that has experienced similar rules, to become a reality in the whole MENA region. Civil society organizations began to form, despite being suffocated by the regime, spurring resistance towards the rest of dictators and their rule.

The Arab spring led the MENA region to a turning point in history. The revolutions that gave birth to the Arab spring shaped a united consciousness, championed by CSOs, that had been unknown to the Arab masses suffering under authoritarian rules. Freedom, equality, and a struggle for honor have become the norms that unified the people. This united consciousness created a sense of solidarity and motivation among the peoples to set forth several political demands, most importantly, the demand for further societal and political participation. The CSOs' active participation in the Arab spring recalculated policies across different Arab states and called for new strategies to handle the recalibrated

political atmosphere (Aras & Falk 2016). Now, public demands for change became a political priority. Cultural and diplomatic practices even became as fluid as ever, for the new collective consciousness had a mass potential for international diffusion across all countries neighboring the MENA. The revolutions were infectious, and CSOs have leveraged social media platforms to disseminate the news of uprising in one state as a strategy to easily spark an uprising in nearby states through activism and messages of empowerment and solidarity. Arab leaders had to adapt to the new pressure of the ability to exert an influence on the political transformations of adjacent states, while their own states were in vulnerable positions. Any precarious statement Arab leaders made would in turn backfire on them. However, the promises for a democracy were not all turned into practice, as only Tunisia was recognized as a democracy by 2014 (Teti & al. 2018).

B. Say No Evil, See No Evil, Hear No Evil: The International Community's Response to the Arab Spring

Compared to the CSOs response to the Arab uprisings, the international community was not seemingly as ready for several reasons, least of which it being the age of self-determination had come again in the most unstable region in the world, only this time, it transcended the Palestinian case. There was a major absence of a clear set of foreign policies towards the Arab spring from the West, namely the US, whereas the UN was getting prepared to take over the international stage to assist those countries transition democratically and peacefully.

When the Arab spring first took place, the events that took place in Tunisia and Egypt drew some international attention but not enough for an international response despite the significant mobilization of the regime opposing forces (Vidmar 2013). The UN General Assembly (UNGA) did not conduct any exceptional session on the denouement of the events of the Arab Spring nor about what triggered it. It would have been expected for them to convene and perhaps show the ultimate sign of international cooperation and collective say in decision making in international affairs. However, the GA focused only on the case of Libya, not that it made any difference since the UNSC was already all over it and voted on Resolution 65/265 to suspend Libya's membership from the Human Rights Council under the pressure and leadership of the Arab League (Turan 2018). The case of Libya that became the epicenter of the attention of the international community following the condemnations that the Gaddafi regime received at the time due to grave violations of human rights and potential threat of genocide (Wilson 2013). This prompted the reaction of the United Nation Security Council (UNSC), which convened on February 26, 2011, and voted on Resolution 1970 that imposed an arms embargo, travel ban and called for humanitarian assistance to the Libyan people (S/RES/1970, 2011). Within less than a month, the UNSC convened yet again to vote on Resolution 1973 which authorized the use of any means necessary to stop the bloodshed taking place against Libyan civilians (Thakur 2011) and it was well within the UNSC's core functions description "to take military action against an aggressor" (UN, n.d). Following the operation, it had become clear that its main objectives were not only to prevent mass atrocities or protect the civilians but rather to destabilize Gaddafi's regime, which gave the opposition forces the upper hand (Wilson 2013).

The facts state that the UN, through its member states, had the potential to step up and assume its role as the governor of the society of states and guided the international community through a structured response to the Arab spring, under the framework of international law (Barnett & Finnemore 2018). However, as Murthy (2018) pointed out, the UNGA missed out on the opportunity to effectively deal with the political issues that rose out of the Arab spring. In consequence, the UNGA was only content with delegating tasks to other UN bodies to address the rising transgressions across the Arab countries. In his letter to the UN APPG in May 2012 addressing the UN's Response to the Arab Spring and the evolving role of The Security Council, Sir Mark Lyall Grant (2012) commended the work that the United Nation Development Program (UNDP) in Tunisia and Egypt that has been exemplified through providing as much assistance and guidance in setting up elections and amending their constitution. Indeed, the UNDP has mobilized a lot of resources to support smooth regime transition in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya through trainings and promotion of awareness on democratic practices. The organization has also dedicated some of its efforts to help with relocation of displaced civilians in Libya and set up youth programs across the MENA in general (Turan 2018).

For the cases of Tunisia and Egypt, the democratic transitions they have experienced have been optimal under the guidance and support of the Electoral Assistance Division. The outcome of the UNDP's work in Tunisia stands out than the one in Egypt (Murthy 2018). Indeed, the UNDP's success in Tunisia was the most prominent since the assistance it has provided to the interim government during 2011 panned out by October 2011 when the election for the National Constituents Assembly (NCA) took places without

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any setback and UNDP officials renewed their commitment to the democratic transition through assisting in observing the elections (UN News 2011). The UNDP made this possible through allocating significant funding for Tunisia to assist with the process (Turan 2018). The UN Human Rights office in Tunisia has also set out on helping the Tunisian people regain and preserve their rights for freedom and democracy through supporting the establishment of an independent human rights body that would observe their situation during the transition period (UN News 2011).

After the unfolding of the Arab Spring, the UNDP placed more and more emphasis on providing transition support and dealing with the different crises that stemmed out of it. However, it failed to replicate the model it was able to implement in Tunisia elsewhere due to being denied access to the government institutions in Egypt and Libya. It was up to the Office of High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR) to rise up to the occasion to deliver the necessary assistance to the Libyan, Egyptian and Tunisian governments on ensuring that the transitory processes did not infringe of the people's rights to freedom and democracy. OHCHR also managed to tackle some of the other underlying issues such as poverty and inequalities that have exacerbated especially in Libya and Egypt but that is as far as it got since it has received major resistance from the governments of the latter to look into any potential human rights atrocities (Turan 2018).

The Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS) has monitored the progress of the work of the UN organizations like the OHCHR and the HRC and reported that the outcome of their involvement in the MENA region did not uphold the objectives of democratization they had set for the countries undergoing such a transition. The only case

they have ever provided substantial support for is Tunisia, but unlike what has been widely

communicated about the lack of access, it seems that the UN organizations did not further

negotiate with the Libyan and Egyptian governments for instance (CIHRS n.d).

CHAPTER V

TUNISIA: THE ARAB SPRING EXCEPTION

A. A Fish in a Shark Tank: The Curious Case of Tunisia and Foreign Interventions

The previous chapters have highlighted how much of a mess the Arab region is. Almost a century of conflict and foreign intervention, and it took a small country of nearly 12 million people to prove that this rather pessimistic sociopolitical outlook can be different. There is undeniable absence of the mention of Tunisia in Chapter III about interventions in the region compared to their recurring frequency throughout the rest of it. Even after its independence in 1956, Tunisia was not much of a center of international attention and was only slightly affected by the repercussions of the Arab Israeli conflict because of the Israeli bombing of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) headquarters in Hammam Chott. Otherwise, President Habib Bourguiba did a great job maintaining neutrality and balancing its relations with Arab states and the West at the time, especially by attempting to broker peace in the region while denouncing settler colonialism (Abadi 2017).

By the time Ben Ali rose to power in 1987, he took a more pro-western stance and joined the US's war on terror campaign, which attracted the support of the US and EU and made Tunisia a more strategic ally in the region (Mullin & Shahshahani 2011). Ben Ali's strategy reaffirmed and renewed the Western support for Tunisia, especially the US, and it

echoed Ronald Reagan's view of its geopolitical position in the Mediterranean. Tunisia's significance for the American agenda in the MENA meant that it could serve as an entry point for the liberal democratic project and putting a potential end for the Arab hostilities towards Israel. The benefits that came along involved the American support of Tunisia's security against foreign interventions, something that Bourguiba used to counteract a potential Libyan invasion and keep France at bay at the time, and Ben Ali used to pay off any accumulating debts and maintain oversight over the security of his regime later on (Abadi 2017). In consequence, the US and the EU did not react to Ben Ali's atrocities towards the Tunisian people and instead supported his antiterrorism law in 2003, which he actively used to eliminate any kind of opposition to his regime and used it to further consolidate power (Mullin and Shahshahani 2011). This is not to be perceived as uncommon as the West favors stable dictatorships since they fear the unknown outcome of a democratic implosion in the region that would not be in the image of their own model. It would have given leeway for the rise of political Islamism that has long bred "extremism" in the MENA. This orientalist approach has long posited the Arab countries as dependable systems on the guidance of the West and by the time Arab uprisings started to shape, this approach materialized (Gani 2022).

When Tunisia's revolution was brewing, there was no significant support from the US and EU despite the fact that they have long crowned themselves as the champions of democracy, especially in the MENA following in the footsteps of Bush's foreign policy (Mullin and Shahshahani 2011). As mentioned earlier, Ben Ali's regime did not at all adhere to the democratic values of the West but when push comes to pull, the removal of

Ben Ali would have been a strategic loss, more so for the US, given his outspoken support for the war on terror. Ben Ali's overthrowal may have led to the establishment of a new democracy in the MENA region but it could also destabilize a previously stable safeguard for terrorist extremists. In the light of what I just mentioned, the US and the EU had a valid reason to intervene to protect their interests, under the guise of protecting the Tunisian people. However, their abstention reflected a win-win situation in either case. Not siding with the people nor with the Ben Ali's regime would have still placed them on the right side of the winner; either a newfound democracy that they can guide or a reinforced authoritarian regime that helps them in their war on terror. An expected exception was France, which at some point event offered to support Ben Ali quash the rebels and end the revolution right where it was born (Attir & Laremont 2016). However, France's offer never the saw the light due to how the revolution was received across the EU in the following month after the self-immolation of Bouazizi.

Indeed, when addressing Tunisia's revolution and the nature of the country's transition in Chapter IV, the country has been a rather prominent recipient of the international community's assistance more so than interference. Tunisia has not only been the recipient of UN agencies assistance but also the EU and US. The former had recommended abstaining from the use of force as a response to the violent state repression of the protests between December 17, 2010, and January 14, 2011. It has also adopted a supportive stance for the people's demands for democracy and freedom, following through with it through sanctions on Ben Ali and his family and reaffirming its place as a reliable ally during the democratic transition. A joint European-Tunisian taskforce would form

under the tenure of Mohamed Beji Caïd Essebsi that would attract international financial support as well as logistical one to prepare for the elections of the Tunisian Constituent Assembly (Fernández-Molina 2017).

The US followed suit and it did not take long for the Obama government to condemn Ben Ali's violent response to the protests. Following the revolution, the US would designate around $610 million to alleviate the instability Tunisia had been experiencing at the time and to support the interim government on its different democratic programs and aspirations. By the time the Arab spring was in full effect and Tunisia was the only country to have experienced a proper democratic transition, Obama's government saw an opportunity to renew Tunisia's subscription in the war on terror, especially with the outbreak of the Islamic State's attack in the neighboring country of Libya and recruited Essebsi's government to help the US stabilize it as one of its non-NATO allies (Tovar 2018).

B. Tunisia and the Power of Reform

The success of the Tunisian revolution had its foundations and as much as external factors shaped its transition, taking an introspective approach is critical to understanding it. Chapter IV had already touched base on the role of CSOs in the sponsorship of revolutions and institutional reforms across the Arab region, but the case of Tunisia remains a specimen compared to the rest of the Arab countries.

After the fall of the dictatorship of the President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in 2011, the regime of governance in Tunisia witnessed a transitional phase led by Civil Society Organizations, during which the first democratic public elections for the National Constituent Assembly were conducted on October 23rd, 2011 (ICTJ 2014). The assembly's agenda was to draft a new constitution since the 1959 was deemed to be the tool of an authoritarian regime that no one wants to be seen again. The assembly's duties also included the evaluation of the government institutions and investigate how corrupt they were in order to launch a wave of institutional reforms to bring back the balance of powers and undo 23 years of tyranny (Human Rights Watch 2013).

1. *23 Years of Oppression and Deception: A Deeper Dive into Ben Ali's regime*

In 1987, Ben Ali became President, and his campaign seemingly promised a democratic system that would allow pluralism and freedom of expression. To make the illusion perfect, he allowed other parties to run for elections and turned the single party system established by Bourguiba into a multi-party one (Boddy-Evans 2020). Furthermore, the promise included the removal of the previously adopted "President for Life" and limited the presidency to five years per term (Official Printing Office of the Republic of Tunisia, 2010). Nevertheless, appearances can be deceiving, and Ben Ali committed several atrocities to fulfill his promise for democracy. Ben Ali drafted law bills that would prevent pluralistic political participation of parties with different ethnicities and ideologies and the so-called promise for democracy turned into segregation and political oppression (Talbi et al. 2020). The victims were activists, opposition party members and leaders, lawyers,

journalists, etc. His acts of corruption did not stop there, and he was involved in several financial and economic crimes. They included granting his friends and wife's family government and corporate positions. The latter used their ties to him to blackmail CEOs into giving up their shares, citizens into giving up their lands, money laundering, and so on In May 2002, he called for a referendum to approve constitutional changes proposed by him to extend his presidency for two more terms, 2004 and 2009, while granting himself immunity throughout his rule and afterwards (Boddy-Evans 2020).

It is safe to say that the executive branch had dominion over the rest of the branches. Legally and apparently, the constitution separated between all three, however, Presidents Bourguiba and Ben Ali had their fair shares of taking over the legislature and the judiciary. This made the other two branches useless as both powers of legislation and judiciary were vested in the President (Talbi et al, 2020). The parliamentary functions were further limited by Ben Ali when he took advantage of his ability to rule by decree to give himself even more oversight and control of the state. In 2005, he made amendment to empower the Chamber of Advisors, half of which were appointed by him, over the lower chamber (Constitution of Tunisia). This amendment stripped the latter of its jurisdiction over law bills and instead became a front for Ben Ali to legislate as he pleases and get an even more firm grip over the country.

As for the judiciary, the seemingly independent highest judicial authorities in Tunisia under the 1959 Constitution, the Supreme Court and the Constitutional Council were under the heavy influence of the regime. When Ben Ali was in charge, he appointed the High Council of Magistrates - Conseil Supérieur de la Magistrature – to keep the

Supreme Court and Constitutional Council in check and make sure they follow his agenda (International IDEA). The Council's job was basically to provide Ben Ali with overwatch over judges through promoting selected lawyers to keep them in check and enforcing disciplinary measures against those who opposed him. was tasked with appointing and promoting lawyers, as well as taking disciplinary action. Eventually, the judiciary was no longer independent and became instead composed of judges who were close to the regime. The independence of the judiciary was further compromised in 2005 when the Council managed to infiltrate the Association of Tunisian Judges. Supposedly an independent civil society body, the association turned into a highly politicized institution whose leadership got replaced by pawns of the regime at the time. These events led up to several violations of human rights and unjust trials of several innocent people who were simply exercising their right of freedom of expression. The judiciary conducted several unlawful rulings in absentia in the name of activists, members of opposition and ordinary citizens (International IDEA n.d). At the time, it was evident that Tunisia, as a state and as a people, plunged deeper into oppression and corruption because of the absence of scrutiny and balance of powers. Everything was instead under the control of the President who succeeded in making the system democratic on the outside while being authoritarian on the inside.

2. *Paving The Way for Democratization: The Institutional Do-Over*

The new version of the constitution that the assembly worked on reduced the jurisdictions of the President. The president's functions were set in article 77. The latter

kept his duties as the high commander of armed forces and responsibilities as a foreign policy maker and enforcer of national security. However, he no longer has the same amount of freedom in decision-making as he enjoyed during the previous regime. The president now needs the approval of the parliament when introducing law bills, declaring emergency state, but still enjoys veto power when it comes to legislation. The assembly made sure to rework the issue of presidential terms to prevent the same scenario of the country falling back into authoritarianism from happening again. It introduced Article 75 which limited the re-election of the president to only one more time. The Article states: "The Constitution may not be amended to increase the number or the length of presidential terms". Another safeguard to authoritarianism was set by article 88 by which the parliament can impeach the president with a two-thirds majority vote (Grote n.d).

The 2014 constitution made the parliament unicameral to make sure the Chamber of Advisors scenario does not take place again. The constitution also ensured the diversity of the political representativeness of constituencies that composed the 217 seats. The parliament was once again granted the ability to impeach the President and call for a censure of no motion in the prime minister (Pickard 2013). The legislation seemingly did not witness as much changes as the executive branch since the nature of the system was presidential during the previous administration. The Constituent Assembly simply brought back the functions of the parliament into practice since the 1959 constitution specified its functions but never managed to see the light and was instead doing the bidding of the President back in the time (European Forum n.d).

The judiciary became divided into four branches. Firstly, there is the ordinary judiciary headed by a Supreme Court- also known as Cassation Court- which deals with criminal and civil appeals from lower courts falling within this branch. Next is the administrative judiciary consisting of administrative courts and tribunals dealing with all administrative cases with appeals lying from there to the Supreme Administrative Court. Then, there is the financial judiciary comprising a special Court of Audit for financial matters. Lastly, there is the Constitutional Court with jurisdiction over constitutional disputes (Talbi et al 2020).

Aside from the institutional reforms previously mentioned, the most important job of the assembly was the drafting of the transitional justice law which was passed in December 2013. The law helped uncover past atrocities and human rights violations committed by the regime between 1955 and 2013 while allowing the victims to speak up about them and get reparations for what they have suffered. The application of the law would then create the Truth and Dignity Commission (TDC), to become its enforcer and seek justice and truth for the victims of the mentioned abuses. The TDC would hold the criminals accountable for their acts ranging from any kind of human right violations that includes murder, torture, extorsion, any form of sexual assault and judicial injustices to financial violations which include theft, fraud and abuse of the public funds (ICTJ 2019). The commission conducted over 49,654 secret hearings with around 62,720 deposited files relating to victims of the previous regimes (Amnesty international, 2019).

In the beginning, Tunisia was on the right track in the path of transitional justice. However, once the 2014 elections took place, the TDC received backlash from members of

Nidaa Tounes party (Goldstein 2019). To give an overview about the nature of the party, its members are known to be previously affiliated with the previous regime and previous ruling party, RCD. One would argue that it is only natural for remnants of the falling system oppose a commission that is digging into their own past. Especially, a commission that is investigating violations of human rights, corruptions and illegal activities. From the very beginning, the TDC was subject to several challenges imposed mainly by the government officials. The latter treated the commission as a non-pressing matter on the government plan and did not provide it with the proper files needed to conduct the necessary investigations (Chomiak 2019).

Even the president, Béji Caid Essebsi, a known public official under Ben Ali and Bourguiba's regimes had his reservations against the transitional justice process. President Essebsi clearly stated that bygones should be bygones for the country to progress and proceeded to introduce the Economic Reconciliation Law which was approved in 2017 (Goldstein 2019). Transitional justice is not just about uncovering truths of the past and getting justice for the victims. It is also about rebuilding and improving the community. The country cannot progress while members of its community still hold grudges against the system or against certain figures in it. Ancient grievances proved how deep hatred can go if the past has not been dealt with hence the cases of some civil wars across the world. The controversy of Essebsi's statement is even more stark because he was not in favor of doing the victims justice but was keen on passing an amnesty law that would spare previous regime officials the consequences they should face for their corruption and financial crimes.

The TDC faced other obstacles that had to do with the trials. There was no obligation for the accused nor the victims to show up to court. This frustrated the commission because the absence of one or both parties meant that its mission would not be fulfilled, and the perpetrators would walk free. For instance, Human Rights Watch reported that "in the first special court case, involving a death in detention under torture, none of the fourteen defendants have shown up. At least one police syndicate denounced the tribunals as "denigrating" the security services and urged its members to shun them." (Goldstein 2019). The obstacles the TDC faced were also structural because of an induced leadership conflict that was fueled by the media coverage. The TDC director at the time, Sihem Bensedrine, was bombarded with criticism about the functions of the TDC (Chomiak 2019). On the one hand, she had to deal with those who wanted to expose corruption faster and those who thought the families of the victims already endured much suffering and loss for the commission to bring up old wounds again.

C. A Solid Foundation

The role of Civil Society Organizations in the shaping of Tunisia during and after the Arab spring not only reflects the institutional foundation but also a social one where cohesion played a critical role in achieving Tunisian unity. One of the internal factors that has made Tunisia's transition so different than its MENA neighbors is attributed to its solid nation-state status that was shaped by its history and more recently, its post-colonial national identity formation that put aside tribal divisions and emphasized national identity (Menaifi 2022). It is no secret that Tunisia is by far the least fragmented nation state in the

region. The history of the country has a record of diversity of civilizations that existed within almost unchanged geographical borders and harboring people of the same ethnic background and religions. From the Phoenician era till the Islamic period, Tunisia has been exposed to the different cultures, practices, and trends of the Mediterranean and the European continent. Compared to the rest of its North African neighbors, like Algeria and Libya, Tunisia's ethnic makeup is composed of natives who speak a dialect that combines the languages spoken across the Mediterranean, Berber, Amazigh and Arabic, whose collective religion is estimated to be 99% Muslim Sunni (Brown 2014). The unified national identity of the people has played a key role in the smooth transition of Tunisia after the revolution took place, compared to its counterparts across the rest of the Arab region. The identity is not only rooted in the history of the country but also in the collective experiences of the people, especially the political and social ones.

By the time Tunisia got its independence, Bourguiba's vision for the people was one of education, patriotism, and secularization. After the successful March 25, 1956, elections of the Front National Destourien (National Constituent Front), Bourguiba was appointed as prime minister for the new government and under his leadership, the legislation would draft a new constitution, that amended the 1881 version and took inspiration from the American one. The 1956 version would reflect the will of the people who already had a history of political participation, guided by educated political elite that championed institutional reform. On July 25, 1956, Tunisia was no longer a monarchy and by 1959, Bourguiba was elected president of the new-born republic. Under his tenure, he prioritized education, making it mandatory and free for all of the Tunisians. He also made

sure that by the time western support was knocking on his doorstep, he asked for his people to be fed, sheltered, and educated instead of arms and weaponry. Bourguiba recognized the importance of the post-colonial transition for his people and made sure that their needs are properly met (Masri 2017).

Bourguiba also saw it necessary to make the military a national symbol that people looked up to and relied on to respond to the foreign and domestic threats that could befell Tunisia. There was never a direct Tunisian military involvement in the Arab Israeli conflict and the mission of this body would instead focus more on the Tunisian people. The military would soon become this neutral body that acts on the orders of the state but also serve the well-being of the citizens through an established ministry of defense. Bourguiba would maintain this neutrality by preventing military officers from participating in elections or any political activity, hence depoliticizing the military completely. This way, the armed forces would not have any incentive to pursue an agenda of their own, whether in taking down the state or in quelling any civil unrest that could occur. Bourguiba's strategy made the Tunisian military a specialized entity whose mission is to solely protect the national integrity, both in terms of sovereignty and unity, that would empower the people to build the nation-state alongside their elected government (Ware 1985). This would prove most useful when the Tunisian revolution was still in the making and the military would not point their guns at the civilians but rather shielded them from the attacks of the remnants of the fallen regime. As surprising as it may be perceived given the military's brutalization of Tunisians during the protests in 1978 and 1984, during the revolution, the military found an opportunity to improve its relations with the people. Under the leadership of Chief of Staff

Rashid Ammar, the military refused to repeat the scenarios of 1978 and 1984, Ben Ali was a domestic threat to the nation and had to be taken down (Townsend 2015). The military's leadership even clashed with the Ben Ali's militias to prevent major bloodshed and after overpowering them, Ben Ali was given two choices, to either be arrested by the military or to leave the country (Taylor 2014).

The final piece of the consolidated national identity was years' worth of secularization and putting women's rights at the forefront of Tunisia's outlook on human rights. From the period dating the armed resistance to post independence, Tunisian women had a major role in the building of the nation-state ranging from smuggling weapons to the guerilla under their *safsari* to fight off the French colonizers to their active societal involvement after the establishment of the Code of Personal Status (Code Du Statut Personnel) shortly after the independence. Inaugurated by Bourguiba's removal of a woman's veil in public, Tunisia's secularization was coming in full circle in line with Article 1 of the constitution at the time that stated that Tunisia is a secular country. Bourguiba smartly separated religion from politics, fully knowing that the majority of Tunisians had a religious culture and declaring that it would be a personal practice for those who may or may not engage in it. A good strategist statesman as he was, Bourguiba pushed back on the rigid the Islamist Pan-Arab wave and sheltered the people from its unintended consequences and promoted a more modern understanding of Islam, following in the footsteps of prominent reformists before him. Women's representation in society was at the very core of such transformation, especially their education and when Islamist proponents argued any differently to create potential divisions, Bourguiba responded with imbuing the

education system with more rationalism, pragmatism, and modernity, and included Tahar Ben Achour, a Zaitouna sheikh in the making of the Code of Personal Status (Masri 2017).

After the 1987 coup, Ben Ali took on the responsibility of secularizing the country, except that he did that in a much less diplomatic way. Ironically, it was the Islamic Tendency Movement, later known as Al Nahda, that actually helped him overthrow Bourguiba, but Ben Ali's promises or pluralism were fake as mentioned earlier and started persecuting them instead. Ben Ali's actions would result in violent clashes between the party and the government after the 1989 parliamentary elections that would end up with Rashed Ghannouchi leaving the country and him and 256 other members of his party being convicted. This solidified the predominantly secular political system in Tunisia to the point that, even when Ghannouchi returned to Tunisia and campaigned for the 2013 elections, he had removed the Islamic label from the party's name and made sure to clear the bylaws of the party of every mention of religious affiliations of the members and the party itself (Arieff 2012).

CONCLUSION

The Arab spring has been a transformative event for the MENA region. For Tunisia, we are still witnessing its fruits till today, the good and the bad ones. The political transition that Tunisia has witnessed over the course of the first ten years is a remarkable one in terms of being the only country who survived the Arab Spring fallout largely thanks to the efforts of Civil Society Organizations, UN Agencies, a robust institutional foundation, and an outstanding unified national identity. Tunisia made it to the list of democracies that managed to make freedom of speech and the preservation of civil rights a priority and the main theme of the post revolution system. However, it is undeniable that the course of the democratic transition faced several bumps throughout its application. The general political landscape of the region has affected the neighboring countries, especially Libya and Egypt, and at one point it seemed that the revolutionary wave that started in Tunisia and flooded the rest of the Arab world was about to bounce back with the transitional failures in Yemen and Syria.

One of the main reasons why Tunisia remained on the peaceful democratic path is the lack of interventions, especially the military ones, not that it needed any thanks to the factors I have previously mentioned. Cohesion did play an important role especially with the anti-colonial collective spirit that the Tunisian people has possessed ever since the French colonization began. However, had Tunisia experienced the same events that that rest of the region has throughout the last century, the outcome might have been completely different. Tunisia had indeed experienced much less interventions compared to its neighbors in the region. I take this chance to refer to how Libya had turned out to be after

NATO's strike and Iraq before it during the US's invasion to forcefully democratize it. It stands to reason that the two countries could well be proof that interventions are counter intuitive during revolutions and times of civil clashes with the government. The lack of foreign intervention in Tunisia has allowed for constructively drawing a path to become a functioning democracy under the people's conditions, which touches down on the importance of self-determination, crowning Tunisia as a potential model that proves that the Arab countries need to design their own unique democracy to become one (Gaffar 2017).

It is also important to mention that Tunisia significantly differs from the rest of the MENA region on other levels. After all, this region harbors a diverse set of ethnicities that have a complicated history of interaction with each other, both in peace and in war. The MENA, especially the Middle East, has been known to experience tensions between these groups induced by several factors. Sørli & al. (2005) theorized that the region may have been looked at commonly from a conflict-prone lenses due to the long period of the conflicts that break out within it. They claimed that the underlying reasons of conflict in the area are not necessarily linked to investigating ethnic polarization or religious conflict, economic, political, or social discrimination. Rather, it is the combination of 3 elements: - repression of a certain faction, labelling it as frustration, opportunity, which is the power and ability to organize and mobilize resources and people, mainly financial means to maintain the status of the insurgency which comes in the form of foreign aid usually, and finally, a common identity which is this shared sense of belonging that acts as a cohesive and mobilizing bond for the repressed masses (Sørli & al. 2005). However, their attempt to

determine whether the Middle East is drowning in conflict because of factors that are unique to the region, or whether it is just an unfortunate region filled with conflict inducing factors, does not do justice to the complex reality of the Arab region and is somewhat reductionist.

One of the main factors causing such tensions is perhaps the heterogenous nature of the Arab society in the Middle East compared to the relatively more homogenous one in North Africa, especially in Tunisia. For instance, the reality of minority groups in multi-ethnic states in the Middle East is often one of discrimination, not only socially but also legally and culturally. They experience obvious inequalities in status and well-being, which sparks deep grievances among them and underprivileged ethnic groups elsewhere. This manifests in the difficulties they face in social mobility, as they are mostly entrapped in disadvantaged conditions and very few are able to enhance their lifestyle. Ultimately, the discontent with their deprivation in comparison with privileged groups helps build momentum for political and even military mobilization. These minority groups may then resort to protests and even rebellion, therefore, use conflict, to end this structural discrimination and obtain what they want (Yilmaz 2007).

Moreover, if history has proven anything, it is the fact that the Arab region is full of manipulative leaders who systemically eliminated political competition, silenced opposing voices, and disbanded civil society movements that sought to oust them. And as much as Ben Ali tore through the civic lines of Tunisian society, he was obsessed with security matters and has always sought to keep the country from experiencing any civil unrest. However, across the rest of the region, the narrative is most different. Other Arab leaders

have sometimes even deliberately used the "ethnic card" to instigate fear and feelings of insecurity among one group to turn them against the others in order to augment their power. In fact, recent history has witnessed a number of instances of political elites using ethnonationalist arguments to get as much support as they can, continuously building up a sense of ethnic solidarity during the times of a threat arising from ethnic conflict. The case of Muammar Qaddafi's genocidal acts and inciting speeches against the natives of Misurata during the Arab spring is the perfect example of the kind of efforts leaders like him used to consolidate power. This is usually followed by the (re)establishment of hostile images of the adversary ethnic group as being culturally or racially inferior and inherently dangerous. They have also resorted to the (mis)use of historic traumas is to revive the grievances of the prevailing conflict with ethnic adversaries that happened in the past. In the case of the Lebanese civil war, sectarian leaders have resorted to re-stimulating enduring ethnic prejudices and strengthening the already hostile ethnic images of the other sects, thus, leading to ethnic polarization and the creation of a devastating a mix of ethnic rivalry and violence (Souleimanov 2013).

When reflecting on this work, Tunisia is considered lucky that it has not been part of a foreign or domestic fragmentation agenda. The international attention that Tunisia has been getting was one of attempts at political interference and no geopolitical significance (Moughadam 2017). No guns were funneled to it to combat communism or serve as a ground for proxy war and the prevailing domestic security measures did not allow for public carry of any kind of weapons. There was never a conflict that escalated high enough to attract the attention of a western military intervention that left the country crippled on all

levels. More importantly, Tunisia's democratic transition was more shaped by internal factors than external ones. It was the consolidated national identity that combined a homogenous societal makeup, which championed women's rights, quality education and secularization of the nation-state, alongside the unwavering sense of patriotism that reinforced the transition (Masri 2017). It is also important to demystify the nationalization of the Tunisian military, which is a core component of the consolidated Tunisian identity and an everlasting symbol of resistance against foreign and domestic threats. Finally, the work of Civil Society Organizations in Tunisia has been of utmost importance especially during and after the Arab spring. While they had limited presence during Ben Ali's regime, their role in the transition set the country on the right path.

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