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Abstract

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of the European Union's (EU) democracy support practices in Lebanon, Palestine, and Tunisia, highlighting the challenges, contestations, and impacts identified by local stakeholders through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), interviews, and case studies. By examining these three case studies together, the report sheds light on the nuanced dynamics of EU democracy promotion efforts across different geopolitical and sociopolitical contexts.

In Lebanon, the report reveals a complex relationship between the EU and local Lebanese stakeholders, marked by frustration, mistrust, and structural barriers that hinder meaningful engagement. It focuses on the EU's engagement in Lebanon, addressing contestation to the EU and feedback, interaction between local actors and the EU (including funding and constraints), central epiphanic moments, the role of gatekeepers, and pivotal issues such as the genocide in Gaza and the Syrian refugee crisis. A major issue is the role of third-party implementers in EU-funded projects, who act as intermediaries but often create ruptures instead of fostering communication. Consequently, EU-funded projects in Lebanon tend to become “activity-driven” rather than catalysing political or democratic change.

Additionally, the proposal process for EU funding was identified as exclusionary, reinforcing a small group of trusted CSOs and perpetuating NGOisation. These dynamics limit inclusion and hinder meaningful engagement with Lebanese civil society. The broader geopolitical context—especially the genocide in Gaza and the Syrian refugee crisis—further compounds local frustrations, with perceptions of EU double standards in its application of democratic values and human rights principles. This sentiment of frustration is echoed in other regions where the EU engages in democracy promotion, including Palestine and Tunisia, as explored in subsequent sections.

In Palestine, the report critically engages with democracy promotion as a contested international practice, focusing on the EU's programs and their impacts at the local level. The Palestine case study centres the voices and needs of aid-receiving communities to understand the key notions of political democracy and democratic governance. Through interviews and focus groups, it becomes clear that EU democracy promotion funding often privileges EU agendas over local needs, overlooking the ongoing impact of the Israeli occupation. Local adaptation and contestation to such programs reveal the disconnect between EU objectives and the lived realities of Palestinians, further undermining the effectiveness of these efforts. Similar to Lebanon, the reliance on EU-driven agendas rather than community-centric approaches has resulted in significant local pushback and perceptions of misalignment.

Tunisia’s 2011 revolution marked a significant transition, with early EU involvement supporting elections, building institutional capacity, and backing human rights reforms. However, since President Kais Saied's power grab in 2021, Tunisia has faced growing authoritarian pressures, exacerbated by political fragmentation, socioeconomic challenges, and limited EU resources. Like in Lebanon and Palestine, EU support in Tunisia has been critiqued for prioritizing strategic interests—such as migration control and economic stability—over democratic values. The EU’s response to Tunisia's democratic regression under Kais Saied has been perceived as muted and inconsistent, with citizens viewing recent agreements emphasizing migration control as a compromise of democratic principles.

Tunisian civil society, initially empowered by EU initiatives, has been marginalised under recent authoritarian measures, with focus groups revealing a perception of EU support as conditional and misaligned with local priorities. This mirrors findings in Lebanon, where structural barriers and the role

of gatekeepers limit EU engagement with a broader cross-section of society. In Tunisia, the 2021 Memorandum prioritizing irregular migration control has raised similar concerns about the EU's true commitment to democratic ideals.

Across these three case studies, a common theme emerges: the EU's democracy promotion efforts are often perceived as selective and prioritizing pragmatic or strategic interests over genuine democratic support. Whether through the exclusionary funding mechanisms in Lebanon, the privileging of EU political agendas in Palestine, or the migration-focused policies in Tunisia, the EU's involvement has been instrumental but fraught with challenges.

In conclusion, this report calls for a reassessment of the EU's approach to democracy promotion, advocating for strategies that prioritize local voices, address structural barriers, and align more closely with the EU's stated democratic values. A nuanced understanding of the complexities and local contexts in Lebanon, Palestine, and Tunisia is essential for fostering more inclusive, impactful, and sustainable democratic engagement.

Introduction

This deliverable D3.2 follows the WP 3's first deliverable (D3.1) which provided the background study on and context of EU-Arab relations over the past decade, as well as a cluster of case studies focusing on themes relevant to the EU-Arab relationship, namely Migration, shared norms and trade. D3.2 focuses on local democratic politics in the three main SHAPEDEM southern neighborhood countries: Lebanon, Palestine and Tunisia. The main idea is to centre local voices, practices and experiences which often are very far apart from the idealized versions framed in Brussels or EU member states. The relevant Task (T 3.2) is mapping these local voices and their practices in democracy and contestation.

Description of Activities

The overall activities across the projects in Lebanon, Palestine, and Tunisia focus on assessing the development and impact of EU democracy promotion policies, prioritizing local voices and experiences. The work was done primarily by the AUB team in addition to support from our KADEM partners who conducted the local focus group meetings and drafted the Tunisia case study under the AUB team's overall supervision. We were grateful to have feedback from our partners, particularly by Michelle Pace (RUK) but also by the SHAPEDEM leaders, Andrea Gawrich and Fabian Schöppner. **Through a combination of focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews, and secondary source analysis, the projects aim to explore how EU policies intersect with local dynamics, highlighting contestations, gatekeepers, and feedback mechanisms. Ethical considerations, diversity, and inclusivity are prioritized to ensure that the voices of various stakeholders—journalists, NGOs, political groups, and community representatives—are captured while maintaining anonymity and confidentiality**.

1.1 Lebanon

For the Lebanon case study, the project seeks to assess the development (discourse) and impact (practice) of EU policies, frameworks, and programmes, as well as map and analyse 'local' voices (and struggles) on the ground. These local voices, which include journalists, civil society representatives, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and political groups challenging the traditional political elite, are often engaged – directly or not – with core concepts and values of democracy, in addition to thinking about local interpretations of democracy. To best capture and understand how local voices in Lebanon contest EU democracy support practices, the qualitative data collected for the purposes of this report relied on both focus group discussions (FGDs), as well as semi-structured, in-depth interviews, based on an interview/discussion guide that was piloted prior to the launch of the fieldwork. FGDs were specifically selected as they permit "the study [of] the collective process of meaning making and formation of intersubjective attitudes" (van Bezouw et al. 2019). The FGDs and interviews will also shed light on the channels of "political feedback" and specifically "gatekeepers" (parties, individuals, groups, or interests) that mediate the interrelations between the EU and these "local voices."

For the Lebanon case study, participants selected for the FGDs and semi-structured, in-depth interviews included journalists, newly emerging political groups who played an important role during the October 2019 protests and parliamentary elections, NGOs who collaborate with and/or depend on EU funding, as well as considerably "anti-EU" political parties. The discussions were indicative of Lebanese societal dynamics but, as with any FGD, results are not representative of the general population. The FGDs gathered representatives from each of the groups (e.g., NGOs, newly emerging political parties), who all have experience in collaborating with one another, as well as coordinating (in various ways) with the EU. Several semi-structured, in-depth interviews were also conducted with key individuals, namely more senior and established journalists, as well as political activists with more concrete links (e.g., those who receive EU funding or who visit and attend conferences regularly) to the EU, to supplement the results of the FGDs and provide more space for expression and discussion.

Selected individuals were invited to the FGDs and interviews via formal letter sent by email, which clarified that their participation in this project was completely voluntary, and that the information gathered from the FGD/interview would be used solely for research purposes and kept confidential. In line with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), all participant data was deidentified, and participants were kept anonymous. Prior to the start of the FGDs and interviews, the AUB team

member leading the FGDs explained the project in more detail and obtained oral consent from every participant individually. Accordingly, all quotes included in this report have been kept confidential. The FGDs and interviews were supplemented with secondary sources, including journal articles, as well as news pieces from local media outlets.

1.2 Palestine

For the Palestine case study, the aim of the project is to centre the voices and needs of the communities receiving aid, to understand the key notions of political democracy and democratic governance by highlighting diverse firsthand experiences. In conducting the consultation sessions, we are cognisant of the importance of informed consent and clarity with regards to the positionality of both researchers and interlocutors. Despite limitations, it nonetheless sheds light on the nuanced approaches unique to the Palestinian experience. Ethical considerations were integrated into every phase of the research process, from data collection and literature review to focus group design, implementation, and the writing of the study. Furthermore, diversity and inclusivity were prioritised to ensure that the voices captured encompassed a spectrum of age, gender, geographical, religious, and political affiliations. Three focus group sessions were conducted, each lasting approximately two hours, with the following breakdown:

- Syndicates and National Funds: Conducted in person in Jericho.
- Youth Development & Empowerment Organisations: Conducted via Zoom with three participants.
- Gender Empowerment and Women Development Organisations: Conducted via Zoom with four participants.

Additionally, individual online interviews were conducted with three representatives from Cooperative Unions, Parliamentarians, and politicians, respectively. Diversity and inclusivity considerations were taken into account to make sure that the voices captured diversity in age, gender, geographical, religious, and political affiliations. The researchers ensured attributing the knowledge and experiences of these groups to those who contributed. We also were careful that the positionality and reflexivity of the researchers vis-à-vis the focus group sample captured the voices at the centre of EU support in Palestine. Retaining the agency and the positionality of the researched community was the main consideration in the writing of this study. Both interviews and consultation sessions were conducted by a Palestinian moderator, a lawyer with over 20 years of experience in human rights, access to justice, and gender issues, and extensive knowledge of EU support to Palestinians.

The project faces limitations due to three overarching causes: firstly, Israeli occupation, secondly political repression, and lastly polarization within Palestinian society. We are aware of the temporal and geographic limits, along with the limits created by the current war on Gaza, which has shifted priorities and focus dramatically. The Israeli blockade on Gaza, continuing during the war, the military occupation, and the restrictions on movement associated therewith all contribute to our inability to conduct this study on the standards we desire. During the data collection phase, some requests for interviews and consultation sessions were declined. **Certain interlocutors refused to meet with the AUB researchers, citing disappointment with what they called the EU's "double standards" and its failure to address ongoing war crimes in Gaza.** Others conveyed a sense of animosity toward the EU and futility about the study itself, feelings tied to the EU's role in post-2006 election sanctions and other historical events. For instance, a representative from a Palestinian syndicate expressed frustration over the EU's current stance toward the Palestinian people, **voicing disappointment in the**

EU's perceived complicity in supporting Israel in its war crimes in Gaza and reluctance to engage meaningfully with Palestinians. Representatives from Hamas and the six NGOs recently added to the Israeli terror list also refused to participate, citing a sense of hopelessness and frustration. Similarly, a women's group from Askar refugee camp in Nablus declined to participate in an interview or focus group, citing anger over the camp's poor living conditions. They highlighted the ongoing grip of the Israeli occupation, dire economic circumstances, and a bleak reality, noting that EU projects offered only minor, temporary fixes that failed to address the root causes of their hardship. The war also prevented politicians Hanan Ashrawi and Mustafa Bargouthi from speaking to us, because they were too busy advocating for the end of the war. The repression practised by the PA exacerbates the challenges of doing research amid ongoing political divide and war. Finally, another limitation stems from the unwillingness of some of our interlocutors to sit with each other. Our inability to negotiate for a more diverse pool of interlocutors comes from several sources of friction including differences in agenda, political view, or professional competition. Other times, deep ideological and political rifts made our invitees refuse to appear in the same room–even when that room was a virtual one over Zoom.

Since the War on Gaza, the Israeli military has tightened control over entry and exit points between Palestinian cities, and settler violence against Palestinians has increased. Our interlocutors opted for interviews via Zoom or in person, based on both convenience and safety concerns. AUB researchers conducted in-person sessions in Jericho and Ramallah when possible, using Zoom for participants in other parts of the West Bank to reduce risks associated with travel and checkpoints. This approach balanced the project's effectiveness with participants' safety.

Despite these limitations, our study is methodologically innovative because of the diversity of voices and methods. We have incorporated the experiences of women and men from various age groups, but also brought together initiatives that focus on women, youth, and human rights. We place these voices in conversation with political and syndical leaders who shape the Palestinian political landscape. We maintain the anonymity of our interlocutors in order to minimise the effects of self-censorship.

1.3 Tunisia

For the Tunisia case study, led by our KADEM partner, the project aims to delve into the analysis of interactions and practices related to EU democracy promotion within the dynamic context of Tunisia, a key country on the southern shores of the Mediterranean with a rich historical backdrop of significant events. Since the 2011 revolution and the fall of the Ben Ali regime, Tunisia has undergone major political transformations, marked by the emergence of an Islamist government, the establishment of new democratic institutions, and the adoption of progressive laws. This period has also seen challenges such as terrorist acts, political assassinations, and institutional crises like presidential vacancies and the early elections of 2021, culminating in the election of Kais Saied.

Throughout these events, the EU has been a pivotal player, evoking critical, appreciative, and indifferent responses among Tunisian political actors. This complex dynamic provides a fertile ground to explore how democracy is conceptualised according to Tunisian standards and how EU initiatives have been perceived and integrated within this evolving political landscape.

The focus group discussions are structured to deeply examine several crucial dimensions:

- The impact of EU funding and support initiatives on the empowerment or dependence of local entities, particularly during "critical moments" such as political transitions and security crises.

- Evaluation of tangible or symbolic outcomes and practices of EU programmes.
- Analysis of formal and informal feedback mechanisms between the EU and its Tunisian partners (especially mechanisms of funds).
- Exploration of forms of contestation and key actors involved in EU democracy promotion.
- Reflection on the evolution of the EU's role and influence during periods of political change and "coup-like" events, such as that of July 2021, to the recent democratic regression and new political directions in Tunisia.

Two focus groups were conducted: the first (civic) was composed of civil society members and journalists, and the second (political) consisted of political activists, former deputies, and political science researchers. **Additionally, two peer-to-peer interviews were conducted** with officials from the Tunisian Ministry of Defence (a researcher and professor within the Academy of War) and a lawyer. These sessions followed meticulous selection by KADEM, the Tunisian partner of the project.

Diversity criteria were respected, including gender diversity, age diversity, political affiliation diversity, and specialisation in civil society, as well as a mix of EU supporters and critics, and regional representation. In sending invitations and requests for participation, we emphasised the trust participants had placed in us, ensuring they fully understood the purpose of the sessions. Prior to each session, we provided a comprehensive overview of the project, particularly WP3, which aims to assess the discourse and impact of EU policies in Lebanon, Palestine, and Tunisia, map local voices' engagement with democracy and their interpretations, and explore political feedback channels and gatekeepers in EU-local relations.

We were transparent about the questionnaire developed by our partner and WP3 lead, AUB, which was tailored to the Tunisian context. Oral consent was obtained from each participant, and we committed to maintaining anonymity due to national and international sensitivities, ensuring utmost confidentiality. Participants were informed that the collected data would be used to produce a policy brief on the Tunisian context. As partners and/or beneficiaries with KADEM, through the networking efforts of KADEM members, the solicitation process was smooth. Those who declined did so due to scheduling conflicts, not reluctance.

Results

The challenges faced by EU democracy support practices across Lebanon, Palestine, and Tunisia reveal a complex and often contested relationship between the EU and local stakeholders.

1.4 Lebanon

In Lebanon, based on the results of the FGDs and interviews, this report provides a better understanding of **how EU democracy practice is contested locally in Lebanon**. Across various local voices in the country**, perceptions of EU democracy support are dim**, specifically when viewed within the lens of contemporary challenges such as the Syrian refugee influx to Lebanon and the genocide in Gaza. **These practices are highly contested by both traditional political parties and representatives of civil society organisations – but these opinions are rarely taken into consideration or acknowledged by EU partners. Multiple gatekeepers to this engagement also pose a significant obstacle to establishing clear communication channels between the EU and local voices, further hindering efforts at democracy support, promotion, and programming. To this end, the EU should gain a more nuanced understanding of the contradictory effects of its democracy support policies and practices, as well as the complex dynamics of the local context, ahead of future efforts to promote democratisation in other countries**.

1.5 Palestine

Similarly, the Palestinian experience underscores the disconnection between EU support frameworks and the lived realities of local populations**.** The story of post-Oslo EU support to the Palestinian people is one of increased integration into the international community, but at the cost of national liberation and self-determination. Israeli settlements remain the primary obstacle to peace in Palestine, yet international funding has diverted attention from resistance efforts toward dialogue with Israel. Although this strengthens the role of the Palestinian Authority (PA), it neglects the political engagement of the youth and prevents the formation of solidarity between various groups. To secure funding, actors on the ground are compelled to present their projects using sanitised language, avoiding terms like “resilience” or “resistance.” In order to maintain credibility, groups are often forced to meet community needs with language that resonates with the community, even if these risks losing EU funding.

Our interlocutors described how the EU favoured security concerns over democratic principles, as seen in EU approval processes and the reframing of civil society experiences through a rights-based lens. These security concerns, however, rarely succeeded in ensuring safety for Palestinians or Israelis but instead entrenched systems of corruption and exploitation.

This study comes at a time of unprecedented levels of horrific war crimes and collective punishment, when Palestinians feel an acute sense of abandonment by the EU and the international community. The global system has failed to halt these vicious atrocities. In this dark moment of human history, the children of Gaza are being collectively bombarded and killed without sanctions or cessation. **Our Palestinian interlocutors feel that discourses of democracy have become hollow rhetoric that serves some at the expense of others.** The promotion of democracy, our study finds, has become a commodity, translated into money, aid, and financial support. Rather than promoting democracy, the need for funding has turned the quest for it into an attempt to appease those who set the agenda. The universality of democracy has been reduced to rhetoric; in practice, democracy is made into a tool to entrench double standards. Rather than establishing an independent state, the infantilizing discourse around democracy has furthered dependency, with the Western approach creating a society that fits

only those who design it. Democracy permitted within the donors' parameters fundamentally undermines the principal notion that democracy is the manifestation of the people's will. The sanctions on democratic elections in 2006 and the failure to bring about a ceasefire today are horrific revelations of the truth behind EU support for the Palestinian people.

The EU's approach to supporting the Palestinian people urgently needs revision to ensure the genuine pursuit of a state-building project that guarantees Palestinian agency, safety, respect, free will, dignity, and ultimately, the Palestinian people's right to self-determination. Restrictive policies that deepen rifts among Palestinians will not lead to a peaceful and democratic region. In summary, the EU has truly supported occupation and now genocide. Democracy support has long been buried in the EU cemetery.

The scale of human suffering in the Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem, and the West Bank cannot be quantified and cannot be captured in the language of development. The typical lexicon of rebuilding, rethinking, and revisiting falls short. There is no need for rhetorical 'Rs,' but rather a pressing need for ending the occupation, sanctioning those committing international law violations, advancing and promoting a Palestinian state, empowering the Palestinian right to self-determination, and ultimately, empowering Palestinians to lead the support agenda. A meaningful intersectional and participatory approach that places the needs of the Palestinian people at the centre is the only way for EU support to be effective in creating a lasting peace in the region. Rather than engage with Palestinian civil society through the Oslo frameworks that entrench authoritarian and elite structures, the EU should engage with a broader section of Palestinian society on its own terms.

1.6 Tunisia

In Tunisia, the EU's democracy promotion efforts further reveal the limitations of its policies in contexts of democratic regression**.** Participants unanimously agreed that the European Union played a significant role in Tunisia's democratisation since 2011. However, following the 2021 coup, the EU's focus shifted towards protecting European borders rather than promoting democracy and human rights in Tunisia. The participants critiqued the lack of a unified understanding of democracy and the rule of law among Tunisians, compounded by political instability and past conflicts. Kais Saied's populist policies are seen as a consequence of these issues. Despite the EU's effective support during elections and reforms, its bureaucratic evaluation system and failure to integrate local expertise have hindered project success. The EU is now perceived as complicit with Saied's regime, imposing a democratic model that neither respects Tunisian culture nor progresses incrementally. Participants stressed that the EU's cooperation with Tunisia should be restructured to include all stakeholders. It is crucial to bring officials and civil society organisations (CSOs) together to protect the civic space currently threatened by Saied's policies. Rather than a selective approach, **the EU should listen to diverse needs across various regions, fostering inclusive dialogue and support.**

Together, these case studies demonstrate how EU democracy support, while significant, remains riddled with contradictions, double standards, and inefficiencies that hinder its effectiveness in fostering genuine democratisation. They contribute to the overall WP-3's main objective which is to better understand how the EU democracy support is perceived in the southern neighborhood, and, hopefully, to support the EU's reflections in its relevant programs to make them more effective and more participatory.

Deviations Summary

The southern neighborhood is in turmoil and crisis. The three main countries examined here are in unprecedented crises. In Palestine, there is the catastrophic Gaza genocide and more recent Israeli army invasions of parts of the West Bank. In Lebanon, an unprecedented economic and political crisis since 2019 was made more unbearable by the 2024 Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon and the migration of large segments of Lebanese citizens displaced by Israeli bombings. In Tunisia, there is the crackdown by Tunisian security forces and the consolidation of authoritarian rule. All this made conducting field research very difficult and likely rendering “local perceptions” very focused on immediate events rather than a longer memory and analysis. As such, there were delays in initially submitting the drafts and then the final deliverable. There were then additional delays due to various logistical and formatting issues. Despite this, we think the overall results and conclusions reflect local perceptions in the three case studies and are vital resource for EU policy makers and analysts to understand so that they may begin to adjust their policies, discourse and practice towards their southern neighbours.

Conclusions

Despite the deviations that resulted from the crises in the three countries we focused on, we think the overall results and conclusions reflect local perceptions in the three case studies and are vital resource for EU policy makers and analysts to understand so that they may begin to adjust their policies, discourse and practice towards their southern neighbours. The cases are similarly vital for the other SHAPEDEM work packages that will build on the local perceptions to frame their overall policy recommendations.

In the Lebanon case, based on the results of the FGDs and interviews in Lebanon, this report provides a better understanding of how EU democracy practice is contested locally in Lebanon. Across various local voices in the country, perceptions of EU democracy support are dim, specifically when viewed within the lens of contemporary challenges such as the Syrian refugee influx to Lebanon and the genocide in Gaza. These practices are highly contested by both traditional political parties and representatives of civil society organisations – but these opinions are rarely taken into consideration or acknowledged by EU partners. Multiple gatekeepers to this engagement also pose a significant obstacle to establishing clear communication channels between the EU and local voices, further hindering efforts at democracy support, promotion, and programming. To this end, the EU should gain a more nuanced understanding of the contradictory effects of its democracy support policies and practices, as well as the complex dynamics of the local context, ahead of future efforts to promote democratisation in other countries. The recent and ongoing genocide in Gaza was discussed at length in the focus groups as an epiphanic moment in light of EU democracy support in Lebanon and the region. Because of the EU's perceived role in Israel's continued impunity, participants across all groups questioned the explicit double standards of the EU in their application of 'so-called' democratic values and human rights principles. Of particular significance was the overwhelming agreement that 'whoever created democracy [Europe] is not applying it.'

For the Palestine case, the story of post-Oslo EU support to the Palestinian people is one of increased integration into the international community, but at the cost of national liberation and self-determination. Israeli settlements remain the primary obstacle to peace in Palestine, yet international funding has diverted attention from resistance efforts toward dialogue with Israel and neglects the political engagement of the youth and prevents the formation of solidarity between various groups. Our interlocutors described how the EU favoured security concerns over democratic principles, as seen in EU approval processes and the reframing of civil society experiences through a rights-based lens. These security concerns, however, rarely succeeded in ensuring safety for Palestinians or Israelis but instead entrenched systems of corruption and exploitation. Moreover, the Palestine study comes at a time of unprecedented levels of horrific war crimes and collective punishment, when Palestinians feel an acute sense of abandonment by the EU and the international community. Our Palestinian interlocutors feel that discourses of democracy have become hollow rhetoric that serves some at the expense of others. The promotion of democracy, our study finds, has become a commodity, translated into money, aid, and financial support. Rather than promoting democracy, the need for funding has turned the quest for it into an attempt to appease those who set the agenda. The universality of democracy has been reduced to rhetoric; in practice, democracy is made into a tool to entrench double standards. The Palestine study concludes that the EU's approach to supporting the Palestinian people urgently needs revision to ensure the genuine pursuit of a state-building project that guarantees Palestinian agency, safety, respect, free will, dignity, and ultimately, the Palestinian people's right to self-determination. The scale of human suffering in the Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem, and the West Bank

cannot be quantified and cannot be captured in the language of development. A meaningful intersectional and participatory approach that places the needs of the Palestinian people at the centre is the only way for EU support to be effective in creating a lasting peace in the region. Rather than engage with Palestinian civil society through the Oslo frameworks that entrench authoritarian and elite structures, the EU should engage with a broader section of Palestinian society on its own terms.

For the Tunisia case, participants unanimously agreed that the European Union played a significant role in Tunisia's democratisation since 2011. However, following the 2021 coup, the EU's focus shifted towards protecting European borders rather than promoting democracy and human rights in Tunisia. The participants critiqued the lack of a unified understanding of democracy and the rule of law among Tunisians, compounded by political instability and past conflicts. President Kais Saied's populist policies are seen as a consequence of these issues. Despite the EU's effective support during elections and reforms, its bureaucratic evaluation system and failure to integrate local expertise have hindered project success. The EU is now perceived as complicit with Saied's regime, imposing a democratic model that neither respects Tunisian culture nor progresses incrementally. Participants stressed that the EU's cooperation with Tunisia should be restructured to include all stakeholders. It is crucial to bring officials and civil society organisations (CSOs) together to protect the civic space currently threatened by Saied's policies. Rather than a selective approach, the EU should listen to diverse needs across various regions, fostering inclusive dialogue and support.

Overall, it is clear from the three case studies that the perception of the EU has declined markedly over the past year or two. Its perceived collusion with Israel in its onslaught against Gaza's civilians and invasion of Lebanon, and its perceived support of Kais Saied's authoritarian rule in order to advance its migration interest, mean that a serious rethinking must take place in Brussels and the European capitals if they are to re-balance their analysis and resume a more even-handed, participatory approach to democracy promotion in the southern neighbourhood.

Annex 1: EU Democracy Support to Lebanon: Towards an Understanding of Local Voices and Contestation

Executive Summary

This report provides an analysis of the European Union's (EU) democracy support practices in Lebanon, highlighting the challenges and contestations identified by civil society organisations (CSOs) and other local actors through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and interviews. It reveals a complex relationship between the EU and local Lebanese stakeholders, marked by frustration, mistrust, and structural barriers that hinder meaningful engagement.

The report focuses on the EU's engagement in Lebanon, addressing contestation to the EU and feedback (1.2), interaction between local actors and the EU, including funding and constraints (1.3), central epiphanic moments and their unfolding (1.4), the role of gatekeepers (1.5) and two pivotal issues: the genocide in Gaza and Syrian refugees in Lebanon (1.6).

A major issue is the role of third-party implementers in EU-funded projects. These entities, often CSOs with prior experience in executing EU programming, act as intermediaries between the EU and Lebanese civil society. However, instead of fostering communication, these implementers create a rupture, positioning themselves as de facto gatekeepers. By justifying their role as "purely technical," they absolve the EU from accountability and create frustration among local actors. Consequently, EU-funded projects become “activity-driven” rather than catalysing political or democratic change.

The proposal process for EU funding was also identified as a significant barrier. Local CSOs find the application process to be “the hardest to apply to,” requiring specialized expertise that many organisations lack. This leads to the reinforcement of a small, trusted group of CSOs—often the “usual suspects” in dealing with the EU—thereby reinforcing the phenomenon of NGOisation. This process limits inclusion and creates an exclusionary environment that undermines the EU’s ability to engage with a broad cross-section of Lebanese society.

Additionally, EU engagement is impacted by the geopolitical context, especially the ongoing genocide in Gaza and the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon. These issues have led to heightened perceptions of EU double standards, particularly in its application of democratic values and human rights principles. One journalist remarked that “some leaders in Europe have shown that they believe human rights are not for Arabs,” highlighting a pervasive sense of inequality in EU policies. Furthermore, the recent EUR 1 billion aid package to Lebanon, aimed at curbing migration flows, has been criticized as an act of “externalisation” that legitimizes the traditional political elite without requiring democratic reforms.

Finally, the Lebanese political elite was identified as another critical gatekeeper. Participants expressed frustration with the elite’s hoarding of information and lack of transparent communication with the EU. The political elite's approval of the EUR 1 billion aid package without understanding its terms reflects the power dynamics that continue to shape EU-Lebanon relations.

In conclusion, the report calls for a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of EU democracy support in Lebanon. The EU should reassess its approach, taking into account local frustrations, structural barriers, and the broader geopolitical context, to foster more inclusive and meaningful engagement with Lebanese civil society and political actors.

1 Introduction

The European Union (EU) has had a lengthy and well-established relationship with Lebanon, specifically since the 1965 E.E.C.-Lebanon Trade and Technical Cooperation Agreement (Dandashly 2021). Since then, the cooperation between the two has been based on its European Neighbourhood Policy and the Renewed Partnership with the EU's Southern Neighbourhood – A New Agenda for the Mediterranean (European Union n.d.). Within the scope of this framework, EU member states have been providing considerable democracy support to Lebanon in various forms, ranging from bilateral financial assistance, supporting donor conferences (e.g., Paris I, II, and III international donor conferences convened by France), and supporting civil society by working closely with and funding them, to monitoring elections, encouraging key policy reforms, implementing EU international border management strategies, and assisting with border governance in the country (European Union n.d.; Tholens 2017; Ouazzani 2019).

The SHAPEDEM-EU project considers EU democracy support "as practices performed within a multi-layered constellation of communities of practices," consisting of three different groups: "communities of EU democracy support practices, communities of local democratisation practices, and communities of other EU foreign affairs practices" (Achrainer and Pace 2023). The approach of the EU towards Lebanon, as well as most of the studies that explore EU democracy support in the region, is centred on the "Eurocentric exclusive top-down approach" (Achrainer and Pace 2023). In this paper, and in line with the SHAPEDEM-EU project, we shift this direction from Lebanon to the EU, aiming towards an "inclusive bottom-up democracy learning loop" in order to best understand the implications of EU democracy support practices in the southern neighbourhood, with a specific focus on contesting – and often unheard – local voices (Achrainer and Pace 2023). In this paper, we aim to critically engage with "democracy support" as a locally contested international practice. It focuses on the role of the EU and associated programming in Lebanon by unpacking their multiple and contradictory meanings and diverse impacts at the local level. More specifically, it explores how local adaptation and contestation to such programmes and their effects are often expressed, highlighting the contradictory effects of EU "democracy support" policies and practices and their interactions with complex local dynamics. This paper is part of our larger efforts to investigate democracy support in the Arab world.

2 Methodology and Ethical Considerations

This project seeks to assess the development (discourse) and impact (practice) of EU policies, frameworks, and programmes, as well as map and analyse 'local' voices (and struggles) on the ground. These local voices, which include journalists, civil society representatives, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and political groups challenging the traditional political elite, are often engaged – directly or not – with core concepts and values of democracy, in addition to thinking about local interpretations of democracy. To best capture and understand how local voices in Lebanon contest EU democracy support practices, the qualitative data collected for the purposes of this report relied on both focus group discussions (FGDs), as well as semi-structured, in-depth interviews, based on an interview/discussion guide that was piloted prior to the launch of the fieldwork. FGDs were specifically selected as they permit "the study [of] the collective process of meaning making and formation of intersubjective attitudes" (van Bezouw et al. 2019). **The FGDs and interviews will also shed light on the channels of "political feedback" and specifically "gatekeepers" (parties, individuals, groups, or interests) that mediate the interrelations between the EU and these "local voices."**

For the Lebanon case study, participants selected for the FGDs and semi-structured, in-depth interviews included journalists, newly emerging political groups who played an important role during the October 2019 protests and parliamentary elections, NGOs who collaborate with and/or depend on

EU funding, as well as considerably "anti-EU" political parties. The discussions were indicative of Lebanese societal dynamics but, as with any FGD, results are not representative of the general population. The FGDs gathered representatives from each of the groups (e.g., NGOs, newly emerging political parties), who all have experience in collaborating with one another, as well as coordinating (in various ways) with the EU. Several semi-structured, in-depth interviews were also conducted with key individuals, namely more senior and established journalists, as well as political activists with more concrete links (e.g., those who receive EU funding or who visit and attend conferences regularly) to the EU, to supplement the results of the FGDs and provide more space for expression and discussion.

Selected individuals were invited to the FGDs and interviews via formal letter sent by email, which clarified that their participation in this project was completely voluntary, and that the information gathered from the FGD/interview would be used solely for research purposes and kept confidential. In line with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), all participant data was deidentified, and participants were kept anonymous. Prior to the start of the FGDs and interviews, the AUB team member leading the FGDs explained the project in more detail and obtained oral consent from every participant individually. Accordingly, all quotes included in this report have been kept confidential. The FGDs and interviews were supplemented with secondary sources, including journal articles, as well as news pieces from local media outlets.

3 Structure of the Report

The findings of the interviews and FGDs have been categorised into six different themes reflecting the questions posed to the participants, as well as the objectives of the overall project. The first section examines local perceptions of EU democracy support practice in Lebanon and how "change" is observed. The second describes the ways in which local voices ("usual suspects" as well as "unheard voices") contest EU democracy support practices and provide feedback to the EU. The third section assesses the various levels of interaction between the local and the EU, while also addressing the issue of programme and project funding as well as other significant constraints. The fourth section addresses a central epiphany moment discussed by all the participants in the Lebanon discussions: French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to Lebanon following the 2020 Beirut Port explosion. The fifth section examines the various identified "gatekeepers" (i.e., individuals or structures who play a role in connecting or acting as a mediator) to EU-Lebanon engagement. The sixth and final section centres on two pivotal issues discussed in light of the EU's democracy support role – the ongoing genocide in Gaza and the EU response to Syrian refugees in Lebanon. It is important to highlight that this study is taking place at a time when Lebanese citizens are dealing with the impact of multiple crises: an unprecedented economic and financial collapse further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the devastating 4 August 2020 Beirut Port explosion, both occurring shortly after the October 2019 protests, which provided hope to the Lebanese population. This **hope quickly shifted to despair, particularly among young people**, many of whom have already chosen to migrate or are aiming to leave the country. According to the **Arab Barometer (2022), almost half of the Lebanese population is considering migrating.** Alongside this **pessimism about Lebanon's future is a growing lack of trust in the governing leaders and institutions,** which is **further intensified by the complete absence of accountability for both the financial collapse and the Port explosion.** This study should also be situated within the current context of Israel's ongoing genocide in Gaza and, in particular, in light of the EU's perceived role in Israel's continued impunity and what has been referred to as the **"double standards" of the EU in their application of democratic values and human rights principles.**

4 Focus Group Discussion Findings – Lebanon

4.1 Perceptions of EU Democracy Promotion Practice in Lebanon and How Change is Observed

The qualitative data revealed varying perspectives among the different groups on how the EU is perceived as promoting democracy in Lebanon, but **all agreed that the EU is exceptionally 'weak' in its practice. The journalists considered the EU's democracy support role as strictly performative**, incorporating the use of EU-centric jargon and terminology as well as the promotion of specific and well-selected narratives, e.g. resilience, human rights, freedom of expression, women's political participation, etc. **These narratives portray the EU as promoting ideals such as an independent judiciary and anti-corruption reform measures, while at the same time maintaining their relationship with and empowering the Lebanese political ruling class, who continue to circumvent such measures and oppose change in the country.** It should be noted that these democratic reforms promoted by the EU do not operate in a vacuum, but rather within the Lebanese political system that is held captive by the elite.

The journalists specifically questioned the intent behind the EU democracy support role, in light of the push to normalise civil society relationships with the Lebanese ruling elite. One of the journalists gave us an account of his trips to Brussels, wherein officials explicitly said to them, 'We have to deal with your regimes that you have elected' and 'You have to make yourself more accepted by your regime. We cannot deal with them, because of the matter of sovereignty.' This can be understood as the EU justifying their 'stability approach' by blaming it on the choice of Lebanese citizens. One journalist even went as far to say that the entire process of EU democracy support is nothing but a 'public relations stunt'. It therefore appears that the EU carefully navigates between pleasing civil society with the promotion of specific rights-based democratic ideals, while at the same time prioritising what it perceives as 'stability' and 'resilience' – maintaining the political status quo – over true 'democracy' in Lebanon. Mouawad (2017) finds that Lebanon's so-called 'resilience' to the multiple crises faced by the country, heavily promoted by the EU, 'is rooted within state–society relations that have long undermined state institutions while empowering a system of patronage and clientelism often endorsed directly or indirectly by the international community. Its effects are clear: undermining state institutions, empowering the 'system' and creating a dependency of society on this system.' This indicates both a discrepancy and double standard between discourse and practice.

Most of the NGO representatives also similarly viewed the EU's support of democracy as something highly technical and stemming from a rights-based approach and centred more on promoting the image of the EU as opposed to the tangible and genuine commitment of the EU to enact democratic ideals and support change. They emphasised the EU's lack of understanding of the local context, particularly in reference to local dynamics and their understanding of democratisation. They explained that this lack of nuance about local dynamics is what ultimately leads the EU – in some cases – to implement a blueprint, one-size-fits-all approach to their democracy support agenda. This agenda does not match the context of nor the assessment of local actors, which are often provided to the EU by NGOs but more than often fall on deaf ears. For example, one NGO shared their experience in dealing with the EU, who they said 'pragmatically' prioritised one theme (for instance, women's rights) within democracy support initiatives without a complete understanding of local dynamics (within this example, the active role and participation of women in the non-governmental sector). According to participants, implementing this agenda without a nuanced understanding of local dynamics may ultimately lead to a backfire of intended outcomes, and furthermore, conceal potential policies and reforms that might eventually contribute to better outcomes of that theme. This is but one example

of how the EU has struggled 'to learn from ineffective attempts to support democratisation in the Arab world… and continuously (re-)produces democracy support malpractices' (Achrainer and Pace 2024).

On the other hand, the representatives of the emerging political parties experienced the EU's promotion of democracy as a system of thought (i.e. the liberal understanding of democracy) and as a top-down process directly linked to formal politics and institutions (e.g. the constitution, governmental organisations, etc.). While they did in fact associate democracy to liberal understanding, most of these representatives were adamant that there is no need to establish a link between democracy and the West, which they considered as completely disconnected from 'truth and reality', especially in relation to the ongoing genocide in Gaza. To emphasise their point, specific reference was made to the legacies of European colonialism as well as the relative EU silence on the continued genocide in Gaza. They established a clear and somewhat sympathetic distinction between the EU as a body and different member states based on the degree of their political engagement with European political parties, stating, 'The EU's practices are different than its member states' practices'. This was stated in reference to their often-continued engagement and rapport with representatives of specific EU member states, as opposed to the EU as a whole. This illustrates another contradiction: the EU as a body seeks to promote democracy in a different way than individual EU member states, engaging with the Lebanese political elite and once again promoting stability over democracy, thereby strengthening regime stability and preventing any sort of political or institutional change. There therefore appears to be a double standard approach in terms of EU democracy support and engagement with Lebanon: the EU seeks to fund civil society and grassroots organisations to promote reforms while at the same time contributing to the stability of the political system. As one of the civil society representatives stated, 'They [EU] want to please everyone. They adopt a strategy to satisfy both parties. There is no actual political reform.' It therefore appears that the EU is adopting a double-standard approach when it comes to their democracy support agenda in Lebanon: they choose to deal with both the Lebanese government and civil society organisations, simultaneously collaborating and funding these organisations to enact change, while at the same time promoting the stability of the system and upholding the political status quo, thereby hindering the opportunity for 'democratic' change.

4.2 Contestation and Feedback

Local contestation to EU democracy support predominantly takes place in the form of feedback, which Lebanese representatives of NGOs and political entities share with EU officials, officers of donor agencies and units, members of parliament, etc. (i.e. the usual suspects). Participants in our FGDs, particularly those from the NGOs, explained that when they send formal letters to EU representatives—whether these letters include recommendations on local project implementations or involve lodging complaints—**they do not always receive a response**. In fact, **their comments were seldom taken into consideration**. One of the participants sarcastically commented, 'Ideally, no one should contest [the EU] and say there is a problem.' An NGO representative described their experience after sending EU representatives a report with recommendations that countered the democracy narrative they were trying to convey and stated, 'They did not take it lightly.' According to this representative, the response to challenging this democracy narrative was not welcomed. Another local NGO member expressed their disappointment with the lack of clearly shared information from EU donors and project implementers, particularly after providing any type of feedback or comments. They explained how, following the submission of recommendations for project implementation to EU representatives, they received a positive response during an in-person follow-up meeting but never

received or viewed any official documents proving that their recommendations were going to be applied: 'It was just kalam a'am' (literal translation: 'general talk; i.e. lip service').

On the other hand, contestation of Lebanon's traditional political parties to EU democracy support takes on different forms. It should be noted that there is no clear venue for formal contestation, and where there is, it is unilateral without any feedback or response channels. In the absence of formal, centralised policies that would benefit Lebanon (for example, with respect to the Syrian refugee influx to Lebanon), political parties claimed that they had to resort to addressing the EU through informal channels. This included creating alliances with their counterparts in Brussels and other EU member states and challenging the EU by protesting in front of the EU embassy and sending official contestation letters to EU ambassadors (L'Orient Today; Nahas 2023). For instance, in the backdrop of the Syrian refugee influx to Lebanon, some traditional parties have formed alliances with right-wing European parties who hold similar views on refugee inflows and presence in their countries (see The National 2023).

Participants once again expressed their frustration with the one-size-fits-all, 'quick-fix' approach to EU project implementation, and how the EU does not consult 'representatives of the people' in the process of conceptualising new projects or when assessing completed ones. An example was given of a multi-million-dollar environmental project directed by the Lebanese government and funded by the EU, which ultimately did not meet its sustainability objective: 'They satisfied both parties [the EU and the Lebanese government], and implemented some democracy, but they do not look at the impact afterward.' In this case, the participant explained that both the Lebanese authorities and the EU celebrated the successful implementation of the project; however, the impact was negligible at best. Another participant added, 'We realise that programs get funded [by the EU], but there is no follow-up afterward.' Overall, participants across all groups agreed that there is no clarity as to what sort of assessment takes place following EU project or programme implementation and how these criteria for assessment are developed and adopted, especially when the feedback of local representatives is disregarded and not considered. One NGO mentioned an instance where the EU delegation took into account their recommendation—only after they reached out to them to clarify their position. In this sense, local recommendations are not essentially prioritised by the EU, nor is the implementation of a successful feedback mechanism for these projects and initiatives taking place. As such, it appears that local contestation is not only subject to bureaucratic considerations and circumstances, but also, there is a lull in the communication channels between the EU and local representatives following EU project implementation or funding, which again discounts the context and does not take into consideration local recommendations or feedback.

4.3 Interaction between the Local and the EU, Funding, and Constraints

Participants in the FGDs discussed different forms and channels of interaction between the 'local' and the EU, ranging from formal cooperation agreements to EU-Lebanese state engagement, and their personal experiences in interacting (or attempting to) with representatives from the EU. Results of the discussions indicated that emerging political parties and journalists interact quite often with EU officials and member states, unlike NGOs, which find it much harder to access these officials and funding opportunities. One representative of civil society stated, 'I had to do the impossible just to find out who is the person responsible for a particular EU-supported programme.' While some **members of the political parties indicated that their connection with European MPs was made on an individual basis, this nevertheless indicates a weaker relationship between the EU and grassroots NGOs. NGO representatives questioned the degree to which EU engagement with Lebanon is participatory and**

reflective of Lebanese society, stating that the EU primarily chooses to deal with organisations that are linked to Lebanon's political elite, under the pretext of more efficiently implementing their programming and funding across the country. This is largely because of the grasp that the traditional political parties in Lebanon have over the territory via large-scale institutions and municipalities. In this sense, in the Lebanese political system captured by the elite, the traditional political parties become the de facto partners of the EU. This further **strengthens the relationship between the EU and the ruling class, to the extent that some participants agreed that this was one of the EU's priorities in Lebanon: the 'saving' of the Lebanese political elite, 'their submissive entourage', to 'accomplish their own interests'.** For instance, EU consultations for programming and projects are often done with cabinet ministers. One NGO clarified that they sent several letters to EU representatives in protest, emphasising the importance of being inclusive and coordinating with representatives of civil society, who have a strong understanding of local needs: 'When the EU initiates a consultation process, we should secure a channel of communication that guarantees a diversified set of representatives. We know what every village in Lebanon needs; [these consultations] should not be for elites only.' Another NGO questioned representatives of the EU directly, asking them**: 'Within this process [of programming], especially during assessment, were the tools you used inclusive? When you asked the local community [of their needs], were representatives diversified? The answer was no. All of it is missing.'** Only one organisation explained that they received a positive reply and a commitment to 'immediate measures' **after they sent seven letters to donors from the EU as well as project implementers, to emphasise the importance of inclusivity**. Additionally, cooperation agreements were also viewed as not equally applied by the EU across all sections of Lebanese society, with the EU favouring engagement with the Lebanese authorities. A member of one of the emerging political parties explained, 'When the [Lebanese] government went bankrupt and got pillaged [by the ruling class], the ruling class, through its organisations, sought refuge within the Europeans (sic.). **They were also contributing to killing democracy**.' Another representative emphasised that 'The Europeans are only engaged [with Lebanon] through official presence.'

When it comes to funding, civil society representatives all agreed that there are gaps in understanding the EU's agenda when it comes to financially supporting programmes and initiatives in the country. Some even referred to their funding methodology as 'flawed', centred on the EU merely providing money to the traditional political elite to 'keep business running', rather than being bottom-up. One participant asked, 'How is the EU doing [funding] 'democracy support' in the midst of a crisis?' A representative from one of the country's emerging political parties likened their methodology to 'throwing money on a problem… [And] they do not understand that it is not working.' Another likened this approach to 'silencing', stating 'We are forbidden to talk. They give us money, they buy our silence, and they don't want anything but loyalty.' The overwhelming majority of participants across all groups agreed that there more often than not**, there is no 'radical', 'effective', or 'direct change' resulting from EU-funded programming.** The discussions also revealed one of the limitations of EU funding in Lebanon – the funding of programmes and initiatives (i.e. implementable activities) as opposed to financially supporting lobbying groups and activities in the quest for democratic change. The overwhelming majority of participants across all groups questioned the significance of these funds without the real or substantial political and legal reforms that are expected to accompany them: 'The EU would never fund a coalition to pressure amendments to labour law… The EU would never care about that. How would [democratic] change happen if you are not supporting the essence of change, which is advocacy?' A journalist echoed this statement that, 'The EU could have enacted reforms in other areas, such as Lebanese labour law, but they did not, so they could keep profiting from the status

quo.' One representative of civil society stated, 'The EU does not fund advocacy or lobbying efforts… Their added value, compared to us, is that they deal with politics in Lebanon. They can go to the Internal Security Forces, General Security, they can push the agenda [if they wanted to].' Another NGO member expressed their frustration at how the EU's funding strategy does not centre lobbying, explaining that 'They funded the first part [a project or a programme] to give a particular voice [to a group], but our voice is restricted and limited in a circle we cannot escape from.' Another limitation that was raised was the lack of follow-up from EU representatives and donors following project funding and implementation, specifically to understand the impact of this programming on Lebanon at large, and whether it does in fact promote democracy. **Little to no follow-up reports reach civil society representatives, and if available online, are developed to be more of a general overview of programming as opposed to detailed content. This reveals a large disconnect when it comes to accessing information and data on EU programming and impact of implemented projects.**

With respect to funding conditionality, the discussions revealed that there appears to be no funding conditionality per se – however, the EU does have an impact on particular themes within funded programming and projects (e.g. women's rights, refugees, etc.), meaning that, to some extent, they do exert their agenda via financial support. All of the participants expressed their staunch opposition to receiving funding from any entity that might exert a particular agenda on them, with some organisations sharing that they either rejected funding opportunities outright or actually lost financial support for either being 'too vocal' or for their criticism.

4.4 Central Epiphanic Moment and How It Unfolded

Following the 'early promise' of Lebanon's **October 2019** protest movements, during which Lebanese citizens took to the streets to demand structural change and reforms and an end to the sectarian, clientelist system, on 4 August 2020, a catastrophic explosion occurred at the Port of Beirut, resulting in widespread casualties and extensive damage to the city (Makdisi 2021). In the aftermath of the Port explosion, French President Emmanuel "Papa" Macron informally visited Beirut, walking through the destroyed streets and hugging weary Lebanese citizens, and announced a French-led diplomatic intervention, drawing global attention back to Lebanon and unlocking international aid, which had been previously blocked, awaiting the implementation of anti-corruption measures and policy reforms by the Lebanese government (Makdisi 2021: 437). Initially, Macron emphasised the need for a 'new political contract' as a means of bringing about democratic change to Lebanon. However, shortly thereafter, Macron shifted his rhetoric and no longer called for a new ruling formula but rather called for the Lebanese to decide on the future of their country via electoral competition. The Beirut blast was a central epiphanic moment that was discussed at length by participants, a juncture that 'encapsulated Lebanon's political turmoil in compressed time, transforming Lebanon's political landscape, as people moved quickly from shock to hope to despair to renewed division' (Makdisi 2021).

Participants expressed their disdain at Macron's visit and questioned the intentions behind his trip to Lebanon at such a pivotal moment, during what was referred to by many as 'a moment of anger among the Lebanese population' following the high loss of life and cataclysmic levels of destruction from the Beirut Port explosion. The majority of the participants viewed the visit as merely a means to absorb and diffuse the anger and devastation of the Lebanese, a 'morphine shot… to help people's pain.' The overwhelming majority of the participants agreed that while his visit may have been intended to enact transformation within the Lebanese political system, it may have alternatively shattered any potential attempt towards democratic change. Members of the focus group discussions explained their interpretation of his visit as a 'cosmetic façade,' which meant to 'polish the ruling class's image' and

'show sympathy but without intending to change the system.' One participant added, 'If Macron really wanted the current rulers to step aside, he could have used many other ways or methods.' A representative of one of the emerging political parties in Lebanon explained that Macron's visit should be considered within the broader context of EU-Lebanon engagement, stating that the EU had tried to meet with Lebanese civil society multiple times both before and after his visit, and that Macron was 'testing the ground' to see if Lebanon could accept democratic change. They stated, 'What the EU found was that [pro-change] civil society groups are detached and do not have a unified political vision. Therefore, they decided to deal with who was available – the traditional political elite.' This is another example of how the EU favours stability over democracy and upholds the political status quo in Lebanon. A journalist clarified that the visit itself gave the ruling class legitimacy, particularly when Macron referred to the elections and mentioned, 'You [the Lebanese] elected them.' As such, Macron's informal visit can be seen as a co-optation of an epiphany moment that otherwise might have led to broad political change and a shift in the status quo of the ruling elite.

4.5 Gatekeepers

Various gatekeepers to EU-Lebanon engagement were mentioned during the discussions. The representatives of civil society organisations agreed that third-party implementers of EU-funded projects are significant gatekeepers. These implementers, which are often civil society organisations that have prior experience with executing EU programming in Lebanon, act as intermediaries between EU donors and other civil society representatives. However, rather than acting as a link between the EU and Lebanese civil society, they instead establish a rupture between the two. For instance, the implementer, in response to feedback from other NGOs, referred them to the EU donor who is known to be difficult to reach. They justify their role as purely technical in relation to projects, deliverables, and outcomes. Therefore, they impose themselves as de facto gatekeepers, which, on the one hand, absolves the EU from any accountability, and, on the other hand, causes frustration among Lebanese civil society. The project ends up being activity-driven as opposed to driving political or democratic change. Another important gatekeeper preceding the implementation of any EU-funded project is the proposal itself, known for being 'the hardest to apply to.' Participants acknowledged the long and tedious process to apply for EU funding, as well as the expertise needed to develop the proposal, which these organisations more often than not lack. This required expertise excludes the overwhelming majority of Lebanese civil society and reaffirms those who have acquired and developed the appropriate level of technical skills as the trusted partners, or 'usual suspects,' in dealing with the EU, subsequently resulting in NGOisation. While the implementers and the project proposal process act as structural impediments **preventing inclusion and better engagement between the EU and local representatives, European diplomats abide by a set of centralised policies devised and developed in Brussels, which reduces their role (of Lebanese CSOs) to 'employees' and 'implementers' of these policies instead of active interlocutors, sidelining, as a result, more substantive discussions related to the contextualisation of the project**. The EU is a large bureaucracy, a 'slow and agile entity,' which further reduces its role to a structure that establishes a hierarchy between 'neutral donors' and 'recipients.' As an extension, these hierarchical partnerships unfold within **a very specific framework, reduced to the life of the project and KPIs, which considerably reduces any potential impact beyond the scope of these projects themselves. Communications are therefore, on the one hand, limited to project activities, and, on the other hand, lost after project completion**. Another important gatekeeper that was identified by the discussions is the Lebanese political elite. There was significant expressed resentment from all groups towards the Lebanese political elite. In the few exceptions where they were praised, this was due more to coordination efforts and the technical dimension, and

not necessarily due to the successful implementation of democratic reforms. Participants complained that the Lebanese political elite were hoarding information and forbidding the establishment of a clearer, constant channel of communication with the EU. Finally, the geopolitical situation regionally and globally was also identified as a gatekeeper, especially the Russia-Ukraine war, which led to the diversion of available funds and significantly less earmarked assistance to other countries, as well as the genocide in Gaza.

4.6 Two Pivotal Issues: The Genocide in Gaza and Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

The recent and ongoing genocide in Gaza was discussed at length as an epiphanic moment in light of EU democracy support in Lebanon and the region. **Because of the EU's perceived role in Israel's continued impunity, participants across all groups questioned the explicit double standards of the EU in their application of 'so-called' democratic values and human rights principles. Of particular significance was the overwhelming agreement that 'whoever created democracy [Europe] is not applying it.'** One journalist emphasised that *'Some leaders in Europe have shown that they believe human rights are not for Arabs.' Another pivotal issue that was raised concerned the recent EUR 1 billion aid package to Lebanon in an attempt to curb migration flows to Europe. All groups strongly rejected this aid package, seeing it as externalisation in action and another way of legitimising the traditional political elite, who were blocked from European and international aid until clear democratic reforms were implemented, and 'who now got 1 billion without any effort.'* A representative of the emerging political parties explained that the Lebanese government unconditionally approved this European aid package without knowledge of what they voted on. Other participants *likened this aid package to the Macron visit, claiming it to be a way in which EU leadership in Brussels can secure some sort of 'victory,' while at the same time entertaining a vested interest with the traditional political elite: much-needed money in exchange for preventing refugee flows to Europe.*

5 Conclusion

Based on the results of the FGDs and interviews in Lebanon, this report provides a better understanding of **how EU democracy practice is contested locally in Lebanon**. Across various local voices in the country, **perceptions of EU democracy support are dim**, specifically when viewed within the lens of contemporary challenges such as the Syrian refugee influx to Lebanon and the genocide in Gaza. **These practices are highly contested by both traditional political parties and representatives of civil society organisations – but these opinions are rarely taken into consideration or acknowledged by EU partners**. **Multiple gatekeepers to this engagement also pose a significant obstacle to establishing clear communication channels between the EU and local voices, further hindering efforts at democracy support, promotion, and programming**. To this end, **the EU should gain a more nuanced understanding of the contradictory effects of its democracy support policies and practices, as well as the complex dynamics of the local context, ahead of future efforts to promote democratisation in other countries**.

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Annex 2: Forestalling Statehood: EU Financial Support for Democracy Building in Palestine

Executive Summary

The overall objective of this paper is to critically engage with 'democracy promotion' as a contested international practice. It specifically focuses on the EU's role and programs in Palestine, by unpacking their multiple and contradictory meanings and diverse impacts at the local level. The Palestine Case Study aims to centre the voices and needs of the communities receiving aid, to understand the key notions of political democracy and democratic governance by highlighting diverse first-hand experiences. It explores local adaptation and contestation to such programs and what their effects are through one-on-one interviews as well as focus groups. We examine the way in which EU democracy promotion funding intersects with local dynamics in Palestine. We conclude that the EU's funding practices tend to privilege EU agendas over local needs, and these practices also ignore the ongoing effect of the Israeli occupation.

1 Introduction: Struggling for Statehood

The struggle for Palestinian democracy is deeply intertwined with the quest for statehood, a goal hindered by the Israeli occupation since 1967. Despite symbolic declarations of statehood, effective sovereignty remains elusive due to the dominance of Israel over Palestine. Palestinian politics are marked by conflict, alienation from the Palestinian Authority (PA) and reliance on foreign support. Authoritarian tendencies, exemplified by the PA's disregard for fair elections and crackdowns on dissent, have eroded democratic aspirations. Research has shown that much of the PA's political activities centre on the theatrical rather than the representative; that Palestinian officials are effectively paid to "'act' as if the Palestinian state exists" rather than effectuate its coming into being (Pace and Sen 48). The blockade on Gaza and constant wars further undermines democratic expectations and political reform. The divide between Gaza and the West Bank exacerbates citizen rights' violations, with both Hamas and the PA suppressing opposition. The slanted relationship between the EU and Israel in relation to Palestine, when the former is the occupying power of the latter, exacerbates the unequal relations of power. In EU publications, Israel is depicted as an equal partner, whereas Palestine remains a humanitarian catastrophe – the cause of which remains opaque in these writings (European External Action Service, date?).

International financial support, particularly from the EU, plays a crucial role in supporting Palestinians while subsidising the Israeli occupation, but its impact on democratisation is questioned by both our interlocutors and academic scholarship. Despite limitations, efforts to understand the local context and empower grassroots voices are essential. However, the EU's financial support conditionality often contradicts democratic principles and perpetuates the occupation. The EU's approach to financial support has focused on economic development and security, neglecting the underlying political issues. The unequal and oftentimes arbitrary treatment of Palestinian organisations by international donors highlights the difference between promoting democracy and promoting agendas. Democratisation cannot ignore the complex legal and political landscape shaped by the Israeli occupation.

Definitions:

The United Nations defines democratic governance as one that:

> includes an enduring capacity for: the separation of powers and independence of the branches of government; the exercise of power in accordance with the rule of law; the respect for

> human rights and fundamental freedoms; and the transparency and accountability of a responsible civil service, functioning at both the national and local levels.
>
> [A democracy] welcomes a wide scope of political participation embracing a pluralistic system of political parties, a vibrant civil society, and media. Further, strong democratic institutions promote and integrate women and minorities in all levels of the Government and society as a whole. Also, a state which embodies the culture of democratic governance is one which protects the rights and dignity of children (United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste 2012).

The UN developed this definition in light of its active role in establishing East Timorese independence and democracy after decades of Indonesian occupation. Its conception of democratic governance in East Timor is therefore relevant to conceiving of the EU's role in supporting democratic transition in Palestine.

Thus, political democracy is a much broader conception than a strictly electoral system. It involves an entire cultural apparatus and a set of values that a society is required to adopt. These values do not organically appear with the rise of electoral politics. According to the UN's *An Agenda for Democratization*, 'Democratization is a process which leads to a more open, more participatory, less authoritarian society. Democracy is a system of government which embodies, in a variety of institutions and mechanisms, the ideal of political power based on the will of the people' (Boutros-Ghali 1996). Democratic transition is the process by which a polity's political and social structure is shifted towards these values outlined above and is synonymous with democratization. Political democratization is distinct from political governance broadly conceived because political governance is simply the enforcement of decisions, no matter how these decisions are made. The Palestinian case is not even a case of viable political governance, because the PA is unable to enforce its own decisions on the Occupied Territory.

2 EU PRACTICES: CONTESTATION, COOPTATION, AND ACQUIESCENCE BY LOCALS.

2.1 From Intifada to Oslo/PA: 1985-1995

The First Intifada came as a shock to the status quo in the region, with the post-1967 system being seen as economically beneficial to Palestinians. Indeed, statistics showed that incomes rose steadily in the aftermath of the 6-Day War as more Palestinians were allowed to work inside Israel (Khalidi 2021). These Palestinians were mainly unskilled labourers who earned higher wages in Israel than they earned during the interim period between 1948 and 1967. However, these workers did not invest in the local economy and were not paid by employers in Gaza or the West Bank. Thus, prosperity may have increased, but the local economy did not expand. Furthermore, opportunities were bleak for anyone not able or willing to work as an unskilled labourer in the Israeli economy—jobs for educated Palestinians were scarce and Israel's expropriation of land continued unabated. The First Intifada was therefore an expression of frustration at the status quo, and the international community's response was the Oslo Accords. These Accords served to entrench PA authority and channel support either to the PA directly or to groups affiliated with the PA. Organisations like the Holst Fund (Wake 2008), although helpful in delivering timely support, shifted during this period, focusing its support almost exclusively on the PA and its auxiliaries.

The Oslo Accords laid the foundations for the relations of power and support that underpin the political status quo up to this present day. In fact, the Oslo Accords aimed to create a state with limited powers of administration but absolutely no sovereignty. The statehood Oslo granted was from its inception fictitious, and foreign support incentivised Palestinians to act like they had a state when they lacked basic sovereignty. Foreign support has therefore contributed to the "fuzziness" of the Palestinian State, rooting it further in performance and privilege rather than seriously addressing needs on the ground (Pace 2019). This support geared towards democracy promotion in Palestine began in earnest after 1994, Oslo providing a model for a polity acceptable to the donors. However, support quickly began to be used to entrench Fatah's supremacy over the PLO, and the emergence of the Palestinian Authority (PA) as a hegemonic power within Palestine (and as an extended security arm of the Israeli occupation). The money flowing into the PA also allowed it to discipline its own members and establish a single authority under Yasser Arafat and then Mahmoud Abbas (Farsakh 2016). The boycotting of the 1996 elections by several Palestinian political actors, including Hamas, further entrenched PA authority and established a polity where most power was centralised in the executive. When not entrenching PA authority, support subsidised Israeli occupation; the international community continuing to pay to prolong the fragmentation of the Palestinian polity and allowing Israel to waive its obligations under international law.

The dominant approach that emerged during this period—and that continues in organisations like the World Bank—has been called by Tartir et al. (2021) instrumentalist. Instrumentalists believe that support should be directed towards strong central authority and that financial support distribution policies can create peaceful, sustained coexistence in harmony with the vision set out by the Oslo Accords (Wildeman and Tartir 2021: 228). When their direction of funding towards this centralised authority does not produce the expected outcomes, instrumentalists blame exogenous factors or Palestinian administrative incompetence. They do not tend to rethink how the core of their directive relationship with the Palestinian people may be fundamentally unjust, unequal or unfair. Furthermore, the mechanisms of Israeli occupation and the settlement of the occupied territories are seen as realities to be avoided rather than issues that need to be tackled (Wildeman and Tartir 2021: 230). In a sense, political support is depoliticised; the political realities on the ground are abstracted, and policies are directed towards economic prosperity that will allow Palestinians to accept Israel's role in the region. The World Bank and its reports adopt and promote this approach, as can be seen for example in its reports on the Intifada, which focused on creating a system of prosperity that would allow for continuing the pre-Intifada status quo (The World Bank 2003).

The academic literature (see Wildeman 2021, Khalidi 2021, Farsakh 2016) holds that during this period, the foundations for a depoliticised Palestinian Authority rooted in economic prosperity rather than national self-determination were laid. This process paved the way for Trump's Peace for Prosperity doctrine; instead of offering a viable economic system, the international community would invest in economic incentives. Integration with the Israeli economy was seen as beneficial for Palestinians, and a means of ensuring peace.

2.2 Limits to On Democratic Commitments: 1996-2007

With the Second Intifada, a group called critical instrumentalists in the academic literature (Tartir 2021) came to prominence. They challenged the occupation existentially and identified the spread of settlements as a major obstacle for peace. However, critical instrumentalists maintain that the PA is the legitimate source of authority for the Palestinian people, and they generally adopt the Oslo framework. They are distinct from the instrumentalists in that critical instrumentalists see occupation

as the major obstacle to the effectiveness of support channelled through the Oslo framework (Wildeman and Tartir 2021: 233). The Second Intifada demonstrated the ineffectiveness of the purely instrumental approach. However, for these critical instrumentalists, the issue was not the entire framework of Oslo, but rather the continuation of the settlements.

Indeed, the immediate aftermath of the Oslo Accords seems to have gestured towards the plausibility of the Accords' goals. Despite Fatah's control over the PA, the frameworks established after Oslo still allowed for Hamas's rise to power. International actors—many of them support donors—testified to the transparency of the 1996 as well as the 2006 elections (Farsakh 2016: 53). The effectiveness of these processes of government building may have served to assure donors of the instrumentalist approach; by investing in a strong centralised authority and by strengthening this authority, a polity recognisable to Western observers was emerging.

Hamas's 2006 victory, however, exposed the faults of this logic; many internationals were not interested in a democratic polity as such, they were more interested in a polity that upheld the fundamental framework set out in the Oslo Accords. Despite the widely acknowledged fairness, transparency, and freeness of the 2006 elections (EU own observation mission 2006), donors still boycotted the PA after Hamas's victory and did not protest Israel's arrest of Hamas parliamentarians (Farsakh 2016: 53). Consequently, the premises behind the support regimes came into question; were they meant to establish a democratic polity, or an Oslo polity? Were Palestinians free to reject parts of the Oslo Accords, or was this a liberty that donors found intolerable? The tragic rift that came about because of the 2006 elections scars Palestinian politics up to this day.

Upon Hamas's rise to power, Oslo's politics—and the support regime associated therewith—began to fall apart. The PA's claim to legitimacy in the international arena was largely based on its recognition of Israel and its repudiation of armed resistance. However, these very factors were key to its waning domestic legitimacy. When Hamas won the 2006 elections, PA President Mahmoud Abbas pressured Hamas to disarm and recognise Israel, but Hamas refused. Almost immediately, Israel withheld the PA's tax revenue, causing an immense and immediate deficit in the PA's budget (around 40% of the PA's budget comes from tax revenue) (Tannira 2021: 137). June of 2007 saw the breakdown of the unity government which was headed by Ismail Haniyeh, and the consolidation of Hamas's control over the Gaza Strip. Abbas established the Fayyad cabinet under an emergency government. Within days, the US and the EU recognised the Fayyad government—despite it being unelected and coming at the cost of an elected government. Both reinstated support regimes to the PA, in a bid to bolster Abbas's legitimacy.

Financial support to Gaza became greatly limited as a result of both the blockade and the international community's refusal to recognise the results of the 2006 elections. Literally surrounded from all sides and isolated from the rest of Palestine (that is the West Bank and East Jerusalem) and the region, Gaza began to create its own economic system, still dependent on UNRWA and other limited forms of support but more heavily dependent on a network of tunnels that brought the strip into Egypt's economic orbit. Prior to Egypt's destruction of these tunnels by flooding them in 2015-2016, 80% of Gaza's economy was dependent on the tunnels (Tannira 2021: 140).

The literature therefore points to Gaza's isolation and blockade as evidence of the conditionality of the support regime; support did not aim at developing democratic institutions but was rather contingent on acceptance of the Oslo regime. Thus, at the eve of 2008, we observed two polities within Occupied Palestine, both extremely precarious; one ruled by the PA, supported by the international community, and dependent on foreign support and Israeli tax revenue. The second polity, ruled by Hamas,

depended to some degree on the PA for some public sector wages, but was far more dependent on the tunnels with Egypt.

2.3 Cast Lead and Iron Fists: War in Gaza and Crackdown in the West Bank: 2008-2018

As a result of the tightening of Israel's hold on the Gaza Strip, Hamas increased the number of rockets fired into southern Israel, to which Israel responded with heavy bombardment. An Egyptian-brokered truce ended in the final days of 2008, resulting in a three-week-long bombing of Gaza named Operation Cast Lead by the Israelis. The result was over a thousand Palestinian deaths and thirteen Israeli ones (PCHR 2009). The Israeli ground invasion began in early January of 2009 and lasted until late that month. Thereafter, however, support for rebuilding began to flow into Gaza. These efforts were partly subsidising obligations placed on Israel by UNHRC to rebuild.

In the aftermath of the 2008 War, the Palestinian National Assembly established the Palestinian Reform and Development Plan (PRDP), a medium-term plan to address concerns relating to Palestinian development and reconstruction projects. The PRDP set out four main goals: (1) good governance, as envisioned through separation of powers and government accountability; (2) safety and security; (3) increasing national prosperity by increasing private and public sectors; and (4) improving quality of life through the provision of social services (Palestinian National Authority 2008: 35-6). However, this plan continues to rely centrally on external financial support:

> Under every foreseeable scenario, the short-term viability of the Palestinian economy will be driven by aid. Even under the most optimistic scenarios significant aid will continue to be required for the medium-term. Clearly, the ability of the private sector to resume its place as a driver for growth will have a major bearing on the sustained health of the Palestinian economy and thus its aid requirements, which will therefore be even larger in the absence of improvements in movements and access restrictions.

In light of this explicit dependence on financial support, a class of NGOs by this point had emerged whose primary goal was meeting donor expectation rather than citizen needs. This professionalisation of the NGO scene favoured those organisations that promoted a vision of Palestinian politics endorsed by the Oslo Accords and projected this vision back to the donors (Farsakh 2016: 55). Thus, even Palestinian NGOs were forced to choose between tending to local needs and forsaking lucrative foreign support and catering to donors while abjuring popular sentiments.

In the period after the 2008 Gaza War, the dominant academic approach to the financial support regime has been one of increased criticality, a more thoroughly critical approach to support. Exemplified (and in many ways prophesied) by scholars like Sara Roy (Roy 2016), scholars writing in this critical approach questioned the neoliberal presumptions of financial support. For the first time, these scholars abandoned the presumption that good policy will deliver Palestinian statehood (Wildeman and Tartir 2021: 235). Roy, for example, argues that the integration of Palestinians into the Israeli economy benefits Israel, not the Palestinians. Facilitating this integration and pouring financial support into the PA does not help the Palestinians but rather entrenches the PA (effectively a subcontractor for Israel) and de-develops the Palestinian economy (Roy 2016).

2.4 The Great March of Return and the Sheikh Jarrah Protests: Rejecting Oslo's Priorities

The status quo was still not acceptable, however—in 2018 and 2019, protests on the border between Gaza and Israel erupted, protests that came to be known as the Great March of Return. In these protests, Palestinians marched towards the barrier between Israel and Gaza and were met with brute

force by Israeli military forces. The primary demand of the protests was one that the Oslo Accords deferred to the final status agreement, avoiding a direct discussion thereof decades ago: the right to return. After all, most of Gaza's population were themselves refugees from the Nakba and saw their return to their ancestral land as an integral part of any peace process (Kershner and Abuheweila, year?). Thus, the March of Return was a rejection of the priorities set forth by the status quo, and was an expression of the general public's demands, regardless of the PA's negotiations or the international community's expectations.

The ties between the West Bank and Gaza, however, were not totally severed: in the early 2020s, protests erupted in both territories. In the West Bank, particularly East Jerusalem, protests erupted over the expulsion of Palestinian families from the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood (Mounayyer 2021). Although Israeli courts litigated the issue as a domestic dispute, Palestinians cited the neighbourhood's place outside of Israel proper to dispute Israel's jurisdiction over the land (Baconi 2021). Home demolitions and forced evictions to make way for Jewish settlers have been routine—and ignored by the status quo—since the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza began. However, protests erupted in 2021 as the Israeli Supreme Court was set to announce its decision on the dispute on 10 May, five days before the anniversary of the Nakba. The PA had postponed elections indefinitely. Protests erupted not only in Jerusalem but in Lydd, Hebron, Nablus, Haifa, and Nazareth—on both sides of the Green Line, articulating the continued unity of Palestinian national consciousness (Mounayyer 2021).

As Palestinians emphatically expressed their rejection of the Oslo realities, Israel and the United States turned their sights elsewhere in the region. The Abraham Accords were a set of agreements between Israel, Bahrain, the UAE, Morocco, and Sudan. The Abraham Accords were in turn part of then President Trump's 'Peace to Prosperity' plan, which gave Israel all of Jerusalem and its settlements in the West Bank in exchange for some land on the Egyptian border to establish a non-contiguous Palestinian state with limited sovereignty (US National Archives and Records Administration 2020). The Abraham Accords deepened dependency because they subsumed Palestinian needs to serve regional security concerns, rendering the Palestinians irrelevant, and Palestine only a pawn on the negotiating table.

The Abraham Accords and the Peace for Prosperity plan brought to the fore what scholars call the pro-dependency approach to international support for the Palestinian people (Wildeman and Tartir 2021). The pro-dependency approach sees financial support as a means to making Palestinians more docile and accepting of the continuing Israeli occupation. Although this approach has existed since Oslo, it reached its pinnacle under the Trump administration, whence it became official policy. The pro-dependency approach sees that appropriate policies should ignore the occupation in that it should not resist the settlements or Israeli domination of the occupied territories. In this sense, those advocating dependency align with the instrumentalists of Oslo's early days. However, the two are distinct in that those advocating for dependency do not consider the purpose of this disregard for the occupation to be the promotion of peace. Instead, financial support is meant primarily to create conditions for the acceptance and entrenchment of Israeli occupation permanently (Wildeman and Tartir 2021: 241).

At the time of writing, Israel is in its ninth month of committing international war crimes against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. This bombing is accompanied with widespread demolitions in the Green Zone and the West Bank, an ongoing military blockade restricting movements, and an unprecedented rise in settler violence. The future of the region is increasingly unclear; on the one hand, the destruction seems insurmountable, on the other, Western public opinion is shifting sharply in Palestine's favour. Financial support has been further restricted, and a humanitarian catastrophe is unfolding as we speak.

The attacks of October 7th, which began this round of bombing, are yet another articulation of the Palestinian public's unwillingness to be sidelined by a process of de-politicisation. The claims of Palestinians cannot be addressed through diplomatic cables between Washington and the Arab States, but must centre the grievances of Palestinians, as articulated through some political means. Palestine's dependence on foreign support and its integration into the Israeli economy has meant that the risks it faces are multiplied; Gazans suffer attacks from the very state that controls their resources, economy, wages, and access to the outside world.

3 FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION: FRUSTRATION AND FUTILITY

3.1 Methodology and Objectives of the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

The aim of this project is to centre the voices and needs of the communities receiving aid, to understand the key notions of political democracy and democratic governance by highlighting diverse firsthand experiences. In conducting the consultation sessions, we are cognisant of the importance of informed consent and clarity with regards to the positionality of both researchers and interlocutors. Despite limitations, it nonetheless sheds light on the nuanced approaches unique to the Palestinian experience.

Ethical considerations were integrated into every phase of the research process, from data collection and literature review to focus group design, implementation, and the writing of the study. Furthermore, diversity and inclusivity were prioritised to ensure that the voices captured encompassed a spectrum of age, gender, geographical, religious, and political affiliations. Three focus group sessions were conducted, each lasting approximately two hours, with the following breakdown:

- Syndicates and National Funds: Conducted in person in Jericho.
- Youth Development & Empowerment Organisations: Conducted via Zoom with three participants.
- Gender Empowerment and Women Development Organisations: Conducted via Zoom with four participants.

Additionally, individual online interviews were conducted with three representatives from Cooperative Unions, Parliamentarians, and politicians, respectively. Diversity and inclusivity considerations were taken into account to make sure that the voices captured diversity in age, gender, geographical, religious, and political affiliations. The researchers ensured attributing the knowledge and experiences of these groups to those who contributed. We also were careful that the positionality and reflexivity of the researchers vis-à-vis the focus group sample captured the voices at the centre of EU support in Palestine. Retaining the agency and the positionality of the researched community was the main consideration in the writing of this study.

Both interviews and consultation sessions were conducted by a Palestinian moderator, a lawyer with over 20 years of experience in human rights, access to justice, and gender issues, and extensive knowledge of EU support to Palestinians.

The project faces limitations due to three overarching causes: firstly, Israeli occupation, secondly political repression, and lastly polarization within Palestinian society. We are aware of the temporal and geographic limits, along with the limits created by the current war on Gaza, which has shifted priorities and focus dramatically. The Israeli blockade on Gaza, continuing during the war, the military occupation, and the restrictions on movement associated therewith all contribute to our inability to

conduct this study on the standards we desire. During the data collection phase, some requests for interviews and consultation sessions were declined. Certain interlocutors refused to meet with the AUB researchers, citing disappointment with what they called the EU's "double standards" and its failure to address ongoing war crimes in Gaza. Others conveyed a sense of animosity toward the EU and futility about the study itself, feelings tied to the EU's role in post-2006 election sanctions and other historical events. For instance, a representative from a Palestinian syndicate expressed frustration over the EU's current stance toward the Palestinian people, voicing disappointment in the EU's perceived complicity in supporting Israel in its war crimes in Gaza and reluctance to engage meaningfully with Palestinians. Representatives from Hamas and the six NGOs recently added to the Israeli terror list also refused to participate, citing a sense of hopelessness and frustration. Similarly, a women's group from Askar refugee camp in Nablus declined to participate in an interview or focus group, citing anger over the camp's poor living conditions. They highlighted the ongoing grip of the Israeli occupation, dire economic circumstances, and a bleak reality, noting that EU projects offered only minor, temporary fixes that failed to address the root causes of their hardship. The war also prevented politicians Hanan Ashrawi and Mustafa Bargouthi from speaking to us, because they were too busy advocating for the end of the war. The repression practised by the PA exacerbates the challenges of doing research amid ongoing political divide and war. Finally, another limitation stems from the unwillingness of some of our interlocutors to sit with each other. Our inability to negotiate for a more diverse pool of interlocutors comes from several sources of friction including differences in agenda, political view, or professional competition. Other times, deep ideological and political rifts made our invitees refuse to appear in the same room–even when that room was a virtual one over Zoom.

Since the War on Gaza, the Israeli military has tightened control over entry and exit points between Palestinian cities, and settler violence against Palestinians has increased. Our interlocutors opted for interviews via Zoom or in person, based on both convenience and safety concerns. AUB researchers conducted in-person sessions in Jericho and Ramallah when possible, using Zoom for participants in other parts of the West Bank to reduce risks associated with travel and checkpoints. This approach balanced the project's effectiveness with participants' safety.

Despite these limitations, our study is methodologically innovative because of the diversity of voices and methods. We have incorporated the experiences of women and men from various age groups, but also brought together initiatives that focus on women, youth, and human rights. We place these voices in conversation with political and syndical leaders who shape the Palestinian political landscape. We maintain the anonymity of our interlocutors in order to minimise the effects of self-censorship.

3.2 Findings

The EU generously funds bi-national peace-building and coexistence initiatives in the post-Oslo landscape, without looking to resolve the root cause of the problem: occupation. This meant that those who partake in such initiatives often face internal criticism. When organisations as a whole opposed, they were sanctioned. The European Union's financial involvement in issues like the rule of law, funding for women's and children's issues underwent a shift following the closure of six Palestinian civil society organisations by military order. These organisations, Addameer, al-Haq, Defence for Children Palestine, the Union of Agricultural Work Committees, Bisan Centre for Research and Development and the Union of Palestinian Women Committees, were deemed terrorist organisations by the Israeli government (UNOHCR 2021) and by virtue of the order became completely at the mercy of Israeli military authorities; their offices, assets, and employees could be seized at will. Our

interlocutors pointed out that this policy by the EU in fact reaffirms their commitment to Israel as an equal at the cost of Palestine; by accepting Israel's designation of these groups, the EU makes sure Israel appears democratic and peace-loving, not as a war-mongering and violent occupier. The EU crafted a document (EU 2024) similar to the U.S. terrorism document (US Department of State 2001), compelling organisations to sign. While some institutions agreed and signed, others refused, marking the beginning of a power struggle. The closure of highly active institutions led to funding primarily for government-supported entities, aligning with the PA. The impact of this policy over the years has imposed challenges on civil society in Palestine. Civil society became caught between ethical and national commitments on the one hand, and the needs for funding on the other**. In order to receive support, they are compelled to designate Palestinian resistance an act of terror, thereby betraying the recognised right of the Palestinian people for self-determination. Rejecting the EU-imposed restrictions, on the other hand, hinders access to funding and jeopardises civil society work and survival, along with the livelihood of all those dependent on aid.**

The policy of designating civil society organisations as terror groups had a chilling and silencing effect on the scope of work of the Palestinian civil society. By using the same coin to equate terrorism with Palestinian national resistance, the policy was not only exclusionary, but it was also stigmatizing because it equated Palestinian liberation activism with terror. As a result, out of fear of jeopardising funding, some of the civil society institutions bowed to the external pressure and signed the policy. The schism among civil society actors has consequently widened, adding another level of complexity to an already complex situation. The EU policy required vetting all beneficiaries, even those who might sit in a training course. This policy resulted in excluding all those even remotely related to what the Israeli military classified (i.e. the occupying power / apartheid regime) as involvement or incitement of terrorism. For example, having a cousin who is a member in the charitable or cultural sections of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) would disqualify someone from being a beneficiary. In an anecdote relayed by one of our interlocutors, the Palestinian Bar Association was unable to deliver training for lawyers in marginalised villages in the West Bank without vetting every participant. None of the participants were supposed to have any links whatsoever to anyone who is a member of the PFLP. In a small, tightly knit Palestinian society, the policy proved to be discriminatory and divisive.

This policy was yet another assault on the diversity of support-dependent Palestinian civil society actors. This assault led to fragmentation and therefore increased their fragility and vulnerability. The policy was one-sided and inherently biased because it emerged only from the determinations of the Israeli military occupation, without consideration for the Palestinian perspective. Sanctioning these organisations and anyone remotely affiliated with them aimed to further protect the state of Israel at the expense of the livelihood of the Palestinian institutions. One participant in the focus groups explained that Palestinian organisations had requested the EU to draft a statement that denounces all forms of terrorism and violence and advocates for ending the Israeli occupation (In an anecdote relayed by one of our interlocutors). In doing so, the interlocutor was advocating for a well-established right enshrined in international law and at the heart of the existence of the Palestinian people. **The EU rejected this proposal and instead adopted a single narrative and a single policy, leveraging their financial power to increase the vulnerability of Palestinian actors and therefore further entrench the Israeli occupation.**

Western stringency regarding allegations of affiliation extends beyond Palestinian organisations and includes UN-affiliated groups working in Palestine**. After October 7th, EU member states, Britain and the United States decided to suspend their funding to UNRWA based on allegations from Israel that**

12 of UNRWA's 13,000 staff in Gaza were involved in the attack by Hamas. The decision put thousands of Palestinians at risk of starvation, in a form of collective punishment that put Palestinian refugees not only in Gaza but also in Jordan and Lebanon at a high risk of malnutrition and pushed the camps towards a health crisis. **Later, after overwhelming criticism of such a disproportionate and dangerous decision, the European Commission declared in March that it will pay 50 million euros ($54 million) to the beleaguered UNRWA but hold back 32 million euros while it investigates Israeli allegations that 12 staff took part in the Oct. 7 attacks on Israel. In the focus groups, participants interpreted the action of the EU as another episode where Palestinians are always presumed 'guilty, barbaric, terrorists and backwards.' Our interlocutors expressed the sense that they are always expected to justify themselves and to remind the world daily of their existence and their humanity.**

The EU's funding patterns contributed to creating a bubble of beneficiaries and a culture of dependency. It contributed to creating a culture of dependency on support in social, democratic and justice issues, where organizations no longer seek to reflect local needs and priorities, but rather focus on donor expectations and meeting all required conditions. As a result of this distance and estrangement, **the EU's support has contributed to what we call in this report 'the commodification of social and justice issues**.' Civil society organizations have been forced to transition from a culture of perseverance and steadfastness in the arduous pursuit of equality, social equity and human rights to become totally dependent on foreign financial support. As a result, these issues become commodities – in other words, 'donor funded' materials.

Cooperatives and syndicates were among those most reluctant to concede to EU demands and conditions. These organizations perceived EU aid as not only unsustainable but also as a main driver in creating a culture of commodifying social issues. This commodification means that social and agricultural and syndicate work became 'reports, fund raising, and logical frameworks' material 'rather than actually tending to community needs'. As one of the focus group participants articulated the problem: 'support with strings attached makes labor hectic; we are conditioned to hire staff with specific profiles, competency and language. They need to know how to speak the language of the donors, we spend time writing reports and adhering to visibility standards. As a result, we end up spending most of the grant money on administrative bureaucratic tasks rather than doing the actual work.'

European funding, in other words, is often laden with human rights slogans, aiming to strengthen the PA's authority, whilst diverting Palestinians from confronting issues related to the occupation and aligning with clear political agendas. The 2006 elections sparked a major clash when democratic results contradicted prevalent values, leaving many disillusioned. While desiring democracy, many Palestinians rejected forms that submitted to Israeli policies. The CEDAW fiasco shows that NGOs have lost their compass of priorities, lost their constituencies, and search to communicate with foreign donors rather than domestic beneficiaries. Today during the current war on Gaza, NGOs also have become disempowered, alienated from their source of power and spirit: the steadfastness of the Palestinian people.

The EU's economic policies, imposing a vision of progress on the PA and civil society organizations, collided with Palestinians' collective right to self-determination, while facially supporting individual rights. It was a contradictory funding scenario; for instance, continued support to PA security apparatuses despite political corruption and violence against opposition, aligning with Israeli and PA interests. The EU's language often contradicted itself, espousing Palestinian human rights while undermining them. Focus group participants have extensively shared their pessimism and frustrations

from the double standards of EU support. They explained that the EU in its current approach enhances fragmentation, empowering some segments of Palestinian society while marginalizing others. People who speak the language of development essential to external support can tap into these spaces created by the EU, whether or not they aspire to establish a democratic polity. The Palestinian Authority with its limited financial capabilities and even more limited public legitimacy has been ruling the West Bank with an iron fist. EU support of the PA and its security apparatuses has further increased the brutality of their crackdown. The PA continues to disregard the Palestinian peoples' immediate needs, including the creation of sustainable jobs, enhancing public services like education and health services, and respect for the rule of law.

Civil society organizations, predominantly in Ramallah, remain active but are constrained geographically and financially, forced to choose between neglecting societal priorities and receiving support. The civil society elite, benefiting from funding, manage institutions detached from Palestinian peoples' needs, aiding the EU's democratic façade. However, these organizations have grown disconnected from Palestinian societal values, fostering corruption and dependency.

Funds are understood to be attracted by appealing language rather than substance, acknowledging funding's necessity for institutional stability. However, these organizations became aware of societal resistance to their agendas, with their initiatives increasingly detached from Palestinian culture and needs. For example, cooperation between feminist civil society organizations, the EU, and the Palestinian Authority reflect shared interests but often at the expense of democracy, spreading corruption for mutual gain.

The reliance on funding often led to compromising Palestinian national self-determination, diverting budgets away from actual empowerment initiatives. The neglect of vital issues like the status of Jerusalem demonstrated the funding's flawed prioritization, leading to organizations migrating from Jerusalem to Ramallah. While some interlocutors reported that EU support and aid are unattainable, we sensed greater fear and concern in the long-term consequences of aid dependency on the cultural, social and political values of the Palestinian society. Support did indeed spur a transformation in societal sensitivity and preparedness to respond to social and human rights issues. However, this understanding became aid contingent instead of historically self-motivated. In the focus groups, some interlocutors shared that EU support, and the contribution of EU countries is always given to the Palestinians with a palpable degree of humiliation. Support is framed paternalistically, as aid given to third world people who need to be saved. Policies give the impression that Europe sees its role in the region as saving people from humanitarian crises through its guidance. However, this presumption overlooks the fact that humanitarian crises in Palestine are man-made, they are not natural disasters that require a humanitarian intervention from the well-developed 'western democratic regimes.' Palestinian plight is rooted in the history of dispersion and violence stretching back to 1948 and outlined above, and the wrongdoings of the past that continue to this present moment.

Donors often disregard ethical considerations that are implied in issues of democracy and human rights. Cloaked in a cultural-political rights-based paradigm, our interlocutors saw the EU's agendas as intimately intertwined with neoliberalism. Through neoliberalism, concepts like resistance are deconstructed, often under banners like peace and human rights, promoting individualism and liberalism over the goal of collective liberation. Donors tend to perpetuate acceptance of the Oslo Accords and the terms of the Israeli occupation, emphasizing issues like women's rights and security instead of national liberation. For instance, after Hamas's democratic victory in 2006, accusations of

terrorism undermined the democratic process, leading to a focus on smaller scale initiatives over collective action, further fragmenting society.

Our interlocutors expressed that the EU's support and funding agenda not only aligns with Israeli security interests but also shapes educational curricula to control citizen awareness from an early age. Even within project terminology, specific terms, such as 'Area C,' are used to obfuscate realities, perpetuating a narrative that serves Israel's security interests. When a project is designated as belonging to Area C of the Palestinian Territories, an area which is nearly entirely inaccessible to Palestinians and is heavily inhabited by Israeli settlers, the terms are in fact driving a larger wedge between the lived reality of our interlocutors and the language the EU chooses to use. The EU's agenda extends to financial intervention in elections and women's projects, often dictating terms that diverge from the struggle for Palestinian liberation. Additionally, the transformation of civil society from grassroots movements to funded organizations has diluted the spirit of societal resistance, focusing instead on individual initiatives rather than collective action.

The EU's agenda as perceived by our interlocutors does not aim to provide sustainable and long-term durable solutions to the Palestinian people. It aims to provide assistance that is more cosmetic in nature. The creeping annexation of the West Bank and the ongoing settlements construction with armed settlers occupying Palestinian homes and land have impeded Palestinian inhabitants' access to their lands, agricultural farms, natural resources, and livelihood. In Area C, Palestinian Bedouins are constantly displaced. More sedentary villagers in Area C are also denied the mere access to schools, hospitals and resources in neighbouring towns. Palestinians continue to live in a discriminatory reality shaped by an apartheid regime as exemplified by the infamous separation wall, despite the International Court of Justice (ICJ 2004) advisory opinion ruling on the illegality of the wall. EU support has been short-sighted and looks only on how to give Palestinians minor pacifications rather than giving them durable solutions to access resources in a way that guarantees their dignity and safety.

The EU's influence, despite ostensibly supporting democracy, often prioritizes security and maintains the status quo. For example, youth organizations face significant challenges in securing funding and implementing their activities due to the conditions imposed by donors, which do not take into consideration the innovation and ability to challenge essential to developing youth. Donors like the EU are often wary that youth organizations will be indoctrinating or radicalizing, and therefore the acceptable organizations become too narrow and ineffective. The EU demands assurances that the beneficiaries are not terrorists (itself a requirement embedded in racist presumptions), with financing always contingent upon the donors' ever-changing definition of 'terrorism.' Our interlocutors contrasted the EU approach with that of the Americans, who are straightforward and unchanging in their definitions which see any alignment with the Boycott, Divest, Sanction (BDS) movement as unacceptable (EU 2024). Other entities like UN organizations, Oxfam, and UNICEF object to such activities in a covert manner, making the organizations in fact more precarious. Additionally, the European Union's authority extends to scrutinizing the board of directors and employees within organizations, leading to funding being withheld for alleged associations with banned organizations. Our interlocutors told us that confirming their funding priorities is not straightforward because they often find themselves conforming to their terms for strictly economic reasons, including obliging to demands like signing documents acknowledging Israel's right to exist. Attempts to negotiate additional clauses recognizing Palestine's right to exist are met with outright rejection by EU donor organizations, leaving these organizations questioning the democratic standards being upheld. Moreover, organizations like the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) prohibit these

organizations from working with individuals of certain nationalities including Russian nationality for example, further complicating matters.

Financial oversight is stringent, leaving little room for manoeuvre outside prescribed activities. Deviating from the donor's defined framework results in funding being suspended, as exemplified by the cessation of support for Gaza during the period immediately following the election of Hamas (Roy 2016). Furthermore, the administrative process for financial documentation is complex and time-consuming, impacting the quality, duration, and participation numbers of the activities that organisations can put on. Our interlocutors pointed out that, even among Arab staff in financing institutions, a tendency exists to serve the specific agendas of the donor organisation over the national interests of the Palestinians, compelling these organisations to reluctantly comply.

Our interlocutors expressed a pressing need for a unified stance among Palestinian institutions to resist the imposition of arrogant donation conditions, yet existing differences within the Palestinian NGO Network exacerbate the situation. These networks require support to uphold their effectiveness and promote Palestinian national self-determination, aiming to foster a genuine civil society that builds the polity according to its people's vision.

The concept of financial support contradicts genuine national civil work, reflecting the agendas of external societies. US President Truman's initiatives in 1945 contributed to the idea of support through the international stage, indirectly imposing new forms of colonisation on the region according to our interlocutors. The specificity of terrorism in the Palestinian context poses an additional challenge, as what Western donors perceive as terrorism, many in Palestine view as defence of their land and sovereignty. While Palestinians see actions like stone-throwing as resistance, others deem the act one of terrorism. Again, our interlocutors pointed out that the most extreme form of this paranoia came from the US: American funders create agreements with clauses that allow for lawsuits against these organisations, especially if any of the civil society employees who work in the organisation are detained by the occupation.

The principle of Palestinian self-reliance has been undermined by reliance on external funding, leading to significant rifts among civil society organisations. During the First Intifada, civil society was more involved and influential in political life, whereas today, Western donors are imposing the concept of democracy from abroad, because the organisations and movements promoting democracy have been so thoroughly either delegitimised or defunded. Instead of catering to local needs, organisations need to cater to EU expectations. For instance, our interlocutors mentioned that there is a need to engage directly with youth, while due to EU restrictions, financial support is almost exclusively directed towards official institutions that have monopolised positions for years.

The European Union allocates millions for programmes not prioritised by local groups, and ignores pressing local needs, forcing organisations to fit within European cultural and standards frameworks. Although all donors have their prerequisites and signing documents, the EU may just be more explicit, and the Palestinian situation more dire, than most. Distribution of aid and support, whether geographically or politically, has empowered some causes and regions at the expense of others. Discrepancies in the distribution of support between staff, NGOs, and local actors have also created inequalities through aid.

Due to a variety of factors, foreign financial support is dwindling, which in return creates a sense of competition between organisations over limited resources. This dearth has created unprecedented sensitivities among competing actors, leading to a lack of cooperation motivated by each group trying

to retain authority over funding. This only further exacerbates the way in which many organisations have come to place Palestinian needs in a secondary position. The funding patterns have led to a sense of territoriality and survival anxiety among organisations to maintain themselves as the sole authority or the key player in a specific field. In other words, for civil society actors, EU support has become their 'bread and butter'. Many livelihoods are at stake and a full segment of the Palestinian society is dependent on jobs created by EU support. This dependency has created dynamics where the priority is to retain 'EU support economy', not to cultivate a sustainable Palestinian-led economy.

Women's organisations have been particularly affected by this donor-driven agenda. Aid is conditional and exclusionary, and as a result, civil society's work translated the needs and conditions of the donors' agenda, not the needs and priorities of Palestinian women and girls. The timeline, activities, number of beneficiaries, locations, and scope of work were mainly an articulation of the EU, not those who are at the heart of the social, cultural, political, and lived political realities. As one interlocutor eloquently expressed: 'civil society, and in particular women's organisations in Palestine, are like someone who metaphorically has climbed a tree and got caught halfway. The person is neither on the ground nor can they see the top of the tree.' NGOs have become mainly aid-dependent; they are incapable of performing any work without aid and funding. As a result, the external financial support created a bubble for those benefiting from it. It also created a privileged circle composed of those who can speak the language of the donors and can fit within the conditions of the funding. All other groups faced exclusion. The priority of the NGOs became to accommodate the criteria and conditions of funding to ensure sustainability of 'funding', not the sustainability of work. This process, prevalent since Oslo, has excluded several segments of Palestinian women. It also contributed to marginalising grassroots organisations. Meanwhile, because NGOs speak the language of human rights, international law, and democracy, they communicate with their main clients: foreign funding entities. As a result, these organisations do not have a constituency in and of themselves. To return to the tree-climbing metaphor; NGOs in Palestine have no constituency, while dependent for their existence on the availability of international and external support. The moment the support dwindles, their very existence grows highly precarious. The recent examples of the crisis of CEDAW in Palestine reveal that NGOs and women's organisations have abandoned the language of the local strife for liberation and ending occupation as the main problem. This language has been replaced in pursuit of aid delivery and neoliberal 'Sustainable Development Goals' language to retain minimal funding. The NGOs' concern was the language of international law and its translation into the local language of the domestic laws, without communicating truly with Palestinian women, girls, and men as a collective Palestinian society.

We recommend that the EU revisit its approach to create a more inclusive support system. Gender equality, for example, cannot be meaningfully achieved without targeting men as well as women. Today, amid the war on Gaza, we observe that women's organisations are not involved in the mobilisation for women's peace and security, ending the war, humanitarian aid, and support for women from Gaza. The fragmentation of the land, blockade of Gaza, inaccessibility of the West Bank to Gaza, and dependency has resulted in a crippled civil society.

Women's organisations lack support in Palestine. They have no real constituency or audience. The EU has focused on targeting women mostly and excluded men from the conversation. Organisations have focused on donors' agenda. In order to do so, these organisations have painted Islamic laws and traditions with a brush of backwardness, advocating for short-lived emancipatory projects while operating in an environment of constant violence and denial of the most fundamental rights. They sought to adapt to donors' agenda by importing emancipatory projects to Palestine that are not

particularly a priority for the Palestinians, without a real vision on how to localise domestically to speak to the needs of Palestinian society as a whole. Today, women's organisations have been demonised and are perceived as shops that sell imported products that parachute onto Palestinian society.

3.3 Key Analytical Findings

The primary finding from our research, and the one most essential to keep in mind moving forward, is that EU support has not focused on ending the violent conflict and Israeli belligerence. In doing so, the support has failed to substantially contribute to the building of a viable Palestinian state. In its failure to do so, EU support has at best served as a tool to sustain a status quo deeply disadvantageous to the Palestinian people. This, in turn, has resulted in ambivalence among Palestinians regarding the influence and potential of EU support to empower them in a meaningful pursuit of ending the occupation.

The overwhelming consensus of our interlocutors was that the EU's conditions on support for democratic development in fact erode democratic institutions. Through its mistrust of actors on the ground, the EU stunts democratic development, makes advocates for democracy suspect, and plays into the agendas of anti-democratic forces.

The EU's stringent conditions, often out of touch with Palestinian needs, put activists who are committed to democratic transition in a difficult position vis-à-vis the communities they serve. These conditions, such as requiring acknowledgment of Israel's historic right to exist, undermine the struggle against the occupation. The organisations are faced with one of two choices: either comply with EU requirements and lose their legitimacy on the ground or refuse to comply and lose funding.

The EU's conditions create an environment hostile to democratic development and to the formation of local solidarities. Arab staff within funding institutions prioritise their organisations' agendas over Palestinian interests in an effort to prove their commitment to the EU's agenda. Furthermore, **our interlocutors criticise the imposition of Western political expectations and funding priorities that neglect Palestinian needs. This includes the EU's consistent sympathy with Israeli security directives, which come at the cost of Palestinian freedom to organise and speak.**

The EU's conditions are themselves self-contradictory, creating confusion for both the donors and the Palestinians they intend to support. **The EU rhetorically expresses support for democracy and human rights while simultaneously bolstering authoritarianism, occupation, and corruption.** The ineffectiveness of funding, we conclude, is rooted in this paradox: EU donors have instead reinforced corruption and the detachment of institutions from their society.

Forging organic channels of communication with Palestinians across the political spectrum is essential to the process of revisiting the notions of democratic politics and thinking innovatively and meaningfully about how to adapt, calibrate, and accommodate support to the needs and priorities of the Palestinian people. These needs vary according to whether the Palestinians are in the camps, villages, old towns, or cities, as well as those in Area A, B, C, and other marginalised and forgotten regions in the country. Voices of women, men, and the youth are equally important. A meaningful gender empowerment agenda is impossible without involving both men and women in its design. Expecting top-down policies and imported notions of equity, democracy, and good governance to bear fruit without having true, meaningful bottom-up engagement is delusional. Today, more than ever, Palestinian society is bearing the brunt of the prolonged occupation and its consequential damage to the very fabric of society and Palestine's right to exist. **Revisiting the meaning, possibilities, and application of democratic politics is more necessary than ever. The goal of financial support should**

not be to teach people how to coax funds from foreign donors. Instead, EU support policies should aim to effectively engage with the Palestinian people in shaping a vision for a viable, independent, democratic, and sovereign Palestinian state that lives in peace and is capable of building its own economy and capital.

4 CONCLUSION: THE NEED TO RECONNECT

The story of post-Oslo EU support to the Palestinian people is one of increased integration into the international community, but at the cost of national liberation and self-determination. Israeli settlements remain the primary obstacle to peace in Palestine, yet international funding has diverted attention from resistance efforts toward dialogue with Israel. Although this strengthens the role of the Palestinian Authority (PA), it neglects the political engagement of the youth and prevents the formation of solidarity between various groups. To secure funding, actors on the ground are compelled to present their projects using sanitised language, avoiding terms like "resilience" or "resistance." In order to maintain credibility, groups are often forced to meet community needs with language that resonates with the community, even if these risks losing EU funding.

Our interlocutors described how the EU favoured security concerns over democratic principles, as seen in EU approval processes and the reframing of civil society experiences through a rights-based lens. These security concerns, however, rarely succeeded in ensuring safety for Palestinians or Israelis but instead entrenched systems of corruption and exploitation.

This study comes at a time of unprecedented levels of horrific war crimes and collective punishment, when Palestinians feel an acute sense of abandonment by the EU and the international community. The global system has failed to halt these vicious atrocities. In this dark moment of human history, the children of Gaza are being collectively bombarded and killed without sanctions or cessation. **Our Palestinian interlocutors feel that discourses of democracy have become hollow rhetoric that serves some at the expense of others.** *The promotion of democracy*, our study finds, has become a commodity, translated into money, aid, and financial support. Rather than promoting democracy, the need for funding has turned the quest for it into an attempt to appease those who set the agenda. The universality of democracy has been reduced to rhetoric; in practice, democracy is made into a tool to entrench double standards. Rather than establishing an independent state, the infantilizing discourse around democracy has furthered dependency, with the Western approach creating a society that fits only those who design it. Democracy permitted within the donors' parameters fundamentally undermines the principal notion that democracy is the manifestation of the people's will. The sanctions on democratic elections in 2006 and the failure to bring about a ceasefire today are horrific revelations of the truth behind EU support for the Palestinian people.

The EU's approach to supporting the Palestinian people urgently needs revision to ensure the genuine pursuit of a state-building project that guarantees Palestinian agency, safety, respect, free will, dignity, and ultimately, the Palestinian people's right to self-determination. Restrictive policies that deepen rifts among Palestinians will not lead to a peaceful and democratic region. In summary, the EU has truly supported occupation and now genocide. Democracy support has long been buried in the EU cemetery.

The scale of human suffering in the Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem, and the West Bank cannot be quantified and cannot be captured in the language of development. The typical lexicon of rebuilding, rethinking, and revisiting falls short. There is no need for rhetorical 'Rs,' but rather a pressing need for ending the occupation, sanctioning those committing international law violations, advancing and promoting a

Palestinian state, empowering the Palestinian right to self-determination, and ultimately, empowering Palestinians to lead the support agenda. A meaningful intersectional and participatory approach that places the needs of the Palestinian people at the centre is the only way for EU support to be effective in creating a lasting peace in the region. Rather than engage with Palestinian civil society through the Oslo frameworks that entrench authoritarian and elite structures, the EU should engage with a broader section of Palestinian society on its own terms.

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Annex 3: Tunisia's Democratic Transition: the EU's Engagement and Local Politics

Executive Summary

Tunisia's 2011 revolution marked a significant transition, dismantling Ben Ali's authoritarian regime and fostering new democratic institutions. Early EU involvement focused on supporting elections, building institutional capacity, and backing human rights reforms. However, post2014, Tunisia faced increased political fragmentation, socioeconomic difficulties, and growing citizen discontent with democratic processes, challenges exacerbated by limited EU resources and the complex political context. Since July 21, 2021, and President Kais Saied's power grab, Tunisia has been facing new challenges and controversies.

The EU played a critical role in Tunisia's early democratic transition, providing financial, technical, and institutional support. This involvement included assistance in election processes, backing for civil society organisations, and guidance in judicial and parliamentary reforms. Over time, the EU's focus shifted towards pragmatic concerns such as migration control, economic stability, and counterterrorism, which many Tunisians viewed as compromising on democratic values. EU responses to recent authoritarian shifts, particularly under President Kais Saied, were perceived as muted and inconsistent, contrasting with robust support for Eastern European nations. This has led to a sense of EU complicity in Tunisia's democratic regression, notably in recent agreements emphasising security and migration control.

Tunisian civil society, empowered by EU initiatives, initially played a vital role in advocating for democracy and human rights. However, recent authoritarian measures have marginalised these groups, limiting their influence. Focus groups released for this report revealed a perception of EU support as conditional and misaligned with Tunisian priorities, with citizens feeling EU actions prioritised strategic interests over genuine democratic support. Tunisia's experience highlighted a disparity between the EU's high ideals and practical applications, viewed by many as a selective approach. Moreover, recent EU policies emphasise migration control over democratic principles, with agreements (such as the 2021 Memorandum) prioritising Tunisia's role in curbing irregular migration. This focus has raised concerns about the EU's true commitment to democratic ideals in Tunisia. The EU's involvement in Tunisia has been instrumental but fraught with challenges. As Tunisia's political landscape faces increasing authoritarian pressures, the EU's role remains complex and, at times, controversial.

1 Introduction

1.1 Tunisian Politics Since the Revolution of 2011

Democracy in Tunisia is a tumultuous journey, akin to a never-ending rollercoaster. Before discussing the tumultuous yet crucial events of the Tunisian political scene since 2011, it would be wise to first provide a background on the regime that was dismantled by the 2011 revolution. Zine Al Abidine Ben Ali's rise to power in Tunisia on 7 November 1987 was marked by the ousting of President Habib Bourguiba in what has been described as a medical coup (Aliriza 2022). Prior to his ascension, Ben Ali had swiftly climbed the ranks of political authority, having been appointed Prime Minister in October 1987, a mere month before orchestrating Bourguiba's destitution. Initially, Ben Ali's regime projected an image of democratic reform by releasing political prisoners and legalising opposition groups, although this gesture did not extend to Ennahdha, the Islamist party, which was

banned from the political scene since 1987. This semblance of liberalisation was short-lived. By February 1990, the regime had reverted to severe repression, illustrated by the mass conscription of student protesters from the General Union of Tunisian Students (known in Tunisia as UGTE) and the dissolution of the UGTE (Saber 2022). In 1991, this repression escalated with extensive arrests of Ennahdha supporters and widespread human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings (BBC 2012).

Following the suppression of Islamist opposition, Ben Ali targeted other dissenters, including communists and trade unionists, and sought to neutralise the Tunisian Human Rights League (Nouira) through administrative and functional encirclement (Ben Romdhane). Despite his administration's claims of economic success, highlighted by significant infrastructure projects and social welfare initiatives, these accomplishments were overshadowed by systemic corruption and misappropriation of funds (Kchouk 2017). The purported economic miracle could not forestall the popular discontent that culminated in the 2008 Mining Basin uprising, which many regard as the precursor to the 2011 revolution (Hammami). The Gafsa Mining Basin Revolt remains a social upheaval in a poor region near the Algerian border that is considered the most significant protest movement in Tunisia since the Bread Revolt of January 1984 (under the Bourguiba regime). Despite the authoritarian context, the Mining Basin Revolt demonstrated that substantial segments of the Tunisian population could express their dissent (Mullin). However, **the movement struggled to expand and could not withstand the repressive policies of Ben Ali's regime due to its limited support within Tunisian society and from external and other internal sides.**

The 2011 revolution was ignited by the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi, a street vendor in Sidi Bouzid, whose desperate act of **protest against police corruption and economic hardship** sparked a nationwide revolt, ultimately leading to the toppling of Ben Ali's regime (Al Jazeera).

The fall of Zine Al Abidine Ben Ali's regime following the 2011 revolution brought a significant breath of democracy, greatly enhancing public freedoms in Tunisia (Abdessalam and Akrimi). A month after the revolution, the notorious "political police," a hegemonic tool of Ben Ali's dictatorship present in public institutions, universities, mosques, and cafés, was abolished (Audrey). By the end of February 2011, the Minister of the Interior had filed a request with the Tunis First Instance Court, resulting in the dissolution of the former ruling party, the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD). Tunisia also signed multiple international human rights conventions in 2011, such as the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (“Decree no. 2011-552”).

An entity called the Higher Instance for Realisation of the Objectives of the Revolution, Political Reform, and Democratic Transition was established on 15 March 2011 by the Council for the Defence of the Revolution, a group with revolutionary legitimacy, and the Higher Commission for Political Reform to achieve the revolution's goals of freedom, justice, and dignity for all Tunisians (Lieckefett). It enacted two groundbreaking decrees on freedom of expression, one for the press and media, and Decree 88/2011, a cornerstone for the freedom of association. It opted for a proportional representation voting system for electing a Constituent Assembly (ANC). The elections were a resounding success and a beacon of hope for developing countries.

The European Union's **support** was evident from the start of the revolution, with substantial funding ensuring the Constituent Assembly elections took place in a secure environment. The **EU supported the Tunisian Human Rights League and, in partnership with other associations, trained thousands of observers across Tunisia, created an Election Observation Mission of the European Union (EUEOM),**

and backed public institutions and the interim government to facilitate the democratic transition ("Call à Candidature"; "EU EOM Final Report"). However, following the Constituent Assembly elections and the overwhelming victory of the Islamist movement Ennahda and its allies, the proportional representation system intended only for the Constituent Assembly elections was maintained, leading to political "tourism", which constitutes the movement or switch of deputies from one party bloc to another within the parliament (Jamaaoui). Renouncing their original parties, in which they were nurtured, adopted their programmes, championed their slogans, and stood as candidates under their banner for the Assembly of the Representatives of the People. Due to the impossibility of forming a single majority within the Constituent Assembly elections and later within the parliament after the adoption of the 2014 Constitution, **the Constituent Assembly exceeded its mandate**, which was "to draft the Constitution within a maximum period of one year from the date of its election in 2011", and overstepped its strictly constituent mandate ("Decree No. 2011-1086" 2011; Achour 2012: 9) . This marked a period of decline **for progressive political and civic movements,** shaking a large part of Tunisians' confidence in the democratisation process.

The shift from a presidential regime to a parliamentary system, done through a democratic process and supported by the Islamist party Ennahda, dispersed power and reduced the efficiency of public action. The near impossibility for any Tunisian party to achieve an absolute majority in legislative elections necessitated the formation of coalition governments, creating implicit agreements to share resources and state positions. Control over "administrative levers", particularly high-level civil service positions, intended to facilitate policy implementation, instead allowed for the accumulation of clientelist resources, distributed to party loyalists and economic supporters.

This transition to a parliamentary system and power dispersion introduced new political dynamics in Tunisia, leading to increased governance complexity, particularly in administration, contrasting with Ben Ali's regime, which controlled the intricacies of Tunisian administration. **Tunisians thus practised democracy not only through the freedoms gained but also through the persistent challenges of implementing democratic reforms and managing political coalitions.**

As soon as the Troika (the Troika was an unofficial name for the alliance between the three parties—Ennahda, Ettakatol, and Congress for the Republic—that ruled in Tunisia after the 2011 Constituent Assembly election) resigned, with the resignation of its prime minister Ali Laarayedh (from the Ennahda party), it made way for a technocratic government led by Mehdi Jomâa (an independent figure) in 2014 (Tayeb). The resignation came following the surge in tension triggered by political assassinations and the "chevrotine" (buckshot) events in Siliana, which cast doubt on the legitimacy of the Troika (Human Rights Watch). The period also saw a spike in unemployment, inflation, and socioeconomic tensions (Le Fiagro). Mehdi Jomâa, the new chief of government, decided to opt for a technocratic government with as little political influence as possible to steer the country back towards a secular democratisation process (RFI). However, the socioeconomic challenges, coupled with the political instability within the Constituent Assembly (dominated by the Islamic party Ennahda and its allies), made the task quite complex. Nonetheless, the year 2014 marked the success of two long-awaited events: the adoption of the Tunisian Constitution on 27 January 2014, after three years of contention and delays, and the election of President Beji Caid Sebsi on 22 December 2014: a former figure of the Bourguiba regime (BBC 2014). Many citizens, particularly women, who feared the regressive inclination of the Islamist movement, found hope in the legacy of Bourguiba, the emancipator of Tunisian women (BelHadj Ali). Bourguiba introduced significant reforms through state feminism, such as the Personal Status Code, which outlawed polygamy, gave women equal rights in

marriage, and granted them greater social autonomy. These changes were transformative, earning him praise as a liberator of women in Tunisia (The Conversation). Tunisians overwhelmingly voted for Beji Caid Sebsi, despite his lack of support from the ruling parties such as the Islamist Ennahda or the Congress for the Republic. Beji Caid Sebsi, a prominent figure from the era of Tunisia's first president, Habib Bourguiba, is known for his secular stance and advocacy for a republican regime. During his electoral campaign, he pledged to create more opportunities for the youth, frequently visiting their spaces to demonstrate that despite his age—he was 84 at the time—he was attentive to all Tunisians and represented the entire nation. Tunisians also voted for Beji as a counter to Moncef Marzouki.

Marzouki, having emerged as president from within the Troika and as a leader of one of its parties, is seen as closely aligned with Islamist groups. Many Tunisians were disappointed by what they perceived as his lax approach in confronting the regression and obscurantist tendencies of Islamists in power. His tenure left critics questioning his commitment to countering these influences, as they felt he allowed opportunities for democratic consolidation to slip away amidst growing conservatism (Ryan 2012).

Moncef Marzouki served as interim president from 2011 to 2014. Known for his human rights advocacy, Marzouki was in exile during Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's regime and was appointed by the ruling Troika, with the endorsement of the Islamist Ennahdha party. Ennahdha aimed to position itself as a "democratic" political Islam movement and strategically chose leaders like Marzouki, who, while not party members, aligned with their ideology**. During his interim presidency, Tunisia experienced significant turbulence and attempts to Islamise the regime**. This period was marked by contentious debates within the Constituent Assembly, **with proposals for regressive measures, such as defining women as "complementary" to men and removing the civil nature of the state**. These debates created a tense atmosphere where the Islamist current dominated the streets and media. An anecdote emerged, targeting progressive democrats who had received a negligible percentage in the Constituent Assembly elections, and began to describe them as irrelevant. **Amidst this backdrop, Beji Caid Essebsi emerged as a figure representing the secular, republican ideals of Tunisia's first president, Habib Bourguiba. Essebsi, despite being 83 years old, actively engaged with the youth and campaigned on a platform of inclusivity, securing widespread support, particularly from women voters, as a counterbalance to the Islamist leaning governance of Marzouki**.

1.2 Bridging Stability and Reform: The EU's Multifaceted Support

The European Union announced the granting of a loan on 13 February 2014 in Brussels. The European Parliament announced a loan of 300 million euros to Tunisia, and in its 2014 report, the European Union declared having disbursed approximately 614 million euros to Tunisia (Jeune Afrique 2014 ; Delegation of EU 2014). The European Union also signed its action plan with Tunisia for 2013 to 2017 ("Action Plan 2013/2017"), encompassing multiple aid and financial support actions to encourage the establishment of a rule of law in Tunisia that respects human rights and upholds fundamental rights and freedoms.

The European Union played a key role in supporting Tunisia during its crucial transition to democracy, especially during the democratic elections and the adoption of the new constitution. Despite the challenges of a volatile political climate, the EU provided not only financial aid but also technical expertise and diplomatic support. They were committed to fostering stability and helping Tunisia build strong, independent institutions.

The reports from the European Parliament clearly show the EU's dedication to accompanying Tunisia on its democratic path. Their support extended beyond just monetary assistance; they were deeply

involved in promoting human rights, the rule of law and civil liberties. The EU was not just a passive observer but an active partner in Tunisia's journey.

The election of Beji Caid Essebsi was a significant moment. Essebsi was known for his secular views, which aligned well with the EU's values. The EU saw his election as a positive development, a sign that Tunisia was moving towards a balanced and inclusive political landscape where secular and religious beliefs could coexist. This was a crucial step for the EU, as they aimed to support leaders who could foster modern and inclusive governance.

The EU's involvement was part of a larger strategy to support Tunisia as a model for other countries in the region. They engaged in dialogue with various political and civil society actors in Tunisia, providing a platform for inclusive discussions about the country's future. The EU's approach was holistic, aiming to strengthen Tunisia's internal capacities and ensure that the democratic progress made was sustainable. EU support focused on reinforcing key democratic structures to ensure enduring progress. This included supporting judicial reforms and bolstering judicial independence, as well as implementing governance measures to promote transparency, accountability, and anticorruption. Additionally, the EU invested in capacity building for civil society organisations and local governments, empowering them to advocate for citizen rights and participate actively in democratic governance.

It must be acknowledged that, just before the election of President Beji Caid Essebsi, in 2013, the Constituent Assembly was determined, under The Organic Law No. 201353 of 24 December 2013, concerning the establishment of transitional justice and its organisation (DCAF). To end the impunity of regimes since independence in 1956 and to address victims who were killed or tortured since 2011, especially following the birdshot incident in Seliana in 2012, in the central west region of Tunisia, where peaceful protest demonstrations led to the use of birdshot against citizens, causing them serious injuries (Belhadi). Under the pressure of civil society and the intervention of various international actors such as the ICTJ (International Center for Transitional Justice) and Amnesty International, it was decided to establish the transitional justice process to reopen dormant or neglected cases such as political opponents (the Youssefists) who were oppressed under the regime of the first President Bourguiba, and later under the dominance of the one-party rule of President Ben Ali, the Democratic Constitutional Rally (known as RCD) (Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights; Belhadj; Andrieu 2015; Amnesty International; Carranza et al.). This was a moment of glory for thousands of victims and their families and a hope for establishing peace and social cohesion. The Organic Law No. 201353 of 24 December 2013, on the establishment and organisation of transitional justice (the 2013 Law), provides for the creation of the Truth and Dignity Commission (IVD). This Commission was mandated to: (i) hold public or private hearings for victims of gross human rights violations committed between 1955 and 2013; (ii) document these violations; (iii) determine responsibilities; (iv) propose measures to prevent their recurrence; and (v) develop a comprehensive reparations programme. Additionally, Article 43 of the 2013 Law tasked the Truth and Dignity Commission with making reform recommendations, particularly within the justice sector, to prevent the recurrence of human rights violations, protect human rights, and promote the rule of law. The processing stage of the commission ended on 17 December 2018, even though the Truth and Dignity Commission “faced many difficulties and challenges, internal and external, political and civil, legal and procedural. However, it managed to complete its pledge, achieve some successes and present its final report” (Ghali).

However, the general impression, especially among the victims, is that the transitional justice process in Tunisia has largely failed, particularly in the regions most affected by oppression such as Sidi Bouzid, Tataouine, and Gafsa. This weak and incomplete process has led to protests and a sense of weariness

towards the democratisation process. To support this process of transitional justice, the European Union implemented the Support Programme for Justice Reform, in its second phase ("Neighbourhood-Enlargement"). It was noted that this support programme aims, with the adoption of the law on transitional justice and the recent merger of the Ministry of Justice with the Ministry of Human Rights and Transitional Justice (MJDHJT), to support the judicial process in handling cases of severe human rights violations. Programme for Justice Reform 2 will contribute to the effective implementation of constitutional principles and national priorities related to judicial independence, fair trials, and the treatment of detainees. In this regard, PARJ 2 aims at three specific objectives:

1. The effective implementation of constitutional guarantees and international standards in the area of criminal justice reform;
2. Support for the transitional justice process in handling cases by judicial authorities, including the creation of a mechanism for the protection of victims and witnesses;
3. The gradual establishment of an information system and the strengthening of judicial, penitentiary, and detention infrastructure.

To this end, with a total estimated budget of 15,148,000 EUR for the programme, the European Union contributed 15 million EUR, covering almost the entire budget ("Neighbourhood-Enlargement"). **This support programme for justice reform remains the most successful project funded by the Union.** It has addressed several gaps in the justice system, helping victims present themselves better before the courts and also aiding judges in better understanding public law cases, such as political victims, the transitional justice process, human rights violations, and the state's responsibility to address physical and moral damages.

Although the support from the European Union was significant and substantial in this process of justice reform and transitional justice, it did not prevent the process from being challenging. This was sometimes due to the bureaucracy of the Truth and Dignity Commission, political infighting, and political instability (Andrieu et al.). Additionally, there was an issue of unequal distribution of resources, particularly in the regions most affected by the crimes committed by previous governments, such as Sidi Bouzid, Gafsa, and Tataouine (ICTJ).

In the face of this turbulent political climate and failed reform attempts, along with rising social pressure and political deadlock within the parliament, an initiative was launched on 9 October 2015, by the quartet (winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015). The quartet was composed of the UGTT (Tunisian trade union), Utica (employers' federation), the Tunisian Human Rights League, and the National Bar Association. It led to a national dialogue in Tunisia awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for "its decisive contribution to building a pluralistic democracy following the 2011 Revolution." It played a crucial role in pulling Tunisia out of a deep political crisis that began in 2013 after the assassinations of lawyer Chokri Belaid, secretary general of the leftist secularist party Democratic Patriots Party and a fierce opponent of the Islamist movement, and politician Mohamed Brahmi (Yasmine 2013; BBC 2013).

The national dialogue between the ruling Ennahda Islamists and the leftist and progressive opposition began on 25 October 2013. It aimed to form an independent government and adopt a new constitution, resulting in the resignation of Prime Minister Ali Larayedh and his replacement by technocrat Mehdi Jomaa. This compromise prevented a major conflict between Islamists and antisecularists, amplified by a wave of assassinations and the growth of violence in Tunisia.

Although the country remains fragile in the face of jihadist threats, especially after the assassinations of Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi, and the terrorist attacks in Bardo and Sousse in 2015 (which killed 63 people), a state of emergency was established (and remains in effect today, having been first implemented from 2011 to March 2014) (Le Monde). Democracy was now seen by Tunisians and abroad as a fleeting, fragile illusion or even a fatality, with Tunisians feeling they had risen up in 2011 for nothing and lost everything, including their physical security, due to the lack of public order to curb terrorism by the state and the increase in banditry and robberies in various regions of Tunisia (Lachheb 2020). In 2020, according to a survey by Sigma Conseil in partnership with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 84.4% of Tunisians perceived the political scene in Tunisia negatively (with 65.2% viewing it very negatively), and 77.5% believed that the performance of the political regime was unsuccessful (with 55.1% saying it was not successful at all) (KAS). This was mainly attributed to political instability, lack of consensus, false promises, and lack of change. According to the same survey, 22.5% thought that the ultimate solution was a return to a presidential regime, followed by 11% advocating for changes in electoral laws and 7.7% calling for more job opportunities.

In the face of a faltering political system, it was the government of Habib Essid (appointed as Prime Minister in 2014, succeeding Mehdi Jomaa after the presidential and legislative elections) and formed in 2015 that bore the brunt of the situation. President Béji Caïd Essebsi held Essid's government accountable and expressed support for its replacement in June 2016. On 31 July 2016, the Tunisian parliament, in a plenary session, withdrew its confidence from Habib Essid's government, aligning with President Caïd Essebsi's desire to establish a national unity cabinet (VoaAfrique).

President Béji Caïd Essebsi appointed Youssef Chahed, a young man in his early forties and a member of his party, Nidaa Tounes, as Prime Minister following the resignation of Habib Essid. This was a first in Tunisia, as Chahed was the youngest to hold such a position. Essebsi wanted to demonstrate his opposition to establishing an oligarchy by not appointing his son, Hafedh Caid Essebsi, to power and by showing his support for the inclusion of youth in Tunisian politics. However, Youssef Chahed, once a close ally of Essebsi, soon distanced himself from his mentor. He sought to assert his independence and took on his role as head of government with strong determination.

In between, President Béji Caïd Essebsi, in his commitment to continuing the Bourguibist spirit from which he emerged, embarked on a mission to overhaul the legal framework to make it more progressive. He repealed the circular that prohibited Muslim Tunisian women from marrying non-Muslims and established the Individual Freedoms and Equality Commission (Colibe). This commission, created on 13 August 2017, was tasked with preparing a report on legislative reforms related to individual freedoms and equality, in accordance with the 2014 Constitution and international human rights standards. On 12 June 2018, the COLIBE, composed of prominent law professors, presented its 200page report to President Essebsi. The report outlined reforms aimed at achieving gender equality, including issues like inheritance laws, the abolition of the death penalty, and the decriminalisation of homosexuality. The report was well received by progressives and secularists, but it was completely rejected by Islamists.

At the same time, Youssef Chahed, during his tenure as chief of government of Tunisia, made a significant move by prioritising the fight against corruption in his government's agenda in an action that he named "Clean Hands" (Jeune Afrique). For the first time, a clear and focused strategy was presented, highlighting the government's commitment to tackling this pervasive issue. Chahed's administration recognised that corruption was a major impediment to economic growth and social justice in Tunisia. By placing it at the forefront of his governance plan, Chahed aimed to restore public

trust in government institutions and create a more transparent and accountable political environment. This anticorruption initiative included a comprehensive approach, ranging from strengthening legal frameworks to enhance the prosecution of corrupt practices, to implementing preventive measures across various sectors. The plan also involved increasing the transparency of public administration and promoting ethical standards within government operations. Chahed's government sought to collaborate with civil society organisations, the private sector, and international partners to ensure a holistic and effective fight against corruption. By doing so, he aimed to demonstrate that the government's efforts were inclusive and comprehensive, targeting both the powerful and the common individuals alike. This bold stance against corruption was a defining feature of Youssef Chahed's leadership. It set a precedent in Tunisia's political landscape, showcasing a commitment to reform and the establishment of a fairer system that could support the country's democratic and economic development.

The European Union's support reached a significant peak with the implementation of the Chahed administration's policies. One notable example is the "Support Programme for Education, Mobility, Research, and Innovation" (EMORI) in 2016, where the EU invested €60 million (“Document on the Action for the Program”). This funding included €38 million for budgetary support and €21.5 million for complementary assistance, with a specific allocation of €10 million for the Erasmus+ programme.

The economic reforms initiated by Youssef Chahed were challenging but necessary to address major imbalances hindering economic growth. These reforms also aimed to stimulate new areas of economic activity. The government adopted the Startup Act as a hopeful sign of progress. Additionally, the decentralisation process, marked by the municipal elections on 6 May 2018 and the adoption of the new local government code, was crucial for anchoring democracy and development at the local level.

In facing these challenges, Tunisia relied on the European Union. In Brussels, EU leaders such as former Commission President JeanClaude Juncker, then Parliament President Antonio Tajani, and former High Representative Federica Mogherini unanimously praised Tunisia's efforts and encouraged further reforms (Bergamini 2018). They assured Tunisia of the EU's full support, both political and economic. Since the revolution of 2011, the EU has committed nearly €10 billion to Tunisia (Bergamini 2018).

These substantial funds reflect the significance of Tunisia's challenges and the EU's commitment. Alongside contributions from other international donors, these funds supported essential reforms in Tunisia's economy and businesses. Whether through budgetary support, justice system modernisation, youth empowerment, regional connectivity, or support for SMEs and artisans.

During the same period, the European Union's support was also notable in the areas of education and development, particularly in rural regions, through programmes like "Focus on Decentralisation and Integrated Territorial Development" (CAP2D), "The Integrated Local Development Programme" (PDLI), "The Regional Initiative for Sustainable Development" (IRADA), and "Support Programme for the Development of Disadvantaged Areas" (PAZD).

Launched after the 2011 revolution, the Support Programme for Disadvantaged Areas (PAZD) dedicated €20 million to reducing the gap between the coastal and inland regions. It supported microfinance and local economic recovery. Medical equipment and ambulances were provided, and health centres were built. Following this momentum, a new health support programme allocates €20 million to nine governorates (Béja, Tozeur, Jendouba, Siliana, Gafsa, Kebili, Kairouan, El Kef, Kasserine, Sidi Bouzid, Gabes, Médenine, and Tataouine). The focus is on improving access to and quality of healthcare, emergency services, hygiene, and infection risk management (Portail Ministry of Health).

With the Regional Initiative for Sustainable Development (IRADA), the EU targets eight regions (Médenine, Gabès, Gafsa, Kasserine, Jendouba, Sidi Bouzid, Sfax, Bizerte). The objective was to promote development through public private dialogue, project identification, and strengthening local actors. IRADA, with a budget of 34 million EUR, enhanced the private sector's contribution to regional development and promoted innovation and investment at the local level.

The Path to Decentralisation and Development (CAP2D) programme and the Integrated Local Development Programme (PDLI) work together. CAP2D allocates 43 million EUR to revitalise isolated areas, focusing on employment and vocational training. PDLI allocates 60 million EUR to the institutional framework, aiming at decentralisation. It seeks to strengthen the capacities of local administration and elected officials, as well as to guide the state's decentralised services in supporting local authorities.

Concrete actions demonstrated the benefits of decentralisation: infrastructure, public facilities, housing renovations, etc. With 25 million EUR, the ENPARD programme (in Médenine, Jendouba, Siliana, Sfax, and Kebili) enhances local agricultural and non-agricultural resources in rural areas, benefiting the economic and social inclusion of vulnerable groups. Including the "popular neighbourhoods" programme (69 million EUR), the total aid from the European Union to these territories reached 271 million EUR.

In 2019, Chahed wanted to sign with the European Union the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA), or ALECA. The latter is a trade deal between Tunisia and the EU aimed at deeper economic integration. It aimed to cover reducing tariffs, aligning regulations, and promoting investment and services, including financial and digital sectors. ALECA also aimed to focus on sustainable development, protecting labour rights and the environment. The agreement aimed to provide technical assistance to help Tunisia meet EU standards. It aimed to boost trade, investment, and job creation in Tunisia, while also requiring significant reforms and adjustments to compete in the EU market. But opposition to the ALECA agreement in Tunisia focuses on several key issues and came mainly from Tunisian civil society. Critics argue that the liberal reforms demanded by the EU, such as changes to the Central Bank's status and the Investment Code, primarily benefit European interests rather than the Tunisian economy. They also highlight concerns over Tunisia's debt, advocating for its conversion into funding for local projects instead of maintaining the current debt burden. Another major concern is the lack of provisions for the free movement of labour. There are calls for the agreement to include the ability for Tunisian professionals to work in the EU without visa restrictions, as current limitations hinder economic opportunities. Finally, there was **a push for greater inclusion of civil society in the institutional discussions surrounding the negotiations, to ensure that the interests of the Tunisian people are adequately represented.**

Thus, the exchanges and negotiations were quickly sidelined as tensions and discord arose between Carthage (the office of the President) and the Casbah (the office of the Prime Minister). This strained atmosphere led to a snubbing relationship, resulting in gridlocks on project implementations, legislation, and public affairs. The political coexistence between President Béji Caïd Essebsi and Chief of government Youssef Chahed, whom Essebsi himself had appointed, was fraught with increasing tensions. Initially based on trust, their relationship quickly deteriorated as political differences and personal ambitions surfaced. Chahed, once seen as a loyal ally, began taking positions and making decisions that often contradicted the direction of Nidaa Tounes, the party founded by Essebsi.

The rift between Carthage and the Kasbah became a full-blown political cold war, exposing the internal fractures within the government and the party. This discord was publicly visible, creating a crisis at the

highest levels of the state. As a result, Nidaa Tounes suffered significant weakening, with its support base fracturing and its influence on national political decisions waning. Internal strife, fuelled by personal rivalries and disagreements over governance, led to a loss of popularity and reduced influence for the party on the Tunisian political scene. Amid the political deadlock and various disputes within the Tunisian parliament, coupled with a tense atmosphere, the Tunisian people lost confidence in the political class, feeling that the country was stuck in a state of paralysis. This was further complicated by concerns over the health of President Beji Caid Essebsi, a 93yearold leader who, despite his age, continued to command respect and maintain political charisma.

During this period, Essebsi refused to sign a proposed amendment to the electoral law, which was suspected to have underlying political motives. His refusal added to the already tense political climate**. On July 25, 2019, Republic Day in Tunisia, Beji Caid Essebsi passed away**, just a few months before the presidential elections scheduled for December 2019. Prior to his death, Essebsi had announced that he would not run for re-election, stating his commitment to ensuring the country's stability until the new elections. His death marked a significant moment in Tunisia's political landscape, coming at a time of considerable uncertainty and tension.

In October 2019, President Kais Saied was elected following the death of President Beji Caid Essebsi. While there were efforts to change the electoral law, **this crucial moment of democratic intensity was interrupted by natural circumstances. Saied, an academic who had never engaged in politics and had no political party, presented himself as the country's saviour, claiming to be "clean" (uncorrupted), out of the system, and supported by the youth** (Britannica; New Internationalist)**.** He drew his success from his students and former law students. This was followed by a degradation of the political scene, increased violence within parliament, and conflicts between Carthage (the Presidency) and the Kasbah (the chief of government office). The parliament again attempted to change the electoral law and establish the constitutional court, with Kais in their sights.

The election of Kais Saied, with nearly 73% of the vote compared to 23% for his rival Nabil Karoui, reflects the popularity of his message: "to make a choice today in complete freedom"…"You have created a new concept of revolution, let your conscience guide you" (Ahram Online). Saied explicitly claimed to be the heir and implementer of the 20102011 revolution—and thus the constitutional and institutional framework established in its wake. **On 25 July 2021, he declared a state of exception**, gradually consolidating all powers, dismissing two ministers, and terminating the entire cabinet of the chief of government. To prevent public unrest, he imposed a curfew until the end of August 2021 (Tourmag). This was followed by the gradual dissolution of all intermediary bodies, including the Superior Council of the Judiciary, constitutional authorities, regulatory authorities, and eventually targeting civil society (International Commission of Jurists; Amnesty International 2022). The European Union, through a statement published by Nabila Massrali, Spokesperson for the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, **Josep Borrell, expressed its "deep concern" regarding the situation in Tunisia following President Kaïs Saïed's decision to dissolve the Supreme Judicial Council, emphasising the importance of judicial independence in the country** (Andalu).

On July 25, 2021, President Kais Saied executed this controversial coup by sacking the chief of government Hichem Mechichi (appointed by him) who started again the past scenario of confrontation between President Beji Caid Sebsi and Youssef Chahed, especially when he made a partial reshuffle of his ministers without consulting Kais Saied (Bakrim and Agnès). So this later refused to accept them, leading to an institutional crisis, suspending parliament, and assuming executive authority, citing a

national emergency (Dahmani 2021). Saied's power grab was seen as a direct assault on Tunisia's fledgling democracy by politicians and a large part of the intelligentsia and marked the beginning of an era of political instability (Bakrim and Agnès). In his quest for absolute control, Saied dismantled intermediary bodies and proposed a 2022 referendum to establish a new presidentialist constitution, which granted him unchecked authority over all state institutions. **This constitution allowed the president to hold and control all state institutions without legislative oversight, effectively centralising power and eroding the system of checks and balances essential for democratic governance.**

This drastic shift was preceded by increasing violence and confrontations within the parliament. Tensions between deputies escalated into physical altercations, reflecting the deepening political crisis. Relations between Saied and Speaker Rached Ghannouchi grew increasingly cold and eventually ruptured completely, leading to a political deadlock and a significant blockade between Bardo (parliament) and Carthage (presidency). The parliament's attempt to establish a Constitutional Court, intended to act as a check on Saied's policies, was thwarted, further exacerbating the crisis.

The political turmoil spilled over into the streets, causing widespread tension and a significant loss of hope among the citizens. Initial public support for Saied, who was seen as a potential solution to the crisis, quickly turned to condemnation due to his perceived inaction and failure to address the nation's problems. The silence and inaction of Saied, who had been a symbol of potential recovery from the crisis, only exacerbated public frustration. **Citizens, feeling abandoned and betrayed, began to voice their dissatisfaction more loudly, condemning the president's failure to deliver on his promises and his moves to centralise power.** The initial acclamations for Saied's leadership transformed into a heavy burden as public disillusionment grew.

While on 21 July 2021, Kais was supported by the majority of citizens who believed he was the "saviour" of "clean" democracy in Tunisia, this is no longer the case today (Ben Achour). The increasing number of arbitrary arrests, the concentration of power in one person, the subjugation of the media, and the silencing of freedom of expression have changed perceptions (Ben Salah). **This moment was initially met with radio silence from the European Union.** ‘‘*The European Union has abandoned its role as a defender of democratic values in favour of transactional agreements, which have ultimately undermined its ideals. The EU has shown a more utilitarian face, focusing on security, migration, and economic issues. Additionally, the EU's engagement with Tunisia is hindered by internal conflicts within Brussels*” (El Ghwell). This was followed later by calls for a return to democratic order as soon as possible (The Guardian . The stance by the president has further complicated Tunisia's relationship with the international community. By framing external advice and criticism as intrusive, the president has fostered a narrative that delegitimises international concerns and isolates Tunisia from potential allies and supporters. This approach not only challenged diplomatic relations but also served to undermine the country's ability to receive constructive feedback and assistance that could be crucial for its development and stability.

Moreover, **such a discourse created an environment where domestic dissent is also viewed as unpatriotic, stifling critical voices within the country and weakening democratic processes**. It sets a precedent where any opposition or differing opinion is dismissed as influenced by foreign agendas, thereby consolidating power and limiting open debate. This rhetoric of foreign interference serves to rally nationalist sentiments, potentially diverting attention from internal issues and governance challenges. However, it also isolates Tunisia at a time when global cooperation and support could be beneficial for navigating its political and economic crises.

Subsequently, **aside from scattered reactions from a few European parliamentarians, the European Parliament has not significantly reacted, causing surprise and disappointment among Tunisian civil society and democratic institutions, such as the judiciary council and other counterpowers** (EuroNews)**. The EU's approach is seen in its funding and assistance programmes, diplomatic engagement, and public statements. Financial and technical assistance continues, but without strong political pressure, its impact is limited. Diplomatic interactions often prioritise security and economic issues, and the lack of strong condemnation of undemocratic actions, like undermining judicial independence, suggests a selective application of democratic support** (Benjamin).

Saied's actions have led to a severe decline in democratic norms and governance in Tunisia. His regime has been marked by the suppression of dissent and the dismantling of democratic institutions. The use of arbitrary arrests to silence opposition, including journalists and political activists, has created a climate of fear and repression. The once vibrant Tunisian media landscape has been subdued, with increasing censorship and control over the press. Civil society organisations, which played a crucial role in the democratic transition, are now under constant threat and scrutiny.

The European Union, which had been a staunch supporter of Tunisia's democratic transition, has largely remained silent in the face of Saied's authoritarian measures. The initial lack of a robust response from the EU was followed by muted calls for a return to democratic order. This tepid reaction has been disappointing for many Tunisians who had hoped for stronger international support in defending their democracy. The European Parliament, aside from a few scattered statements from individual members of the European Parliament, has not taken significant action, further fuelling disillusionment among Tunisian civil society and democratic institutions. Finally, the EU's silence and lack of decisive action are particularly striking given its previous involvement in supporting Tunisia's democratic processes.

The EU needs to explore alternative strategies and restructure its approach to avoid losing credibility and its role as a key multilateral actor. This includes focusing on regional stabilisation and addressing geopolitical challenges. The crisis encompasses not only irregular migration but also regular emigration issues, such as brain drain, where skilled professionals move to Europe only to face underemployment and poor working conditions. Conversely, there is a lack of structured opportunities for young retirees looking to relocate, hindered by stringent standards and regulations.

Internally, Tunisia is grappling with a complex migration crisis exacerbated by President Kais Saied's rhetoric, accusing civil society organisations aiding migrants of undermining the state through foreign orchestrated manoeuvres. Saied's insistence that Tunisia should not become a hub for irregular migration, and his rejection of Tunisia as a mere stepping stone to Europe, is part of a hegemonic discourse bolstered by protocols with Italy and frequent visits by Italian Prime Minister Meloni.

The security policy, placing migrants in abusive situations, repeats the mistakes of the agreement with Libya, where EU support for security forces led to serious human rights abuses, including crimes against humanity.

Negotiated in secret, the EUTunisia agreement lacks transparency and fails to guarantee the rights of displaced persons. Instead, it reinforces repression and authoritarian control in Tunisia without significantly improving security or migrant conditions. To address the migration crisis effectively, the EU must adopt a more transparent, rights based approach, ensuring that security measures do not come at the expense of human dignity and legal protections.

Amnesty International (2023) has criticised the European Union for its silence on human rights abuses in Tunisia, particularly in the context of its migration policy. In July 2023, representatives from the EU, referred to as 'Team Europe', met with Tunisian President Kais Saied to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) aimed at curbing migration to Europe. In exchange, the EU offered Tunisia €105 million for border management and nearly €1 billion in additional loans and financial support amid Tunisia's economic crisis.

Amnesty showed that during these negotiations, hundreds of refugees and migrants were reportedly stranded in desert border areas with Libya after being rounded up and abandoned by Tunisian security forces without access to food, water, or shelter. Despite these severe humanitarian issues, EU leaders have not publicly condemned these actions. Instead, the European Commission has committed to cooperating with Tunisian authorities to prevent refugees and other migrants from reaching Europe, fully aware that this may perpetuate ongoing violations and exacerbate the hostile environment migrants face in Tunisia.

Amnesty International argues that agreements aimed at containing migrants in non-EU countries do not save lives or reduce reliance on irregular migration routes. Instead, they force people to take more dangerous paths, increasing the suffering and exploitation by smugglers. Furthermore, these agreements risk legitimising President Saied's increasingly authoritarian measures, including the dismantling of institutional checks on executive power, restrictions on free speech, and control over the judiciary.

2 Methodology and Objectives of the Focus Group Discussions (FDGs)

2.1 Objectives of the Project

Work Package 3 (WP3) aims to critically examine EU 'democracy promotion' in the Arab world, focusing on Lebanon, Palestine, and Tunisia. It explores how EU policies interact with local dynamics, assessing their discourse, impact, and the responses of local actors. Specifically, WP3 maps local voices on democracy, analyses their engagement, and examines political feedback channels, including key gatekeepers influencing EU local relations.

2.2 Objectives of the FDGs

It aims to delve into the analysis of interactions and practices related to EU democracy promotion within the dynamic context of Tunisia, a key country on the southern shores of the Mediterranean with a rich historical backdrop of significant events. Since the 2011 revolution and the fall of the Ben Ali regime, Tunisia has undergone major political transformations, marked by the emergence of an Islamist government, the establishment of new democratic institutions, and the adoption of progressive laws. This period has also seen challenges such as terrorist acts, political assassinations, and institutional crises like presidential vacancies and the early elections of 2021, culminating in the election of Kais Saied.

Throughout these events, the EU has been a pivotal player, evoking critical, appreciative, and indifferent responses among Tunisian political actors. This complex dynamic provides a fertile ground to explore how democracy is conceptualised according to Tunisian standards and how EU initiatives have been perceived and integrated within this evolving political landscape.

The focus group discussions are structured to deeply examine several crucial dimensions:

- The impact of EU funding and support initiatives on the empowerment or dependence of local entities, particularly during "critical moments" such as political transitions and security crises.
- Evaluation of tangible or symbolic outcomes and practices of EU programmes.
- Analysis of formal and informal feedback mechanisms between the EU and its Tunisian partners (especially mechanisms of funds).
- Exploration of forms of contestation and key actors involved in EU democracy promotion.
- Reflection on the evolution of the EU's role and influence during periods of political change and "coup-like" events, such as that of July 2021, to the recent democratic regression and new political directions in Tunisia.

2.3 Ethical Considerations

Two focus groups were conducted: the first (civic) was composed of civil society members and journalists, and the second (political) consisted of political activists, former deputies, and political science researchers. Additionally, two peer-to-peer interviews were conducted with officials from the Tunisian Ministry of Defence (a researcher and professor within the Academy of War) and a lawyer. These sessions followed meticulous selection by KADEM, the Tunisian partner of the project.

Diversity criteria were respected, including gender diversity, age diversity, political affiliation diversity, and specialisation in civil society, as well as a mix of EU supporters and critics, and regional representation. In sending invitations and requests for participation, we emphasised the trust participants had placed in us, ensuring they fully understood the purpose of the sessions. Prior to each session, we provided a comprehensive overview of the project, particularly WP3, which aims to assess the discourse and impact of EU policies in Lebanon, Palestine, and Tunisia, map local voices' engagement with democracy and their interpretations, and explore political feedback channels and gatekeepers in EU-local relations.

We were transparent about the questionnaire developed by our partner and WP3 lead, AUB, which was tailored to the Tunisian context. Oral consent was obtained from each participant, and we committed to maintaining anonymity due to national and international sensitivities, ensuring utmost confidentiality. Participants were informed that the collected data would be used to produce a policy brief on the Tunisian context. As partners and/or beneficiaries with KADEM, through the networking efforts of KADEM members, the solicitation process was smooth. Those who declined did so due to scheduling conflicts, not reluctance.

3 Findings

3.1 Perceptions of EU Democracy Promotion Practice in Tunis and How Change is Perceived

The initial support from the EU post-2011 revolution was substantial, with significant investments in parliamentary development and democratic institutions. This support was instrumental in the early stages of Tunisia’s transition, aiding the establishment of a new constitutional framework and supporting various democratic reforms. However, this enthusiasm faded over time, leaving many initiatives unfulfilled.

Participants in the focus groups noted how initial financial and logistical support for infrastructure within the Assembly gradually diminished, leading to a sense of abandonment. **The conditional nature**

of EU support was highlighted by politicians in FG 2 between 2011 and 2014, which often involved **selective backing for different regulatory bodies.** Critical areas, such as the Torture Prevention Authority, received insufficient support, while the EU played a crucial role in the National Dialogue Quartet and provided substantial financial aid. For FG 2 (composed of politicians), there was a notable disparity compared to the investments made in Eastern Europe. This led to perceptions of a biased agenda, where **Tunisia felt sidelined in favour of other regions.**

For the FG composed of **civil society members and journalists**, the rise of President Kais Saied and his authoritarian measures further strained the relationship with the EU. Saied's dismantling of intermediary bodies and the imposition of a presidentialist constitution undermined democratic processes, **casting a shadow over Tunisia's democratic aspirations.** The EU's response to these developments has been perceived as inconsistent and lukewarm, especially when contrasted with its robust aid to Ukraine and the lack of substantial support for Tunisia and Palestine. Participants expressed frustration over this inconsistency, highlighting a sense of neglect and **questioning the EU's commitment to supporting genuine democratic governance in Tunisia.**

For both focus groups and **the lawyer of the peer-to-peer interview**, discussions revealed a significant shift in how change is conceived and discussed between Tunisia and the European Union, particularly after 2021. **Initially, the EU's involvement was seen as a catalyst for democratic reforms and stability. However, as Tunisia's political landscape shifted under Saied's leadership, the EU's stance appeared to waver.** The initial silence following Saied's power grab in July 2021, followed by muted calls for a return to democratic order, was seen as inadequate by many Tunisian civil society members and democratic institutions. **This perceived lack of decisive action further fuelled disillusionment and a sense of betrayal among those who had initially viewed the EU as a steadfast ally in Tunisia's democratic journey.**

3.2 Contestation and Feedback

For both focus groups, Tunisia's democratic transition presents several major points of friction. The failure to demonstrate that democracy, the rule of law, and institutions are the most effective means to achieve national objectives is a primary cause of discontent. **There has been a lack of connection between citizens' concerns and fundamental issues (such as economic development, social welfare, and employment), which has hindered popular support for democratic reforms**. Insufficient investment at an internal (national) level in political and social rights, as well as in the rule of law, has exacerbated this gap.

Participants believe that, currently, the legitimacy of power is being questioned, as it relies on decrees and ordinances while neglecting the Constitution. The lack of awareness about the dangers of an authoritarian regime is also concerning; many Tunisians are not aware of the past sufferings under such regimes, making the current situation even more perilous. The democratic transition represented a valuable opportunity that was missed, and many hope that those responsible for this failure will one day be held accountable.

For part of the politicians from FG 2, the European Union, which did not adequately support Tunisia during critical periods under Moncef Marzouki (former President) and Kais Saied, has seen its role as a supporter perceived as insufficient and inconsistent. For members of civil society organisations (CSOs), the lack of effective support for transitional justice, which was dominated by internal quarrels and losses of crucial information, contributed to this failure.

For all participants (focus groups, interviews), the European Union seems to treat democracy in Tunisia as a necessary evil, dictating conditions that do not always align with local needs. This approach was particularly evident after July 25, 2021, where hidden promises and agendas influenced decisions (such as the migration memorandum). The West appears to prefer centralised governance with a single interlocutor in a suit and tie, which pushed Kais Saied to deviate from the agreed democratic path to gain their support.

For the official from the Ministry of Defence, the EU's approach to supporting democracy in Tunisia reflects a patronising and superior attitude, akin to colonial missions. This perception is rooted in the idea that the EU positions itself as intellectually and politically superior, guiding Tunisia towards democratic governance. This "accompaniment" is seen as condescending and undermines the notion of sovereign equality. Critics contend that democracy is a matter of national sovereignty, and each country should be free to develop its own political system without external interference. Still, in his opinion, **the notion of neo-colonialism emerges** from the EU's emphasis on transactional relationships that prioritise EU strategic interests, such as migration control and economic policies, over genuine democratic support. The EU's push for agreements like ALECA (the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement) is viewed as an attempt to gain deep control over Tunisia's economy, affecting its sovereignty. Such policies are seen as perpetuating **a form of economic dominance** rather than fostering true partnership. According to him, since 2011, Tunisia has seen a proliferation of NGOs, many influenced by foreign funding. This has led to a perception of external interference in domestic affairs, with some NGOs being accused of aligning with foreign interests rather than national ones. This dynamic has diluted the impact of civil society and led to calls for greater transparency and regulation of foreign funding.

For all participants, Tunisia faces two major dangers: an inferiority complex, seeing itself as less than the West, and the inability to provide development and health conditions that allow citizens to defend and promote democracy. Terrorism, used to weaken certain factions to the benefit of others, has also played a destabilising role. The police state is a direct factor in undermining democracy. The authoritarian rule and the role of security unions in sabotaging transitional justice, along with terrorist attacks that have elevated security as a dominant force, have significantly contributed to this issue. Security unions have played a crucial role in weakening democracy and transitional justice, which are characteristic actions of authoritarian regimes.

The West treats democracy like a menu *à la carte*, choosing and supporting only what aligns with its interests, such as the migration issue and economic interests. The opportunities offered by the West are often accompanied by conditions and external challenges such as terrorism or migration, further complicating the Tunisian situation. The question remains: does the West truly want a democratic and stable Tunisia between two unstable countries like Algeria and Libya? Currently, investments seem unlikely, reinforcing a perception of Western superiority and conditional support that further complicates the situation in Tunisia.

3.3 Interaction between the Local and the EU, Funding, and Constraints

The interaction between local entities in Tunisia and the European Union (EU) reveals a complex dynamic marked by both support and contention. Regarding funding, the influence of foreign funding on political power in Tunisia is significant. For example, the Ennahdha party, with its historical and ideological ties, has benefited from foreign funding. This external financial support has enabled Ennahdha to present itself as a powerful party, affecting other political forces and preventing them

from emerging comparably. This phenomenon illustrates how foreign funding can shape the political landscape, creating imbalances.

In the monitoring and evaluation section, participants from both focus groups expressed concerns about poor oversight of funding, which could sometimes go astray or encroach on Tunisian political life. An example cited was the Ennahdha party, which established several associations to benefit from multiple EU funds. Participants also noted that evaluations are often purely bureaucratic and superficial, as the evaluators, frequently Europeans, lack sufficient understanding of the Tunisian context. This has amplified the misuse of funds and fuelled hegemonic discourse, such as that of Kais Saied against all civil society organisations.

All participants agreed that from 2011 to 2019, the EU was active in monitoring elections and funding political education operations. However, from 2019 to 2024, its presence in elections and other notable fields has been virtually non-existent. The current political situation in Tunisia, coupled with the EU's unclear stance on democracy in the country, has made it challenging to engage with an absent entity. Previously, in their opinion, there were frameworks for discussions during meetings and conferences, but after 2019, such interactions became impossible, potentially being perceived as conspiracies with a foreign entity against the state. Consequently, social protests in Tunisia have diminished, even though the population faces significant hardships.

From an economic point of view, the lack of investment reforms (Investment Code) aimed at strengthening the private sector and investment, which are priorities for the EU, is notable. There are arguments that reforming the fiscal system could achieve social justice by opening the market to everyone and allowing broad participation. This raises the question of the state's role in relation to the EU. Finding an answer to this could provide solutions.

Market reform could improve the situation. In a poor country like Tunisia, the state cannot be in a strong position during negotiations with the EU. When the EU intervened and assisted, it did so from a perspective that perhaps did not align with the local elite's views. This discrepancy in perspectives has hampered effective collaboration.

Locally, the system does not invest in democracy, and political parties are prohibited from receiving direct foreign funding. However, they can benefit indirectly, such as through the Committee of Young Liberals, which can receive indirect funding. NGOs like Bawsala and I Watch have been active in the parliament, providing training and creating an academy within the parliament to support the process. Despite efforts to implement changes, the extent of success remains questionable. Participation in numerous initiatives with the EU, representing the government, has not always yielded the desired results.

Yet, the EU has its priorities and often imposes them without adequate bilateral consultation. There is a need for discussions on how projects should be executed and shared visions on their implementation. However, **local actors frequently face predetermined methods and conditions without prior agreement. Even in training sessions, the EU often brings in foreign experts who are more focused on teaching rather than sharing experiences. This approach raises questions about how these experts can provide insights specific to the local context.**

Furthermore, **the EU's approach is perceived by officials and public bodies as somewhat colonial, with an emphasis on financial evaluations rather than a holistic assessment of activities and funding effectiveness.** This narrow focus on financial metrics overlooks broader impacts and local feedback,

leading to frustrations among local stakeholders who seek a more collaborative and respectful partnership.

3.4 Central Epiphanic Moment and How It Unfolded

Participants noted four dates where they believe the EU was absent or failed to grasp the point:

- **2013: End of the Troika regime (EU absence):** The EU believed that the democratic transition was assured with the resignation of this government, but in reality, the process was still long and complicated. The EU failed to maintain its active role in the democratic transition.
- **2019 (EU absence):** The unsuccessful conclusion of the ALECA negotiations and the change in behaviour/reduction of funding from the EU.
- **2021 (EU absence):** The unclear political position of the EU regarding Kais Saied's regime and its step back in supporting civil society.
- **October 2023 (EU absence):** The loss of credibility of the EU as a defender of human rights, and the near impossibility of sitting at the same table to discuss projects promoting democracy, given its clear stance on Palestine.

3.5 Gatekeepers

Participants from focus groups (FGs) emphasised that the true guardians of democracy are the people, particularly civil society. A democratic culture must be cultivated, especially among younger generations. Despite Tunisia's progress, a foundational democratic culture is still lacking, as evidenced by political hostility over the past decade. Participants noted that while the 2014 Constitution was well-received, its impact is limited without a deep-rooted democratic culture.

Participants highlighted clear risks facing democracy, including public disillusionment. They stressed the need to redefine the EU's role from a funder to a strategic partner supporting democracy in Tunisia. This redefinition is crucial for building a sustainable democratic culture. There is a suspicion that external actors, including the EU, might prefer Tunisia not to become a stable democracy. Participants noted opportunities missed due to external influences like terrorism and migration issues, suggesting these are not coincidental. The feeling that external powers may not want Tunisia to succeed democratically, given its unstable neighbours, Algeria and Libya, is prevalent.

Participants also discussed President Kais Saied’s failures and the courage of political prisoners who resisted, emphasising the need for equal recognition of all political actors once democracy is restored. The Saied regime has exposed the true nature of some politicians and media figures, revealing their opportunism.

- **Perception of Democracy**

For participants in FGs and peer-to-peer interviews, Tunisians are increasingly disillusioned with their democracy. The consolidation of power by President Kais Saied has exacerbated political instability, economic challenges, and corruption, leading to a significant erosion of public trust in democratic institutions.

- **For EU Assistance**

For participants in FGs and interviews, the European Union's support for Tunisia's democracy is increasingly seen with ambivalence. Initially heralded as a strong ally during Tunisia's post-Arab Spring transition, the EU's focus has shifted towards pragmatic concerns such as migration control, counter-

terrorism, and economic stability. This shift has led to a perception that the EU is complicit in human rights abuses and supportive of authoritarian measures under President Kais Saied's administration, switching into pragmatic assistance and political bias.

- **Shift in EU Focus**

Points that were highlighted by participants are:

  - **Migration Control:** The EU's emphasis on curbing migration has led to agreements like the 2021 Memorandum of Understanding, where Tunisia received financial support in exchange for stricter border management. This focus on migration over democratic principles has raised concerns about the EU prioritising its own security over the democratic aspirations of Tunisians.
  - **Counter-Terrorism:** The EU's cooperation with Tunisia on counter-terrorism measures often overlooks the broader implications for civil liberties and human rights.
  - **Economic Stability:** While economic support is crucial for Tunisia, the EU's approach has often been criticised for imposing reforms without sufficient understanding of Tunisian history and culture. Financial aid without a clear and shared strategy with different stakeholders and local regions has inadvertently supported authoritarian practices by providing resources without ensuring accountability.

- **Perceptions of Complicity**
  - **Human Rights Abuses:** The EU's silence on human rights violations in Tunisia has been perceived as tacit approval of these actions. Instances of the Tunisian government's harsh treatment of migrants, suppression of civil society, and political opposition have not been met with strong EU condemnation, leading to accusations of complicity.
  - **Support for Authoritarian Measures:** By prioritising pragmatic concerns, the EU is seen as indirectly supporting President Saied's consolidation of power. Saied's moves to dissolve the parliament, assume executive authority, and suppress dissent are viewed as contrary to the democratic values the EU claims to uphold.

- **Impact on EU Credibility**

The EU's shift from a principled defender of democracy to a more utilitarian approach has significantly undermined its credibility in Tunisia. The EU's initial role in supporting Tunisia's democratic transition post-2011 is now overshadowed by its focus on migration, security, and economic stability, often at the expense of democratic principles. This shift has eroded trust among Tunisians who once looked to the EU as a reliable partner in their democratic journey.

Recommendations

1. **Reaffirm Commitment to Democracy:** The EU should prioritise democratic values and human rights in its engagement with Tunisia.
2. **Conditional Financial Aid:** Financial assistance should be contingent on measurable progress in democratic reforms and human rights protections.
3. **Inclusive Dialogue:** Engage with a broad spectrum of Tunisian civil society organisations and political actors to ensure diverse perspectives are considered.

4. **Transparent and Accountable Policies:** Implement policies that address both security concerns and democratic principles, with regular monitoring and evaluation.
5. **Support for Civil Society:** Increase support for civil society organisations that promote democratic participation, human rights, and social justice.

4 Deviation Summary

Deviations and Failures

- **Failure to Achieve Objectives**: The EU's shift from supporting democratic values to prioritising migration control, counter-terrorism, and economic stability has undermined its role in fostering democracy in Tunisia.
- **Schedule Delays**: The pragmatic focus has led to slow and ineffective implementation of democratic support measures, delaying the achievement of critical democratic milestones (epiphany moments).
- **Funding Oversight**: Poor oversight and bureaucratic evaluations have allowed misuse of EU funds, particularly by political actors like the Ennahdha party, which established associations to benefit from EU funding.
- **Negative Impact on Democracy**: This misuse has fuelled authoritarian practices and public distrust, impacting other tasks aimed at supporting civil society and democratic institutions.
- **Civil Society Engagement**: The failure to ensure proper funding oversight has weakened the impact of civil society organisations, limiting their ability to promote democratic values effectively, and leaving them feeling isolated and vulnerable to threats from authorities.
- **Public Perception**: The EU's perceived complicity in human rights abuses and support for authoritarian measures have damaged its credibility, making it difficult to foster a democratic culture in Tunisia.

Contingency Plan

- **Conditional Financial Aid**: Link financial assistance to measurable progress in democratic reforms and human rights protections.
- **Inclusive Dialogue**: Engage with a broad spectrum of Tunisian civil society organisations and political actors.
- **Transparent Policies**: Implement transparent and accountable policies, with regular monitoring and evaluation.
- **Support for Civil Society**: Increase support for civil society organisations promoting democratic participation, human rights, and social justice.
- **Respecting Culture and Tunisian Realities and Priorities**: To effectively support Tunisia's democratic transition without being overly progressive, the EU should prioritise assistance in specific areas:
    - **Equal Justice**: Support projects that ensure fair legal processes, access to justice for all citizens, and reforms to enhance judicial independence.

- **Social Cohesion and Security**: Fund initiatives that promote community integration, reduce social tensions, and improve public safety through inclusive security policies.
- **Strengthening Democratic Institutions**: Assist in building robust, transparent, and accountable institutions. This includes support for parliamentary functions, local governance, and anti-corruption measures.

5 Conclusion

Participants unanimously agreed that the European Union played a significant role in Tunisia's democratisation since 2011. However, following the 2021 coup, the EU's focus shifted towards protecting European borders rather than promoting democracy and human rights in Tunisia. The participants critiqued the lack of a unified understanding of democracy and the rule of law among Tunisians, compounded by political instability and past conflicts. Kais Saied's populist policies are seen as a consequence of these issues. Despite the EU's effective support during elections and reforms, its bureaucratic evaluation system and failure to integrate local expertise have hindered project success. The EU is now perceived as complicit with Saied's regime, imposing a democratic model that neither respects Tunisian culture nor progresses incrementally. Participants stressed that the EU's cooperation with Tunisia should be restructured to include all stakeholders. It is crucial to bring officials and civil society organisations (CSOs) together to protect the civic space currently threatened by Saied's policies. Rather than a selective approach, **the EU should listen to diverse needs across various regions, fostering inclusive dialogue and support.**

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