

## THE EFFECT OF THE EUROPEAN UNION'S SOUTHERN NEIGHBORHOOD POLICY ON THE TUNISIAN DEMOCRATIZATION PROCESS

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**Abstract:** Tunisia is one of the unique Muslim-dominated countries in the world that holds strong ties to the European Union (EU) of all natures. The country's imprint of international politics expanded during the Arab Spring process in late 2010. Although the process did not end up with the democratization of the region or Tunisia's full transition into democracy, it became a historic turning point in breaking clichés about Muslim people's reluctance to embrace democracy and liberal values. While past studies scrutinized the internal dynamics of this change, the external facet of the transformative Jasmine Revolution remains largely unexplored. In that sense, this study aims to question the role of the EU in advancing a solid democracy in Tunisia focusing on the Brussels' Southern Neighborhood Policy in Tunis from 2011 to 2015. This study contributes to ongoing debates about the effectiveness of external actors in promoting democratic reforms and stability in non-EU countries and seeks to study the change in the interplay between the two political entities.

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## AVRUPA BİRLİĞİ'NİN GÜNEY KOMŞULUK POLİTİKASININ TUNUS'UN DEMOKRATİKLEŞME SÜRECİNE ETKİSİ

**Özet:** Tunus, Avrupa Birliği (AB) ile birçok yönden güçlü bağları olan dünyada Müslümanların çoğunlukta olduğu az sayıdaki ülkelerden birisidir. Ülkenin uluslararası politikadaki etkisi, 2010 yılı sonlarında başlayan Arap Baharı süreciyle birlikte artmıştır. Süreç, bölgenin demokratikleşmesiyle ya da Tunus'un tam anlamıyla demokrasiye geçişiyle sonuçlanmasa da, Müslüman halkların bu konuda isteksiz olduğu yönündeki ön yargıların kırılması açısından tarihi bir dönüm noktası oldu. Geçmiş çalışmalar, büyük ölçüde bu değişimin iç dinamiklerini incelerken, bölgede dönüştürücü bir etki yaratan Yasemin (Tunus) Devrimi'nin dış boyutu halen büyük ölçüde keşfedilmemiş durumdadır. Bu anlamda, bu çalışma, AB'nin Tunus'ta 2011'den 2015'e kadar uyguladığı Güney Komşuluk Politikası'na odaklanarak, Tunus'ta sağlam bir demokrasinin geliştirilmesinde Brüksel'in rolünü sorgulamayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma, ayrıca, AB üyesi olmayan ülkelerde demokratik reformları ve istikrarı teşvik eden aktörleri ve iki siyasi oluşum arasında oluşan etkileşimdeki değişimi de incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Tunus, Demokratikleşme, Yasemin Devrimi, AB, Güney Komşuluk Politikası.*

## Introduction

Tunisia became the focal point of world politics during the Arab Spring process. With its Jasmine Revolution in 2010-11 (also called the Dignity Revolution by some others<sup>3</sup>), the country has begun to carry the torch for Muslim communities and intellectuals who want to develop a kind of Islamic or Muslim democracy to put an end to the backwardness and totalitarian ruling tradition of the Muslim dominated countries. The Tunisian process for democratization that started after the Jasmine Revolution posed a unique example for scholars of Comparative Politics to examine the transition dynamics in a Euro-Mediterranean milieu. The existing literature body about the Tunisian (Jasmine) Revolution and the novelty of the democratization process has primarily focused on various internal reasons in the Tunisian context, taking into consideration its impact on the initiation of a widescale Arab Spring on the region. This oversight left a noticeable void in the literature concerning the role of the global actors, particularly that of the European Union (EU) as a supranational institution in world politics. Nevertheless, these past analyses have unintentionally marginalized a crucial dimension anchored within the context of the EU. Thus, this paper aims to enrich the existing body of scholarship by filling this scholarly void.

Central to the democratization process is the impact of the EU on the unfolding events in Tunis since the eve of January 14, 2011, facilitated through the Southern Neighbourhood Policy (SNP). Notably, the EU conditionality argument and the potential trajectory of semi-Europeanization concerning Tunisia remain underexplored in the existing literature. Brussels, a traditional ally of Tunisia, is acknowledged to wield substantial influence on the advancement of liberal democracy, particularly manifesting in the realms of economic and political collaboration. In that sense, this study aims to question the role of the EU in advancing a solid democracy in Tunisia focusing on the Brussels' Southern Neighborhood Policy in Tunis from 2011 to 2015. That being said, this research contributes to the ongoing discourse in the field of European Studies, asserting that the SNP serves as a sturdy foundation. This framework enables the European Union to exert a significant external influence on the advancement of democracy in Tunisia.

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<sup>3</sup> John L. Esposito & Tamara Sonn & John O. Voll (2016), *Democracy after the Arab Spring*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 237.

## 1. Arab Spring: The Initiation of New State Affairs

Called the Arab Spring, the popular demonstration waves in Muslim-dominated countries against the governments that started in late 2010 shocked many Western observers.<sup>4</sup> Many in the Western world hailed this process at the beginning with the hope that it would become the “*harbinger of ‘modern’ Middle East*” and would put an end to “*the prolonged dark age of the world*” that was characterized by the hegemony of corrupt autocrats.<sup>5</sup>

The term Arab Spring was popularized by the international media and it referred to the revolutionary wave of demonstrations and protests that took place in the Arab region during 2011 and 2012.<sup>6</sup> The term seems to be inspired by the “*Prague Spring*” of 1968, a political liberalization period in communist Czechoslovakia administered by Slovak politician and Czechoslovakia leader (1968-1969) Alexander Dubcek.<sup>7</sup> The common denominator of these protest movements spread into multiple countries in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region was their pro-democratic stance and challenges to authoritarian rule.<sup>8</sup> These political demands were mixed with the economic sufferings of the people and led to many different events such as the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, the Yemeni Uprising of 2011-12, the Libyan Revolt of 2011, and the ongoing Syrian Civil War (2011-). The Arab Spring gained success most notably in Tunisia and Egypt as the authoritarian rules of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (Tunisia) and Hosni Mubarak (Egypt) ended quickly with the mass protests. However, in other countries including Libya, Yemen, and Syria, the Arab Spring led to the emergence of civil wars and chaos.

Various academic studies have been made until today about the important scholarly aspects of this process. The Arab Spring was -at the beginning- largely studied from the perspective of the “*democratization*” theory within the Comparative Politics discipline. Some notable works from this perspective included Khashan (2012)<sup>9</sup>, Stepan and Linz (2013)<sup>10</sup>, and Mako and

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Oğuzhan Göksel (2018), “Eurocentrism Awakened: The Arab Uprisings and the Search for a ‘Modern’ Middle East”, in (Hüseyin Işıksal & Oğuzhan Göksel eds.) *Turkey’s Relations with the Middle East: Political Encounters after the Arab Spring*. Cham: Springer, p. 33.

<sup>6</sup> Ozan Örmeci (2015), “Anti-American Reflections of the Arab Spring in Turkey”, in (Ozan Örmeci & Hüseyin Işıksal eds.) *Turkish Foreign Policy in the New Millennium*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, p. 545.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Britannica*, “Arab Spring”, Date of Accession: 08.10.2023 from <https://www.britannica.com/event/Arab-Spring>.

<sup>9</sup> Hilal Khashan (2012), “The Arab Spring and Democratization in the Middle East”, *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues*, Vol. 16, No: 4, pp. 132-147.

<sup>10</sup> Alfred Stepan & Juan J. Linz (2013), “Democratization Theory and the ‘Arab Spring’”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 24, No: 2, pp. 15-30.

Moghadam (2021)<sup>11</sup>. Another important type of research was conducted based on socioeconomic data and from the political economy perspective. Such works could be listed as Ansani and Daniele (2012)<sup>12</sup>, Eberhard and Louër (2013)<sup>13</sup>, Fedai (2017)<sup>14</sup>, Ianchovichina (2018)<sup>15</sup>, and Bromley (2022)<sup>16</sup>. The role of social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter was also largely studied concerning the Arab Spring and often praised for their contribution to the process.<sup>17</sup> Such studies can be listed as Wolfsfeld et. al (2013)<sup>18</sup>, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (2014)<sup>19</sup>, and Smidi and Shahin (2017)<sup>20</sup>. In addition, the so-called “*Turkish model*” was extensively covered by Western scholars<sup>21</sup> during the Arab Spring to materialize the role of Türkiye as a model country acting as an inspirational model for Arab nations to embrace a secular and democratic regime instead of secular authoritarian or radical Islamist models. Notable works within this fashion include Bali (2011)<sup>22</sup>, Göksel (2012)<sup>23</sup>, and Futak-Campbell and Sauvage Nolting (2022)<sup>24</sup>.

Although at the initial phase, Arab Spring flourished hopes about the democratization of the Arab world, by the summer of 2013, with the military takeover in Egypt, it was understood

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<sup>11</sup> Shamiran Mako & Valentine M. Moghadam (2021), “2 - Pathways to Democratization: The Arab Spring in Comparative Perspective”, in *After the Arab Uprisings: Progress and Stagnation in the Middle East and North Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 26-54.

<sup>12</sup> Andrea Ansani & Vittorio Daniele (2012), “About a Revolution. The Economic Motivations of the Arab Spring”, *International Journal of Development and Conflict*, Vol. 3, No: 3, pp. 1-29.

<sup>13</sup> Eberhard Kienle & Laurence Louër (2013), “Understanding the Social and Economic Aspects of the Arab Uprisings”, *Critique Internationale*, Vol. 6, No: 4, pp. 11-17.

<sup>14</sup> Merve Mesçioğlu Fedai (2017), “Political Economy of Arab Uprisings”, *Ortadoğu Etütleri*, Vol. 9, No. 1, pp. 93-117.

<sup>15</sup> Elena Ianchovichina (2018), *Eruptions of Popular Anger: The Economics of the Arab Spring and Its Aftermath*, MENA Development Report, Washington, DC: World Bank, Date of Accession: 10.10.2023 from <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/251971512654536291/pdf/121942-REVISED-Eruptions-of-Popular-Anger-preliminary-rev.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel W. Bromley (2022), “The Confusions of Democracy: The Arab Spring and Beyond”, *World Development*, Elsevier, Vol 158, October 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Oğuzhan Göksel (2018), “Eurocentrism Awakened: The Arab Uprisings and the Search for a ‘Modern’ Middle East”, p. 41.

<sup>18</sup> Gadi Wolfsfeld & Elad Segev & Tamir Sheafer (2013), “Social Media and the Arab Spring: Politics Comes First”, *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, Vol. 18, No: 2, pp. 115-137.

<sup>19</sup> U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (2014), *Social Media and the Arab Spring: How Facebook, Twitter, and Camera Phones Changed the Egyptian Army’s Response to Revolution*, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

<sup>20</sup> Adam Smidi & Saif Shahin (2017), “Social Media and Social Mobilisation in the Middle East: A Survey of Research on the Arab Spring”, *India Quarterly*, Vol. 73, No: 2, pp. 196-209.

<sup>21</sup> Oğuzhan Göksel (2018), “Eurocentrism Awakened: The Arab Uprisings and the Search for a ‘Modern’ Middle East”, p. 44.

<sup>22</sup> Ashlı Bali (2011), “A Turkish Model for the Arab Spring?”, *Middle East Law and Governance*, Vol. 3, pp. 24-42.

<sup>23</sup> Oğuzhan Göksel (2012), “Assessing the Turkish Model as a Guide to the Emerging Democracies in the Middle East”, *Ortadoğu Etütleri*, Vol. 4, No: 1, pp. 99-120.

<sup>24</sup> Beatrix Futak-Campbell & Hylke de Sauvage Nolting (2022), “Turkey as Normative Power: Connections with the Muslim Brotherhood during the Arab Spring”, *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 19, No: 74, pp. 3-19.

that the Arab Spring could produce democracy only where it began, in Tunisia.<sup>25</sup> Unlike Tunisia, other countries affected by the Arab Spring did not end up holding democratic elections. In Egypt, a very influential country in the Arab/Islamic world, although the Arab Spring began as a very promising democratization period thanks to the earlier collaboration of the Egyptian military and people<sup>26</sup>, democratic forces were swept away in 2013 via a military coup led by General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who became the 6<sup>th</sup> and current President of Egypt. Syria, on the other hand, descended into a still ongoing brutal civil war where chemical weapons are used, terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda and ISIS gained power, and millions of people fled their country and many other countries (Russia, Türkiye, United States, Iran, Britain, and France) have been militarily involved. Lastly, Libya also became fragmented and was divided into two separate governments backed up by divergent foreign countries.

In that sense, the Arab Spring so far has not been able to change the authoritarian/totalitarian ruling style of the region, but has served as a laboratory or a testing period for possible democratization efforts in the future. Moreover, as Esposito et. al underline that the old narrative about Islam and democracy are not compatible is not “*a priori*” anymore, but rather necessary conditions for a viable democracy in Muslim-dominated societies are in question in the academic world.<sup>27</sup>

## **2. European Union’s Influence on Tunisia: An Analysis of the Southern Neighborhood Policy (SNP) and Its Implications (2011-2014)**

### **2.1. The European Union as A Paragon of Integration and Global Diplomacy**

The European Union (EU) had its genesis in the 1960s as the European Economic Community (EEC), which emerged during the latter part of the 1950s. Its primary aim was to escape the scourge of “*total war*” and nationalist hysteria by countering the hyper-militaristic expansion of Germany in Europe.<sup>28</sup> The scholarship on European Studies emphasizes that the European Union acts as a paragon of peaceful coexistence supranational organization that fosters liberal ideas such as “*human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law,*

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<sup>25</sup> John L. Esposito & Tamara Sonn & John O. Voll (2016), *Democracy after the Arab Spring*, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Philip Marfleet (2013), “Never ‘One Hand’: Egypt 2011”, in (Mike Gonzalez & Houman Barekat eds.) *Arms and the People: Popular movements and the military from the Paris Commune to the Arab Spring*, London: Pluto Press, pp. 149-170.

<sup>27</sup> John L. Esposito & Tamara Sonn & John O. Voll (2016), *Democracy after the Arab Spring*, p. 240.

<sup>28</sup> Tobias Lenz (2018), “The European Union: A Model Under Pressure”, German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA), Date of Accession: 09.10.2023 from [https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/document/61007/1/ssoar-2018-lenz-The\\_European\\_Union\\_A\\_Model.pdf](https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/document/61007/1/ssoar-2018-lenz-The_European_Union_A_Model.pdf).

and respect for human rights”.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, it wields a substantial influence “between a European Union of twenty-seven member states and a series of countries on its immediate external periphery”.<sup>30</sup> The EU officially embarked on its transformative odyssey with the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. This advancement stands as a cornerstone in the continuum of treaties and events that shaped the evolving narrative of European integration. The Maastricht Treaty marked a pivotal moment in European integration by not only marking the European influence in world politics with a significant transition driven by a desire for ever-deeper economic integration, but also introducing the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Following the trajectories set by earlier agreements such as the Treaty of Rome in 1957, the external activity of the EU started with the Yaoundé Convention in 1963 was signed by the EEC member states and the eighteen former colonies of these six states to promote economic cooperation and development between the EEC and its ACP partners. Furthermore, the European Economic Community was entrusted with the power to submit proposals to the Council of Ministers for the implementation of the common commercial policy. This transition resulted in shifting the understanding of the “*European integration*” by affecting the credibility of the European Union in the international system.<sup>31</sup> In this parlance, it is essential to distinguish the multifaceted array of mechanisms designed to address a wide spectrum of diplomatic, security, and external relations challenges beheld by Brussels.

Defined under the umbrella of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the establishment of the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) within the toolbox of the European Union’s external affairs in the year 2004 is historically recognized as a strategic initiative aiming at ascribing a harmonized relation between the EU’s longstanding southern partners and those nations acceding to the Union in the aftermath of the post-2000s enlargement. This interregional approach is regarded in the literature of International Relations as a subset of an interdisciplinary field of research (that is European Studies)<sup>32</sup>. From a practical standpoint, it covers several countries including 5 countries in North Africa such as Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia, and other “*Mashriq*” countries

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<sup>29</sup> Simon Duke (2013), “The European External Action Service and Public Diplomacy”, in (Mai’a K. Davis Cross & Jan Melissen eds.) *European Public Diplomacy: Soft Power at Work*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 115.

<sup>30</sup> Federiga Bindi (2022), *The Foreign Policy of the European Union: Assessing Europe’s Role in the World*, Brookings Institution Press, p. 169.

<sup>31</sup> Isabel Ferreira Nunes (2016), “The European Union Global Strategy”, International Seminar, 1st February 2016 at National Defense Institute of Portugal, Date of Accession: 10.10.2023 from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19224?seq=1>.

<sup>32</sup> Claudio M. Radaelli (2004), “Europeanisation: Solution or Problem?”, *European Integration online Papers (EIoP)*, Vol. 8, No: 16, p. 1.

exemplified by Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories as well as Syria. This notion underscores the EU's function as soft power, considering both sides of the emitters and the recipients<sup>33</sup> at the aim of bringing a new pro-European bundle of arrangements in the host country via the means of the economic incentive provided by Brussels. Although generalizations about policy approaches have to be considered from a context-specific case, it is noteworthy to maintain that the SNP usually does not encapsulate both the top-down dimension of norms (adaptation/diffusion) from one hand and the bottom-up dimension (reception/incorporation) from the other.<sup>34</sup>

Instead, the Southern Neighbourhood Policy can be approached from the duality of positive incentives versus punitive measures, better known in academia as the strategy of the “*carrot and stick*”. Nevertheless, it is imperative to underscore that a preeminent interpretation of the SNP posits it as a containment-like strategy intricately tied to the safeguarding of security-related risks that have the potential to affect the EU's surroundings. The coinage of the term “*incentive*” is deemed to be of appropriate usage whence reflecting upon the apex that can be drawn out of the cooperation with the EU. Moreover, the merits of the novel instrument far surpass its drawbacks in fostering modernization within the respective regions. In this context, it becomes evident that the establishment of the ENP in 2004 gave rise to a nuanced environment characterized by complexities and ambiguities, exacerbating the persistent scrutiny of the EU's normative role in global politics. Conversely, some observers may perceive the external European aid via particularly the means of putting forth economic grants as a menace to their national sovereignty and may therefore resist it to preserve their stamp and influence in world politics.

## **2.2. Understanding EU Foreign Policy Dynamics: Drawing Insights from The EEAS and the Principle of Conditionality as a Normative Instrument**

The European External Action Service (EEAS) embodies the institutionalized diplomatic facet of the EU's foreign policy that can be closely equated with the notions of identity, norms, and narratives<sup>35</sup> spearheaded by the esteemed High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy which has been assessed as one of the Treaty of Lisbon's controversial

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<sup>33</sup> Serida L. Catalano & Paolo R. Graziano (2016), “Europeanization as a Democratization Tool? The Case of Morocco”, *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 21, No: 3, p. 366.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 365.

<sup>35</sup> Simon Duke (2013), “The European External Action Service and Public Diplomacy”, p. 114.

inventions.<sup>36</sup> The EEAS includes over 140 delegations located in or proximate to crises or post-crisis countries or areas.<sup>37</sup> By collaborating on the EU's associations with foreign nations and regional entities, the EEAS's primary function was to increase the EU's external visibility, effectiveness, and coherence.<sup>38</sup> This directorate operates as a vehicle to reinforce the EU's superordinate status at an international level to ensure that it preserves the dominant position of the EU over its member states. In a more tailored approach to public diplomacy, it is also pivotal to denote that the EEAS operates via the concept of customization and adaptability to accommodate the diversity in administrative setups across different countries, rather than the principle of differentiation in the EU's internal integration dynamics. Consequently, the EU's foreign policy is not solely determined by the EU's status, but also by the extent of the local government's integration and responsiveness.

This modus operandi is recognized in the outer-Europe context as the principle of “*conditionality*”. It was first introduced in EU foreign policy to disseminate its principles and standards via its delegations in all of its joint agreements with countries beyond the confines of the EU.<sup>39</sup> This endeavor aligns with the universal values embedded in the *acquis communautaire*. It implies that the actions of the EU hinge on the level of commitment from the opposing party. Following this rationale, it is feasible to reaffirm that the ENP “*is not an accession instrument and membership in the ENP does not precede or necessarily lead to accession talk*”.<sup>40</sup> In other words, the EU conducts its foreign policy dynamically and reciprocally, accounting for the specific circumstances of the country in question. In this regard, it is imperative to distinguish the common actions of the EU member states and the individual foreign policies. From this point of view, it can be deduced that the EEAS is not seen as an alternative to national foreign services, but it is rather taken as an additional platform of influence for the Union.<sup>41</sup> The principle of conditionality, in this regard, is understood to refer to a situation in which the assurance of an internationally-tailored

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<sup>36</sup> Rebecca Adler-Nissen (2014), “Symbolic power in European diplomacy: the struggle between national foreign services and the EU's External Action Service”, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 40, No: 4, p. 658.

<sup>37</sup> Simon Duke (2013), “The European External Action Service and Public Diplomacy”, p. 128.

<sup>38</sup> Kolja Raube (2012), “The European External Action Service and the European Parliament”, *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, Vol. 7, No: 1, p. 65.

<sup>39</sup> Johanne Døhlie Saltnes (2013), “The EU's Human Rights Policy: Unpacking the literature on the EU's implementation of aid conditionality”, ARENA Centre for European Studies, Working Paper No. 2, March 2013, Date of Accession: 11.10.2023 from <https://www.sv.uio.no/arena/english/research/publications/arena-working-papers/2013/wp2-13.pdf>.

<sup>40</sup> Emily Pearce (2007), “Exporting Values: Conditionality, Democracy and the European Neighbourhood”, Publication No. 1447353, Master's thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Carolina Digital Repository, p. 44.

<sup>41</sup> Rebecca Adler-Nissen (2014), “Symbolic power in European diplomacy: the struggle between national foreign services and the EU's External Action Service”, p. 670.

agreement is constrained by the partner's mutual abidance by several EU-diffused principles, normally related to human rights, democracy, and good governance as well as the rule of law.<sup>42</sup> Thus, the EU's foreign policy is highly contingent on the level of affiliation with the third party, tailored to respond to each region's specific requirements and conditions.

Cognizant of the above, it can extrapolate on a crucial point of view of the science behind European Foreign policy within the sphere of international politics. A pivotal dimension is the concept of EU normativity, intricately linked to the principle of conditionality. The term Normativity denotes a type of influence that differs from financial and military prowess.<sup>43</sup> The symbiotic relationship between the concepts of 'conditionality' and 'normativity' becomes evident as the EU integrates these concepts into a coherent framework. As acknowledged in the prior analysis, conditionality serves as the instrumental conduit through which the EU seeks to induce and institutionalize adherence to its normative framework among external actors. Through calibrated conditions attached to various facets of cooperation, the EU seeks to incentivize the partner countries of the south and the east towards the assimilation of its normative principles disseminated in its accords of the Neighbourhood Policy. This intricate interplay between conditionality and normativity encapsulates Brussel's nuanced approach to its external relations, wherein normative values become integral components of the cooperative landscape, guided by conditionality measures. This mutual arrangement predisposes it to act in a normative way in world politics<sup>44</sup> and satisfies the hierarchical power-based stance of the EU to world affairs, best known under the term "*EU's normativity*".

### **3. EU Diplomacy and Tunisia's Democratic Transition: A Comprehensive Analysis**

First and foremost, it is imperative to note whether, during the epoch preceding or ensuing the Jasmine Revolution, Tunisia has been approached by the EU via the instrument of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) since its initiation phase in 2004. More minutely, the agreements that were accorded between the two parties are chiefly held within the capot of the Southern Neighborhood Policy that serves as a platform to fulfill two-fold objectives as the aim of encouraging political and economic restructuring in each country, in due respect of its

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<sup>42</sup> Johanne Døhlie Saltnes (2013), "The EU's Human Rights Policy: Unpacking the literature on the EU's implementation of aid conditionality".

<sup>43</sup> Andreas Björklund (2020), "The Foreign Policy Dimension of the Rule of Law Conditionality", A Path for Europe (PFEU), 11.09.2020, Date of Accession: 12.10.2023 from <https://pathforeurope.eu/the-foreign-policy-dimension-of-the-rule-of-law-conditionality/>.

<sup>44</sup> Ian Manners (2002), "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?", *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 40, No: 2, p. 252.

specificities, and to foster the regional cooperation among the countries of the region themselves and with the EU.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, the EU also conducts affairs with Tunisia through the portal of the Union for the Mediterranean, better known under the acronym UMF, accompanied by a set of definite programs for the participation of partner countries in EU programs. For instance, TEMPUS, Erasmus Mundus academic partnership initiative, Research Framework Programmes as well as the H2020 or the cooperation under the auspices of the cross-border cooperation initiative, best known under its acronym (CBC).<sup>46</sup>

Whilst Tunisia's cultural and religious heritage links it to Europe across many facets and diverse historical periods, the formal inception of bilateral relations between the Tunisian Republic and the EU can be dated back to 1995. During this year, Tunisia ratified the Barcelona Agreement with the EU, a commercial pact that created a free trade region in which all two-way exchange of industrial goods transpires without any tariff barriers.

The Jasmine Revolution of 2010-11, sparked by Mohammed Bouazizi's self-immolation, a Tunisian street vendor, was a result of widespread dissatisfaction with the socio-economic and political conditions in Tunisia.<sup>47</sup> These conditions included unemployment, lack of security, gender inequality, human rights violations, censorship, and corruption. The political unrest that had been brewing in the country reached its climax with the Jasmine Revolution, as Tunisians united and fought together to stop the government's control and censorship of the media and demanded the advancement of democratic values and respect for human rights. Tunisian people's main demands during this process were bread, liberty, and national dignity.

Throughout the tumultuous years following the Arab Spring, the democratic transition in Tunisia was initiated with the formation of three interim governments, each of which played a crucial role in establishing and consolidating the nascent democratic framework of the country. Despite the challenges posed by the political and social upheaval, these governments charted a steadfast course towards establishing an inclusive and participatory democratic system, yet far from being complete. The remarkable political inclusiveness displayed during this time was a testament to the maturity and resilience of the Tunisian people, who refused to be swayed by the forces of retrogression of the pro-Ben Ali political mainstream. In the case

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<sup>45</sup> Rym Ayadi (2016), "EU policies in Tunisia before and after the Revolution", European Parliament, AFET, p. 10. Date of Accession: 13.10.2023 from [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/578002/EXPO\\_STU\(2016\)578002\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/578002/EXPO_STU(2016)578002_EN.pdf).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Cemal Burak Tansel (2018), "Ties that Bind: Popular Uprisings and the Politics of Neoliberalism in the Middle East", in (Hüseyin Işıksal & Oğuzhan Göksel eds.) *Turkey's Relations with the Middle East: Political Encounters after the Arab Spring*, Cham: Springer, p. 72.

of Tunisia, the EU has been actively engaged in Tunisia's political and economic development since the country's transition to democracy in 2011. This relation is defined majorly by two milestones in terms of diplomatic cooperation. Namely, the Association agreement between the two parties in 1995 as well as the economic mediation using the Southern Neighborhood Policy (SNP) which is a key component of the Good Neighbor Policy during the period preceding the 2011 revolution. In actuality, The SNP aims to strengthen the EU's partnership with its southern neighbors, including Tunisia, and to support political and economic reforms in the region.

In 2014, the country held its first free and fair presidential elections, in which Beji Caid Essebsi who served in several ministerial roles in the government of Habib Bourguiba, Tunisia's first President, as President of the parliament under Ben Ali, and as Interim Prime Minister following Tunisia's revolution<sup>48</sup>, emerged as the winner, marking a major milestone in the democratic transition. In the following years, the Tunisian government and parliament worked to establish a new constitution that enshrined the rights of citizens and provided a framework for a more representative government. In 2018, Kais Saied, a Constitutional Law Professor, won the presidential election by a significant margin.

Despite facing several challenges, such as political and social upheaval, financial hardship, and terrorism, the Tunisian democratic transition was characterized by a high level of political inclusiveness and maturity of the Tunisian people. This is exemplified by the successful holding of free and fair presidential elections and the establishment of a new constitution that protected the rights of citizens. The transition, however, was not without its difficulties and remained far from complete. Tunisia is currently ranked as a “*partly free*” country according to Freedom House and is one of the most liberal Islamic countries in the world.<sup>49</sup>

### **3.1. The EU's Involvement in Tunisian Democracy: Financial Grants & Technical Assistance from 2011 to 2015**

Studying the role of the EU in the Tunisian democratization process is an incremental stage in reviewing and analyzing the phenomenon in the country. It also helps to trace the gradual shift in shaping the strategy of the region of North Africa vis-à-vis the European Union. Actually, *“Despite the unexpected magnitude of these uprisings, the EU has been quick to*

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<sup>48</sup> Mohsin Khan & Karim Mezran (2015), “Tunisia: The Last Arab Spring Country”, Atlantic Council, October 2015, Date of Accession: 14.10.2023 from [https://cooperative-individualism.org/khan-mohsin\\_tunisia-the-last-arab-spring-country-2015-oct.pdf](https://cooperative-individualism.org/khan-mohsin_tunisia-the-last-arab-spring-country-2015-oct.pdf).

<sup>49</sup> Freedom House (2023), “Tunisia”, Date of Accession: 14.10.2023 from <https://freedomhouse.org/country/tunisia/freedom-world/2023>.

*recognize the challenges of the political and economic transition faced by the region as a whole*".<sup>50</sup> Since becoming a 'partner state', commencing with the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP, also known as the Barcelona Process) in 1995, Tunisia has been a trailblazer in its region, being the first Mediterranean country to endorse a bilateral Association Agreement with the European Union in 1998.<sup>51</sup> In terms of numerical importance, however, statistics display that the post-revolution agreements between Brussels and Tunis have been increasingly more important in terms of number and quality in response to the region's needs. The 'more-for-more' approach was introduced, which provides incentives for reform efforts. This includes greater aid, trade, and a closer relationship with the EU, as well as improved market access.

The collaboration between Tunisia and the EU is founded on a mutual desire to promote a thriving and secure democratic Tunisia. It is essential to signal, in this context, that the data from the European Council show that the EU's investments in the country are partially financed by the European Union and partially by its Member States.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, the role of the EU can be understood from three main perspectives, namely; political, technical, and financial assistance. The focus in this section would be exclusively allocated to financial support as a means to provide actual assistance to Tunisia in the post-revolution times.

The first remedial actions were distributed to the country between 2011 and 2014 as a swift and urgent response to the protests and unrest. These took the form of financial distributions made under the SPRING Program (Strengthening Partnership and Inclusive Growth). This initiative came into existence as a solution to this problem by providing funding to partner countries that are genuinely dedicated to establishing deep and lasting democracies<sup>53</sup> to address the financially challenging situation in the MENA region. The SPRING Program was initially directed to help Arab countries during their transition to meeting a full restoration of political stability, among which Tunisia stood as the first and most successful example. Channeled by the means of the Southern Neighbourhood Policy Instrument, it "*carries a*

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<sup>50</sup> European Parliament (2011), "The EU's response to the 'Arab Spring'", 16.12.2011, Date of Accession: 15.10.2023 from

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009\\_2014/documents/empa/dv/point4memo/point4memoen.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/empa/dv/point4memo/point4memoen.pdf).

<sup>51</sup> Brieg Tomos Powel (2009), "A clash of norms: normative power and EU democracy promotion in Tunisia", *Democratization*, Vol. 16, No: 1, p. 194.

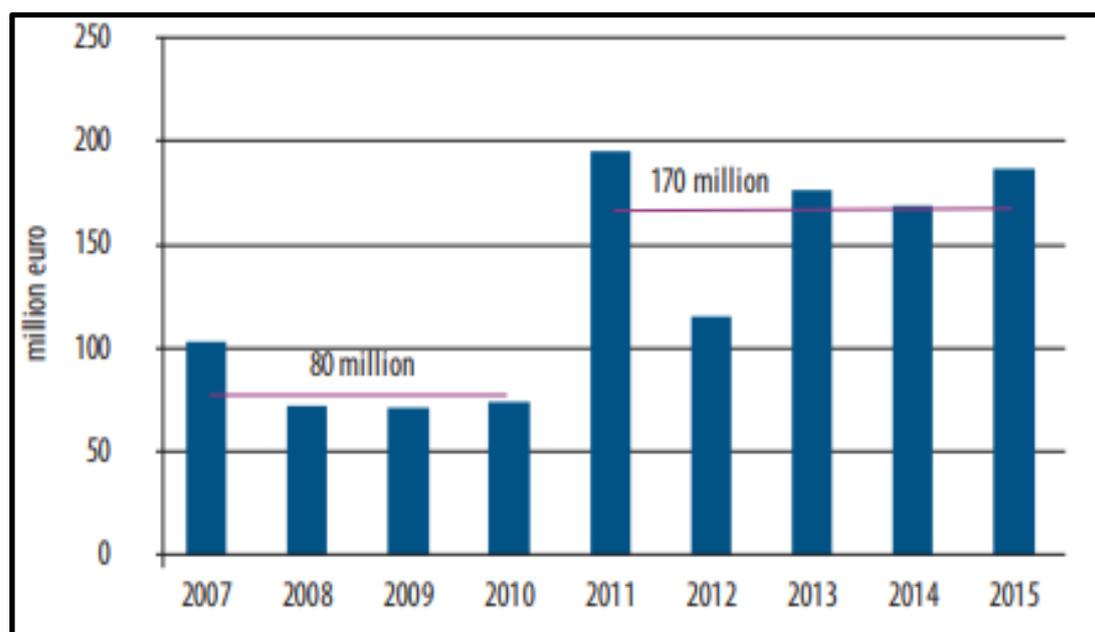
<sup>52</sup> Davide Pernice & Kristi Polluveer (2023), "Financing the Trans-European Networks", European Parliament, 15.11.2023 from <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/136/financing-the-trans-european-networks>.

<sup>53</sup> European Commission, "Action Fiche: Support for partnership, reforms and inclusive growth (SPRING) for the southern Neighbourhood region programme", European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), Date of Accession: 16.11.2023 from [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2017-04/c20116828\\_sm\\_regional\\_south\\_spring\\_2011\\_ad1\\_023279.pdf](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2017-04/c20116828_sm_regional_south_spring_2011_ad1_023279.pdf).

budget of €350 million in additional funds for 2011 and 2012 and makes available support on a 'more-for-more' basis to partner countries".<sup>54</sup> In light of this reference, it is found that the technical and financial aid allocated to Tunisia experienced a notable surge, reaching approximately €485 million<sup>55</sup>, all bound with remarkable funds provided by the EU for bilateral cooperation. The EU has doubled the allocation to Tunisia twice, at the earliest stages of democratic transition. The first is for the year 2011, while the second is for the period 2011-2013 during which the budget was boosted from €240 million to €400 million.<sup>56</sup>

The second most notable effort to advance democratic rule in Tunisia is taken to be the initiation of the 2014-2017 action plan. In actuality, Tunisia emerged as the primary beneficiary of the new EU policies during that period. EU funding was doubled to a total of €445m in the period 2011-2013.<sup>57</sup> The following figure (**Figure I**) can mirror the funding provided by the EU to support the Tunisian transition to democracy.

**Figure I.** ENPI and ENI annual commitments to Tunisia for the period 2007 to 2015<sup>58</sup>



<sup>54</sup> European Parliament (2011), "The EU's response to the 'Arab Spring'", 16.12.2011, Date of Accession: 15.10.2023 from

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009\\_2014/documents/empa/dv/point4memo/point4memoen.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/empa/dv/point4memo/point4memoen.pdf).

<sup>55</sup> Laura-Theresa Krüger & Edmund Ratka (2014), "The Perception of European Policies in Tunisia after the Arab Spring", *L'Europe en Formation*, No: 371, p. 11.

<sup>56</sup> European Parliament (2011), "The EU's response to the 'Arab Spring'", 16.12.2011, Date of Accession: 15.10.2023 from

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009\\_2014/documents/empa/dv/point4memo/point4memoen.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/empa/dv/point4memo/point4memoen.pdf).

<sup>57</sup> Luigi Narbone (2020), "The EU-Tunisian relationship after 2011: Resilience, contestation and the return of the neglected socio-economic question", Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, 04.12.2020, Date of Accession: 17.11.2023 from <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/69264/QM-06-20-147-EN-N.pdf>.

<sup>58</sup> European Court of Auditors (2017), "Special Report: EU Assistance to Tunisia", Date of Accession: 10.10.2023 from [https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR17\\_3/SR\\_TUNISIA\\_EN.pdf](https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR17_3/SR_TUNISIA_EN.pdf).

The year 2011 triggered a natural increase in the funding provided by the European Union to Tunisia after the revolution. Between 2007 and 2010, the European Union's funding for Tunisia reached a peak of €100 million in 2007 and then gradually decreased to a maximum of €80 million by 2010. However, with the transition of the country to democratic rule, the European Union increased its funding to reach nearly €200 million in 2011. Afterward, the pace of investment and financial reimbursement provided to Tunisia remained steady at a sum of nearly €180 million until 2015.

The EU support for Tunisia has been struck hard by a significant shift in terms of nature and adaptability from the year 2015 onwards. The security novelty constructed the first imprint of the radicalism threat in the country's democratization process. Between 2014 and 2015, security became the main focus, as the nation faced challenges at its borders with Libya and Algeria and a remarkable increase in radical Islamism. In this context, the terrorist attacks in Tunisia in 2015 were a turning point in the country's security landscape and had a significant impact on the EU's approach to Tunisia. In 2015, Tunisia experienced two major terrorist attacks that shocked the nation and the international community. The first attack occurred on March 18, when gunmen stormed the Bardo National Museum in Tunis, taking hostages and killing 21 people, predominantly foreign tourists. The second attack took place on June 26, when a lone gunman targeted a popular tourist resort in Sousse, claiming the lives of 38 people, including 30 British tourists. Both attacks were claimed by the Islamic State (ISIS/ISIL) and exposed the vulnerability of Tunisia's tourism industry, which is a crucial source of national revenue, as well as the transnational nature of the terrorist threat. These attacks not only heightened the sense of urgency to address security issues in Tunisia, but also revealed the potential implications of regional instability for European security. Consequently, the EU shifted its focus toward security-related measures and cooperation with Tunisia. These attacks not only shocked Tunisia, but also raised concerns among European countries about the potential spillover effects of regional instability. The fact that most of the victims were European tourists underscored the transnational nature of the threat and highlighted the need for closer cooperation on security matters between the EU and Tunisia. Hence, the EU's approach to Tunisia shifted significantly, with greater emphasis placed on security-related measures and initiatives. This change in focus was evident in the 2015 review of the European Neighborhood Policy allowing for greater collaboration in the realm of

security, including initiatives for preventing conflict, managing crises, and reforming the security sector.<sup>59</sup>

The data provided offers a comprehensive overview of the European Union's contribution to the advancement of the Tunisian democratization process, highlighting the significant investments and support made by the EU and its Member States. Our analysis of this data reveals that while the EU has made substantial efforts to support Tunisia's democratic transition, the focus shifted toward security concerns after 2015, potentially hindering the consolidation of democratic progress. However, the data indicates a shift in the EU's approach after 2015, as security concerns gained prominence due to challenges at Tunisia's borders with Libya and Algeria and the rise of radical Islamism. Since then, this study assumes that the EU's efforts to support Tunisian democracy halted and shifted to a neo-realist perception of the Tunisian case within which Tunisian exceptionalism is no longer the drive for foreign support.

The EU has consistently acknowledged Tunisia's democratic progress since the 2011 Jasmine Revolution and has committed significant financial and political resources to support the country's democratic transition. However, it appears that the EU's priorities shifted significantly following the 2015 terror attacks on the Bardo Museum, which raised concerns about regional security and stability. As a result, the EU's economic stimuli in Tunisia were primarily allocated to security-related measures, rather than initiatives designed to directly promote democratic consolidation. This security-focused approach can be seen in the significant increase in funding for border control, counter-terrorism, and law enforcement, as well as the strengthening of intelligence and surveillance capacities. While these measures are undoubtedly important in maintaining national and regional stability, the EU's emphasis on security may have come at the expense of other critical areas necessary for fostering a robust democracy.

Notably, the findings highlight that the EU's support for socioeconomic growth and the promotion of transparency and accountability mechanisms, human rights, as well as the rule of law has been insufficient in comparison to its security-related investments. This imbalance may have inadvertently hindered the growth and consolidation of Tunisian democracy by failing to revisit the core reasons for the origin of the social outrage, including high

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<sup>59</sup> Assem Dandashly & Gabriela Chira (2018), "European Neighbourhood Policy", in (Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly & Achim Hurrelmann & Amy Verduneds eds.) *European Union Governance and Policy Making: A Canadian Perspective*, University of Toronto Press, p. 136.

unemployment, income inequality, and widespread corruption. Moreover, the EU's security-focused approach may have indirectly contributed to the gradual erosion of civil liberties from 2015 onwards. By prioritizing security over democratic development, the EU may have sent a signal to Tunisian authorities that their repressive measures would be tolerated or even supported, thus providing a cover for the suppression of political dissent and the stifling of civil society. It is important to acknowledge that democracy cannot thrive without a secure environment; however, an overemphasis on security measures at the expense of democratic consolidation is also counterproductive. The EU's approach to Tunisia should strike a balance between security and democracy, addressing both short-term security concerns and long-term democratic aspirations.

In conclusion, our analysis suggests that the EU's contribution to Tunisian democracy after 2015 has not been sufficient, as its economic stimuli were primarily directed toward security-related measures rather than directly promoting democratic development. A recalibration of the EU's approach is essential to ensure that Tunisia's democratic progress is not undermined by an excessive focus on security at the expense of its people's aspirations for a more inclusive, transparent, and accountable political system.

## **Conclusion**

The examination of Euro-Mediterranean relations is taken to be an important cornerstone of the discipline of International Relations. The researchers embarking on this research journey delved into a comprehensive case analysis that intricately examines the European Union's pivotal role in the democratization process unfolding in Tunisia from the perspective of the European Neighbourhood Policy. At the inception, it provides background information concerning the genesis of the Arab Spring and proffers on its as well as Jasmine Revolution components. The literature review, in the initial part, allowed the paper to unveil the reverberation of that development on regional stability in the western Mediterranean. The case studied throughout this article assumes a salient and objective approach towards the Tunisian brief experience with the process of democratization. After meticulous scrutiny of the EU's key foreign policy instruments about the Maghreb region, the authors attempted to comprehensively analyze the issue from an economic angle. The article came to draw several conclusions and contributions as far as the literature is concerned.

First of all, it is noticed that even though the EU's financial support for Tunisia helped the country to democratize, it quickly regressed and altered its target following the emergence of radical Islam-motivated terrorist attacks in 2015. Therefore, the paper points out the fact that a

key limitation lies in the European Neighbourhood Policy's efficiency in establishing robust conditionality measures, which are essential for fostering democratic practices in Tunisia. This is proved by the fact that Brussels' main contribution has been demonstrated to be shifted to security measures which had negative effects on Tunisia's democracy in its phase of consolidation. In that sense, the study clearly shows the link between economic development and democratization. This finding shows the inadequacy of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) in its current vision of the South as an effective tool for promoting democracy. Generally speaking, the absence of stringent conditions diminishes the policy's impact on encouraging democratic reforms in partner countries.

Additionally, the research identifies a significant gap in terms of reciprocity within the ENP framework. A lack of reciprocal mechanisms hinders the mutual exchange and reinforcement of democratic values between the European Union and its neighboring nations, thereby diminishing the ENP's efficacy as a catalyst for democratic development. This analysis underscores the need for a more comprehensive and reciprocal approach within the ENP to effectively promote democratic ideals and practices in partner countries.

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