EXTERNAL ACTORS IN CRISIS: CREDIBILITY AND US DEMOCRACY PROMOTION IN TUNISIA DURING THE ARAB SPRING

by

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how external actors promote democratization in contentious environments by examining the US response to the Arab Spring in Tunisia between 2011 and 2014. The removal of Ben Ali in Tunisia in 2011 and the subsequent transition to democracy in that country took US policy makers by surprise. Given the lack of credibility of the US as a democracy promoter in the region, the US pursued a cautious strategy in encouraging Tunisia's transition. As a result, it failed to capitalize on the opportunity to create a positive "feedback loop" that could have supported Tunisia's democratic transition. This case illustrates the importance of credibility to successful democracy promotion by external actors and highlights the need for further research in this area.

INDEX WORDS: Tunisia, Democracy Promotion, Democratization, US Foreign Policy, Arab Spring

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When the self-immolation of a poor fruit seller in Sidi Bouzid sparked a wave of protest that spread across the Arab world and toppled some of the region's longest ruling dictators, the international community was left reeling. No one had anticipated that what observers considered to be among the most stable of authoritarian regimes in the region could be toppled in a matter of weeks (ICG, 2011). The changes that the fall of Ben Ali created in the region produced an enormous foreign policy challenge for the international community, particularly the United States. A region that many considered resistant to democracy was suddenly convulsed with democratic fervor. The policy process was further complicated by the United States' reputation in the region (Boduszynski, 2013; Carothers, 2012; Mohamed, 2007). The US's legacy of foreign interventions to maintain its security interests and of supporting friendly dictators while claiming to support democracy and human rights has reduced the credibility of its attempts at democracy promotion (Zunes & Ibrahim, 2009). Given the contentious environment in which any response must operate, the question of how best to respond to the crisis is fraught with complications. As one policy analyst noted in the weeks after Ben Ali's fall, "the challenge for the administration is to find the right balance between identifying the U.S. too closely with these changes, and thereby undermining them; and not finding ways to nurture them enough" (Landler, 2011b).

How do external actors promote democracy in contentious environments? In order to explore this question, this paper analyzes the US response to events in Tunisia during the Arab

Spring (December 2010 to January 2015). Tunisia presents an interesting case study for several reasons. First, Tunisia is an example of successful transition in a region of the world some previously considered to be inimical to democracy (Huntington, 1996). Second, Tunisia was the first in a series of political transitions in the region to which the US had to respond. With Tunisia, we can examine how an actor responds to an unanticipated event. With perhaps the exception of Egypt, the Obama administration had time to anticipate the spread of protests to other countries and could therefore be better prepared to respond to them. Third, Tunisia carries few strategic priorities for US national security. As such, the tensions between the desire to promote democracy and the need to preserve national security interests should be greatly reduced. Finally, Tunisia carried many of the traditional "prerequisites" that would suggest a successful democratic transition was likely. As such, US policy makers could reasonably predict that their actions would enable a successful transition. Tunisia thus presents a case is which US policymakers should want to prioritize democracy promotion in their response and in which that response should be impactful.

This paper proceeds with an examination of the literature on how democratization occurs, the international factors that influence that process, and how democracy promoters choose among available strategies to achieve their stated goals. Numerous scholars have examined various aspects of the democratization process, but past work does not sufficiently integrate the parallel domestic and international processes that occur at the moment of crisis. Next, I turn to the theoretical framework that guides the case study analysis. Following the model laid out by (McFaul, 2007), I lay out a theory of democratization as a foundation for examining the case of Tunisia. I also introduce a conceptualization of the phases of democratic transitions modified from Morlino (1998) to structure the analysis. Finally, I examine the democratic transition in

Tunisia and the US's response to explore the interaction between domestic political events and foreign policy responses. I argue that while Tunisia was in many ways an ideal opportunity for the US to pursue its stated foreign policy goal of democracy promotion, concerns about the credibility of US as an external actor in the region led to the Obama administration taking an overly cautious approach to the Tunisian revolution. This overly cautious approach was compounded by budget battles in Congress and security concerns stemming from the destabilizing effects of regional change. As a result, the Tunisian transitions course was determined by domestic factors. The case of Tunisia raises the importance credibility and reputation to democracy promotion, a topic that merits further study.

CHAPTER 2

HOW DEMOCRATIZATION OCCURS

Since the flourishing of democratic governments following World War I and World War II, political scientists have been interested in the question of how and why countries become democracies. The debate over the definition is complicated and contentious, but the many definitions agree on a few key characteristics. Democracy is "a way of making decisions collectively and establishing rules and policies through popular decision-making" in "which the people exercise control and which operates in the people's interest" (Grugel & Bishop, 2014). Procedural definitions of democracy focus on the process of decision-making in which the key characteristic is the holding of meaningful elections (Schumpeter, 1976). Liberal conceptions of democracy add to the procedural characteristics the civil liberties (such as freedom of speech, freedom of press and rule of law) necessary for the functioning of democratic government (Dahl, 1972).[1] Democratization is the process by which governments are reformed of created to further embody these ideals. Scholars have developed many theories to explain the ways in which this process occurs. These theories fall into three broad categories: modernization theories, historical sociological theories, and transition theories. These broad categories of theories share a common focus on the domestic factors that impact or promote the process of democratization.

Modernization Theories

Modernization theories argue that democratization is a function of economic development. As the economy grows, it encourages the development of societal "prerequisites"

[1] For more on the debates surrounding the definition of democracy, see Chapter 1 in Grugel and Bishop (2014).

(such as levels of education, literacy, mortality, urbanization, and industrialization) that are correlated with democracy (Lipset, 1959).[2] These prerequisites are thought to enhance the capacity of citizens to participate effectively in democratic institutions and reduce barriers to collective organization, an essential part of the democratic process. As citizens attain more education and autonomy within society, they seek greater participation in the political process. The process of democratization is a stage in a broader evolutionary process of economic development (Rostow, 1961). Critics of this approach argue that economic development alone cannot cause democratization. Przeworski and Limongi (1997) argue that while economic development strongly correlates with democracy, it cannot fully explain or predict when democratization occurs. Economic development may even undermine the basis for popular challenges to autocratic regimes by making those regimes more stable (M. K. Miller, 2012). Modernization theories share a conception of democratization as a domestic evolutionary process. While they successfully explain the structural factors that condition the success or failure of democratization, they cannot fully explain why or when democratization takes place.

Historical Sociological Theories

Historical sociological theories of democratization also describe a domestic evolutionary process of change. These theories emphasize social or cultural changes rather than economic changes. Friedrich (1950) traces the development of modern democratic institutions from feudal power-sharing arrangements. Moore (1966) argues that the characteristics of social revolutions in the transition from feudalism to capitalism determine political development. Some scholars trace the development of democratic institutions from the fracturing of political authority and the rise

[2] Numerous studies have substantiated the correlation between various aspects of economic development and democracy. For a review of these studies, see Vanhanen (2003).

of individualism after the Protestant Reformation (Bruce, 2004). As with modernization theories, these theories describe long term trends that enable democratization, but not proximate causes of democratic transitions.

Transitions Theories

Transitions theories attempt to remedy the shortcomings of modernization and historical sociological approaches by focusing on the short-term dynamics of democratizing events. Rather than taking a long-term structural approach to democratization, these theories focus on elite decision making in political crises. These theories argue that elites choose democracy as part of a rational response to the uncertainty of political crises. When a crisis of legitimacy occurs (usually brought on by severe economic problems), popular pressure from reform leads to fractures within the ruling coalition over the appropriate response (Gill, 2000). When no one group in either the regime or the opposition possesses sufficient power to resolve the crisis, a political realignment occurs. The kind of transition that occurs is dependent on the relative power of factions within the regime and the opposition. If reformers within the regime and moderates within the opposition reach a compromise, a "pacted" transition results (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986). The pact sets the new "rules of the game" by which future political relations will be governed (Brumberg, 2014). Democratic forms of government are chosen because they provide mechanisms by which competing groups can settle disputes.[3] The key to a successful transition is compromise. Pacts succeed by sufficiently "limiting the agenda of change, dividing the benefits proportionally [among participants], and marginalizing radicals and the masses" in order to keep relevant segments of society committed to the process (McFaul, 2011).

[3] For more examples of transitions theories, see Brumberg (2014), Gill (2000), and Rustow (1970).

The focus on elite decision making makes predicting outcomes almost impossible because many factors can influence the course that events take. The type of authoritarian regime in which the transition occurs influences who the key elite actors will be. How the previous regime maintained its hold on power impacts how (and if) the ruling coalition will break down. For example, civilian regimes maintain power through linkages with certain segments of society such as business elites, labor unions, the military, or security forces. The regime can weather the crisis as long as they maintain these linkages. In military regimes, the regime often maintains fewer linkages to the broader society, but are more susceptible to its internal cohesion. Military regimes often choose to "return to the barracks" in order to protect their independence and position (Geddes, 1999). How the previous authoritarian regime regulated civil society impacts the capacity of the opposition to challenge the regime and their bargaining power during pact negotiations (Gill, 2000). Opposition groups must present credible alternatives to maintaining the status quo (Meirowitz & Tucker, 2013). In countries with strong civil societies, the opposition is often better organized and more effectively challenge the regime. Where civil society is weak or polarized, members of the old regime can more effectively control the transition process. The personalities of the elites involved and their personal relationships can also impact the negotiation process (Gill, 2000).

As with the modernization and historical sociological approaches, transition theories focus on domestic factors as the primary explanation for the success or failure of transitions. Transition theories were developed by examining the "third wave" of democratic transitions beginning in Latin America and Southern Europe (Huntington, 1991). Later transitions, spawned by the collapse of the Soviet Union call into question some of the patterns observed by the earlier work. The post-communist transitions often featured complete collapse of the former regimes.

New regimes did result from bargaining, but the key actors came overwhelmingly from the opposition (McFaul, 2011). Critics of transition theories also argue that these theories place too much emphasis on the relative power among elites. Pacted transitions do not require an ideological commitment on the part of elites to democracy, merely the need for procedures to adjudicate disputes when no one faction can impose its will on another (McFaul, 2011). More broadly, the paradigm assumes that all transitions are necessarily "away from authoritarianism" and "towards democracy," draw a false equivalence between elections and democratization, and completely ignore structural factors that condition the environment in which bargaining takes place. (Carothers, 2002). Perhaps the most important factor that the transition paradigm overlooked was the role of international factors in democratization.

CHAPTER 3

THE INTERNATIONAL ASPECTS OF DEMOCRATIZATION

Previous theories of democratization did allow for a limited role for international factors. Modernization theories were predicated on the idea that by promoting economic development in third world countries, external actors could promote political development as well (Rostow, 1961). While some considered this process to be inevitable, others advocated a more cautious view. External actors could support economic growth through foreign aid, but not predict or control the impacts that this "gigantic social earthquake" would have on domestic politics (Heilbroner, 1963). Historical sociological approaches focus on identifying long term trends in past cases. As such, these theories tend to develop individual explanations for each case. As such international events (i.e. the Protestant Reformation) tend to have individual impacts in each case studies (Grugel & Bishop, 2014). Transitions theories anticipate that international factors can affect the decision-making of elites in the period of crisis. International pressures may precipitate the crisis of legitimacy, limit the options of the regime to respond to it, or enhance the credibility of the opposition to challenge the regime (Gill, 2000).

The experience of the post-communist transitions to democracy in Central and Eastern Europe and Asia seemed to suggest that the role of international actors could be much larger than past theories would suggest. These events prompted a shift in democratization literature to focus more on international factors. The most recent literature identifies numerous direct and indirect influences on democratization at the international level. They can be divided into three broad

categories: democratization by diffusion, democratization by political conditionality, and democratization through foreign aid.

Diffusion

The literature on democratization by diffusion focuses primarily on the indirect ways in which democratization spreads across borders. The process of diffusion serves primarily encourage domestic processes of democratization rather than prompt democratic transitions. Numerous scholars have noted the tendency for democratization to occur in "waves" (Brinks & Coppedge, 2006; Gleditsch & Ward, 2006; Hale, 2013; Huntington, 1991). Huntington (1991) described three waves of democratization: the first spread through Europe and was spawned by the American and French Revolutions, the second occurred after World War II and the end of colonization, and the third began in Southern Europe before spreading to Latin America and the post-communist countries. He argued that waves are prompted by similar international conditions creating concurrent patterns of domestic processes of change and by the "demonstration effect" presented by successful democratic transitions. Waves of regime change "tend to occur where (a) there exists a common frame of political reference, (b) unpopular leaderships are becoming lame ducks; (c) elites lack other focal points for coordinated defection, and (d) structural conditions supporting a new regime type are in place" (Hale, 2013). Countries with democratic neighbors are more likely to experience democratic transitions and more likely to sustain them (Gleditsch & Ward, 2006). Countries also tend to emulate the level of democracy among their neighbors (Brinks & Coppedge, 2006). The spread of international norms supporting democracy has been found to support democratization (Gill, 2000). However, the same processes

that spread democracy may just as easily encourage authoritarianism (Lankina, Libman, & Obydenkova, 2016).

Political Conditionality

While the literature on democratization by diffusion focuses primarily on the indirect spread of democracy, the literature on political conditionality focuses on the direct spread of democratization through the use of conditions and incentives in the international system. Key to the idea of political conditionality is the concept of "leverage" (Levitsky & Way, 2005; Way & Levitsky, 2007). Because of imbalances of power between states within the international system, powerful states can exert influence on weaker states to conform to certain domestic policies. They can exert this influence "in a variety of ways, including political conditionality and punitive sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and military intervention" (Levitsky & Way, 2005). Under political conditionality, powerful states use punishment and reward in order to enforce or encourage action in the international arena.

Political conditionality has been shown in several studies to be an effective means of democracy promotion (Dimitrova & Pridham, 2004; Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2011; Pevehouse, 2002; F. Schimmelfennig & Scholtz, 2008; Frank Schimmelfennig & Scholtz, 2010). Most of the literature on political conditionality focuses on international organizations rather than individual states. International organizations that are small and homogenous can more effectively use membership in their organization to promote reforms (Pevehouse, 2002). The strength of political conditions on the target state is contingent on the nature of the relationship between the target state and the entity offering the incentives, the size and credibility of the incentives offered, and the intensiveness of the monitoring process (Vauchdova, 2005). The

effectiveness of political conditionality is also subject to the subject to the issue area under condition and the domestic adoption costs of those conditions (Frank Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004).

Political conditionality is most influential when applied to countries already in the process of transitioning to democracy (F. Schimmelfennig & Scholtz, 2008). In countries where the process has already begun, the incentives offered by political conditionality, plus the monitoring that accompanies them, serve to "lock in" domestic processes of change. The nature of the incentives makes it attractive for domestic actors to commit to reforms. The entity offering the incentives serves as an external auditor of the domestic situation, giving domestic forces additional resources to keep domestic elites on track. If the incentives are sufficiently large and monitoring sufficient stringent, as in the EU membership process, political conditionality can transcend domestic politics entirely. Vauchdova (2005) argues that the EU membership was so intricate in scope, so intensively monitored and supported, and provided such powerful incentives that the further prospective member states got into the process, the more difficult it became to roll back the reforms made. While the strength and intensity of the EU membership process is limited to prospective members only, the experience of political conditionality in that context shows the power of international factors on domestic politics (Dimitrova & Pridham, 2004; Kubicek, 2013).

Foreign Aid

Another means by which international actors may directly promote democratization is through foreign aid. The primary means by which foreign aid impacts domestic politics is by altering elite strategies and capabilities (Vanderhill, 2013). Foreign aid may accomplish this by

reducing the impact of economic crises, supporting the growth of democratic institutions and government services, or directly developing the capacity of citizens and civil society to participate in a democratic regime. However, the relationship between foreign aid and democratization is controversial in the literature. Some authors find a link between general types of foreign aid and democratization (Gibson, Hoffman, & Jablonski, 2015; Girod & Walters, 2012). Others find no correlation (Ahmed, 2012; Brown, 2001, 2005; Knack, 2004). Uncovering the relationship between foreign aid is complicated by the fact that foreign aid tends to flow towards democratizing countries or countries that are already democracies (Alesina & Dollar, 2000). Thus it is difficult to distinguish cause and effect in the relationship.

More evidence suggests that specially designed democracy promotion aid does encourage democratization. In their examination of USAID democracy promotion funding, Finkel, Perez-Linan, Seligson, and Tate (2008) find that democracy promotion aid is effective, especially when the target country is experiencing economic turmoil or state failure. Some types of democracy promotion assistance, such as direct support to political parties or civil society groups, are more effective than others (*A Study of Political Party Assistance in Eastern Europe and Eurasia*, 2007). Spoerri (2015) examines direct assistance to political parties in Serbia and finds that democracy promotion aid increased the capabilities and credibility of the opposition and facilitated its challenge to the Milosevic regime. However, the strategies that international donors used when allocating aid, such as delaying until after Milosevic consolidated power and being openly partisan about which groups received aid, undermined the gains made during Serbia's eventual transition and made consolidating them more difficult. Aid for international election monitoring has been shown to enhance the legitimacy of elections in transitioning countries, thus

alleviating some of the uncertainty inherent in the transition process (Beaulieu & Hyde, 2008; Hyde, 2007, 2010; Kelley, 2008).

Not all scholars are convinced by the effectiveness of democracy promotion aid. Democracy promotion aid can transplant institutions, but it cannot consolidate democracy. If the people do not view those institutions as legitimate or lack the capacity to make them function according to democratic principles, then a country has not truly democratized (Hill, 2010). Much of the programming that democracy promoters implement is not designed to maximize effectiveness or sufficiently tailored to the domestic context in which it must operate (Carothers, 2015). The rapid growth of the international democracy promotion industry creates perverse incentives for the organizations that implement the aid. In order to do their work, democracy promotion organizations need access and funding. As a result, they tailor the programming they create to best achieve these criteria. Prioritizing access and funding leads to a "taming" of democracy promotion, in which organizations prioritize less controversial programs (Bush, 2015).

CHAPTER 4

HOW DEMOCRACY PROMOTERS CHOOSE STRATEGIES

Thus far we have explored some of the means by which the international environment and international actors can impact domestic politics and promote democratization. What this literature doesn't explain is how (and why) international actors choose to promote democracy in the first place. Most of the literature on this subject begins with the "democratic peace" theory, the observation that democracies don't go to war with each other (Risse-Kappen, 1995; Rosato, 2003). If democracies don't go to war with each other, then it is in the interest of other democracies to promote democracies as a means of avoiding the costs of war. As Huber (2015) points out however, the process of democratization is often destabilizing and can lead to conflict if it fails. Thus there is a fundamental tension in the decision to promote democratization between short term interests and long term interests. Huber argues that two additional factors explain how states resolve this "democracy dilemma": the state's normative commitments to democracy promotion and the extent to which those normative commitments constitute a key part of the state's identity. The internalization of a state's identity as a democracy promoter can help mitigate the perception of threat generated by the instability of democratization.

Jonas Wolff, Spanger, and Puhle (2014) use international relations theory to develop two ideal types of democracy promoters: the "Freedom Fighter" and the "Civilian Power." The freedom fighter type uses explicit language to describe its democracy promotion goals, sees democratization as a revolutionary process, and pursues confrontational and provocative strategies to promote democracy. The civilian power type uses the more abstract language of

human rights to describe its democracy promotion efforts, sees democratization as an evolutionary process, and pursues policies of inclusion and engagement to promote democracy. The authors identify the US and Germany as examples of the freedom fighter and civilian power types, respectively.[4] The extent to which each of these actors engages in democracy promotion is contingent on the interaction between the ideal types and six criteria:

- The *relative balance of power* between the promoter and the target state,
- The *security* and *economic interests* of the promoter in the target state,
- *Domestic special interests* within the promoter,
- *Political culture* of the promoter,
- *International norms* surrounding international intervention and democracy promotion,
- The *context* in which the policy must operate.

External actors have a variety of tools at their disposal to effect a strategy of democracy promotion. These tools vary in the level of invasiveness and resources required to execute. The least costly responses are rhetorical (i.e. statements of support, speeches, naming and shaming). At the opposite end of the spectrum is military intervention (J. Wolff & Wurm, 2011). This literature assumes that the actors who pursue democracy promotion as part of general normative commitment to democracy. Other authors have questioned the assumption that the stated goal of democracy promotion is in fact the intention of the actors who pursue such policies. Robinson (1996) argues that US democracy promotion is actually a strategy designed to maintain the status quo in developing countries.

[4] Other authors have compared US and EU democracy promotion strategies For more, see (Cavatorta & Durac, 2009; Greenfield, 2013; Huber, 2015; Magen, Risse, & McFaul, 2009; Powel, 2009).

CHAPTER 5

THEORY

The literature presented thus far has outlined debates about how democratization occurs, what factors influence democratization, and the ways in which democracy promoters choose strategies. However, much of the literature presented suffer from two important deficiencies. First, much of the literature fails to adequately examine the cyclical and interactive nature of democratization. Democratization is a long and complex process involving numerous, unpredictable factors. Deriving a "grand theory" of democratization may not be possible (Morlino, 2015). Thus, scholars seek to break the question into smaller more manageable pieces. Too often however, these pieces take either domestic or international factors as their focus, without considering the interplay between the two.[5] Second, the literature on democratization tends to focus on democratization as a long term process. The transitions literature sought to remedy this oversight in previous literature, but neglected international factors. The literature that does consider international factors tends to focus on the impacts of long-term democracy promotion tools such as political conditionality or foreign aid. Without the successful integration of these concerns into the field, our understanding of democratization is incomplete. Below, I lay out a tentative framework that will attempt to bring these concerns together to guide the analysis that follows. This framework does not seek to be a complete theory of democratization, but

[5] This problem is not unique to democratization literature, but impacts the field of political science as a whole (Gourevitch, 1978; Putnam, 1988).

merely to demonstrate the general understanding of democratization that I utilized to identify key moments in Tunisia's transition in order to address the research question.[6]

Democratization refers to the long term process of instituting democratic norms and values (such as transparency, accountability, participation, and rule of law) into government within a state. Democratization occurs as a cyclical pattern of interaction at the domestic level in which the rules of political interaction are constantly shifting. A country experiences a democratic transition when its government reforms to meet the minimal procedural definition of democracy: free and meaningful elections. The keys to a successful democratic transition are compromise and inclusion. The legitimacy of any new regime is dependent on a broad consensus within society.

International actors can influence this cyclical process by incentivizing democratic changes or punishing authoritarian impulses. While the extent to which international actors can influence these processes is limited by the nature of democracy, the effects of interaction with the international community can still be powerful (Magen & Morlino, 2009).The magnitude of the effect that international actors can have in a democratic transition is itself the product of cycles of interaction between key domestic players and international actors. At their most powerful, international actors can "anchor" or "lock in" domestic processes of change (Magen & Morlino, 2009; Vauchdova, 2005). Past actions and current interests condition how actors respond to future attempts to influence the transition. Because of this, the context and sequencing of policy responses are important factors in determining the influence of international actors in democratic transitions.

[6] This model of laying out a general theory of democratization to guide an exploratory case study is adapted from McFaul (2007).

Phases of Democratization

The idea of dividing democratization into phases to guide analysis was introduced with the transitions theories. Most transition theories distinguish between three phases: regime breakdown, transition, and consolidation (Gill, 2000; O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986; Rustow, 1970). Regime breakdown is characterized by a crisis of legitimacy in which the old rules by which politics were governed begin to fail. The key feature of this phase is the fracturing of the ruling coalition over how best to respond to the crisis. New actors rise to challenge the regime. The phase ends when either the old regime is removed from power completely or a pact between elements of the old regime and the opposition succeeds in establishing a new regime. The second phase, transition, is where the new "rules of the game" are written. This phase is usually characterized by the creation of institutions and the writing or reforming of the constitution. The phase ends with founding elections. In the final phase, consolidation, the new "rules of the game" become imbedded in the political system. True consolidation occurs when democracy becomes an end in itself rather than merely a means of settling disputes (Brumberg, 2014).

While this conceptualization is powerful, it will be useful for the purposes of this study to take a more fine-grained approach. Morlino (1998) adds an additional phase, what he dubs installation, between transition and consolidation. In Morlino's conceptualization, transition "refers to that fluid and uncertain period when new democratic structures are about to emerge, while some of the structures of the old regime still exist" (pg. 19). Transition describes the period after the old regime has been removed (usually in the form of the removal of key leaders) and before the structure of the new regime is decided. In this phase, key actors decide *how the new "rules of the game" will be written*. The installation phase is characterized by "the creation of new structures and procedures" along with "other more informal mechanisms intrinsic to a

democratic system" (pg. 20). The distinction between transition and installation is a useful one because how the structures and procedures of the next regime are decided is key to the success or failure of the democratic transition (Eisenstadt, LeVan, & Maboudi, 2015).

For the purpose of this analysis, the events of the Arab Spring are broken down into four phases: regime breakdown, transition, installation, and consolidation. Regime breakdown covers the period between Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation and Ben-Ali's departure (December 2010 to January 14 2011). Transition covers the period leading up to the October 2011 elections for the Constituent Assembly. Installation covers the Constituent Assembly in power and the constitution writing process (January 2012 to January 2014). The consolidation phase begins with the first elections under the new constitution in 2014. This analysis focuses on the first three phases. Because the democratic transition in Tunisia is so recent and true consolidation is a more prolonged process than the other phases, it isn't possible to draw useful conclusions about the consolidation phase.[7]

[7] While Tunisia has had two peaceful elections in which power has changed hands, thus satisfying Huntington's test for a consolidated democracy, one of these elections did not occur under Tunisia's new constitution. Furthermore, the process of consolidation is a long term process that can take decades to complete. As such, it's too soon to say if Tunisia has (or will) successfully consolidate its current democratic regime.

CHAPTER 6

WHAT HAPPENED IN TUNISIA

The Domestic Situation Before the Arab Spring

The main reason why the democratic transition in Tunisia shocked the international system was that prior to December 2010, Tunisia appeared to be one of the most stable and repressive regimes in the region. This assessment was based on the nature of the authoritarian regime in Tunisia and the relatively good economic performance of the regime in the years prior to the Arab Spring (L. Miller et al., 2012). Under President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, the Tunisian government "based [its] authority on a hegemonic ruling party – the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD), a powerful Ministry of Communications in charge of muzzling the media, and security services that controlled the opposition and eclipsed the army" (ICG, 2011). Opposition to the Ben Ali regime appeared weak and divided between Islamist groups, who opposed the government's long established policies of secularization, and secular leftists, who opposed Ben Ali's economic policies. Ben Ali cultivated fear of Islamist groups as a means of co-opting secular leftists and preventing coordination among the opposition (Alexander, 2013). While in office, Ben Ali intentionally cultivated an image of internal stability and pursued neo-liberal economic policies in order to attract foreign investors (Anderson, 2011). Foreign investment sustained relatively good levels of economic growth. In the decade prior to the Arab Spring, Tunisia's GDP growth fluctuated between 3 and 6 percent annually, a rate much better than its neighbors. Unlike its neighbors, Tunisia also had a sizeable middle class and a relatively

high standard of living (L. Miller et al., 2012). These conditions combined to make Tunisia seem like an unlikely place for regime change.

In the period prior to the Arab Spring, these pillars of government control began to erode. As Ben Ali consolidated his political power in Tunisia, he increasingly vested political authority in his extended family and "depoliticized" the ruling party. The growth of the internet and satellite TV weakened the regime's hold on information. The high rates of economic growth encouraged by foreign investment concealed broad regional discrepancies in economic conditions, high unemployment (especially among the young and well-educated) and widespread corruption (Gelvin, 2012). A US State Department cable from 2008 released by Wikileaks details the extent to which Ben Ali's family came to dominate economic life in Tunisia:

> President Ben Ali's extended family is often cited as the nexus of Tunisian corruption. Often referred to as a quasi-mafia, an oblique mention of "the Family" is enough to indicate which family you mean. Seemingly half of the Tunisian business community can claim a Ben Ali connection through marriage, and many of these relations are reported to have made the most of their lineage (*Corruption in Tunisia: What's Yours is Mine*, 2008).

This cable, along with others detailing the corruption of the Ben Ali regime, were published and widely circulated in Tunisia in the months preceding the Arab Spring (Shane, 2011, Jan 15).[8] At the same time as the Ben Ali family grew increasingly prosperous, the wages of average Tunisian's stagnated, inflation drove up the cost of staple goods and unemployment soared (Gelvin, 2012). These conditions substantially weakened the popular legitimacy of Ben Ali's

[8] While the publication of the cables certainly brought attention to the issue of corruption, there's no evidence to suggest that the publication of the cables themselves caused the events that follows. Public knowledge of the corruption of the Ben Ali family was widespread before the cables were released (something the cables themselves acknowledge). Furthermore, there is no evidence that Mohamed Bouazizi knew about the cables or was motivated by their publication (Mackey, 2011, Jan 17).

rule. It also left Ben Ali increasingly isolated from the factions within the regime that would be needed to help suppress any popular challenge to his rule (ICG, 2011).

Phase 1: Regime Breakdown

On December 17th 2010, a Tunisian street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire outside a government building in Sidi Bouzid. Earlier in the day, Bouazizi had been working at his produce stand in the town's market when a female government official asked to see his license. Bouazizi did not have a license because he lacked the money needed to pay the bribes necessary to get one. The female official reportedly broke Bouazizi's scale and confiscated his fruits and vegetables. In some accounts, the female official struck Bouazizi when he attempted to resist. Subsequent complaints to the official's superiors fell on deaf ears. In the days following Bouazizi's desperate act, the town of Sidi Bouzid was rocked by protests. Friends and family used social media to spread Bouazizi's story. Protests spread to neighboring towns and reached the capital city by December 27th (Alexander, 2013; L. Miller et al., 2012).

Somewhat ironically, Ben Ali's response to the unrest after Bouazizi's self-immolation encouraged the spread of protests rather than quelling them. Ben Ali's initial response consisted of relying on the security services and police to break up protests. The increasingly heavy handed repression by security services prompted more protestors to take to the streets. On December 24th, two protestors died in clashes with the police. Despite the growing unrest, Ben Ali delayed formally addressing the protestor's demands until after protests reached the capital city (ICG, 2011). On December 28th, Ben Ali made a speech condemning the protests as "unacceptable" while at the same time promising to address the protestor's demands (Noueihed & Warren, 2012). At the same time, the tactics of security services became increasingly violent and polices

attempted to shut down independent media by arresting several journalists (L. Miller et al., 2012). Ben Ali did not speak again publically until January 10th 2011, when he announced the firing of several key government officials and promised to "create 300,000 jobs in the next two years" (ICG, 2011). His delayed response and the violence of the security services signaled the weakness of the regime and only encouraged demonstrations.

Another key factor in the spread of the protests was coordination of protests and strikes at the local level by members of the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) and other professional organizations such as the Lawyer's Syndicate. Mid-level union leaders actively supported the early protests and used their networks of contacts to organize strikes and coordinate the flow of information (ICG, 2011). On January 6th, the Lawyer's Syndicate called for a national strike to protest the treatment of demonstrators (L. Miller et al., 2012). On January 11th, the UGTT made its first national call for Ben Ali's removal following reports that snipers had been used to target protestors. That same day, the military refused to step in to quell the protests. Within the next 48 hours, a series of national strikes and protests fractured the ruling coalition. On January 13th, Ben Ali announced that he would not seek re-election. That evening, he dissolved parliament and in the early hours of the morning on January 14th, he and his family fled to Saudi Arabia (Noueihed & Warren, 2012).

Phase 2: Transition

Ben Ali's departure prompted a brief constitutional crisis. Ben Ali had not formally abdicated the presidency and there was some debate over which constitutional mechanism should be used to remove him from power. The first transitional government was headed by Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi and consisted primarily of members of the previous regime,

supplemented by representatives of UGTT and three legal opposition parties (Noueihed & Warren, 2012). At the same time, he ordered the release of political prisoners, legalized new political parties and created commissions to draft a new constitution. Despite these moves, protestors worried that this new government would not constitute a sufficient break with the past and returned to the streets. On February 27 as the result of popular pressure, Prime Minister Ghannouchi disbanded the old ruling party and stepped down. An interim government led by Beji Caid es-Sebsi and containing no former regime members was appointed.

Tunisia's second transitional government quickly learned the lessons of its first. To direct the transition process, they formed the High Commission for the Realization of the Objectives of the Revolution. This group consisted of a broad range of elected officials from the previous regime, civil society leaders, representatives of Union's and opposition parties. The Commission remained very sensitive to public opinion throughout its tenure. Whenever it felt that it was being too heavily criticized or losing its popular mandate, the Commission expanded to reach a broader segment of society (Zemni, 2014). This emphasis on popular consultation was important for mediating the tense divide between secular and Islamist factions within society.

A key task of the Commission was to write the rules that would govern the election of a Constituent Assembly and guide the drafting of a new constitution. Secularist and leftist members of the Commission, fearing that Islamist parties would dominate the Constituent Assembly and reverse secular social policies, favored pre-negotiated rules to constrain the Constituent Assembly's actions. Islamist parties argued that such restrictions generated by an un-elected body challenged the spirit of the Revolution. The crisis came to a head in June 2011 when members of the largest Islamist party, Ennadha, resigned from the Commission. Yet again, compromise prevailed and Ennadha rejoined the Commission about a month later. Elections for

the Constituent Assembly took place in October 2011. In that election, which international observers praised as transparent and largely peaceful, Ennadha received slightly more than 40% of the votes (IRI, 2011). They quickly formed a coalition government with two secular parties, Congress of the Republic and Ettakatol (Alexander, 2013).

Phase 3: Installation

The Constituent Assembly began work on drafting a new constitution in November 2011. From the start, Ennadha pursued a policy of compromise and conciliation. Despite winning the majority, Ennadha chose not to seek the Presidency in the new government. Instead, it handed the Presidency and the head of the Constituent Assembly to leaders from its secular coalition parties. Ennadha took the prime ministership. Debate over four key constitutional issues dominated the politics of the Constituent Assembly: a direct reference to sharia law, an article that appeared to weaken gender equality, a passage that criminalized blasphemy, and whether or not the new government should be a presidential or a parliamentary system (Alexander, 2013). The first three issues played toward the long-standing Secular-Islamist divide in Tunisian politics. Secular parties and women's rights activists feared that those provisions could be used to restrict personal freedoms (such as freedom of speech and gender rights). In fact, many of the fears associated with these debates resulted from exaggerated rumors generated before drafts of the relevant sections were released to the public and a failure on the part of Ennadha to effectively communicate its position to the broader public (Marks, 2014). After facing considerable international and domestic criticism for their stances, Ennahda withdrew these provisions.

The most contentious issue turned out not to be a religious question, but the institutional question of whether or not to choose a parliamentary or presidential system. Ennadha supported a parliamentary system because they thought that it would curb "Tunisia's tendency toward presidential authoritarianism" and fulfill "the need for all voices in Tunisia's new political landscape to be heard" (Marks, 2014, p. 26). Proponents of a presidential system cited the need for a strong presidency to deal with Tunisia's substantial economic challenges. Furthermore, critics said that given Ennadha's relatively strong party apparatus and substantial public support, a parliamentary system would benefit Ennadha's political interests.

These questions prompted a political crisis that repeatedly delayed the passage of the new constitution. A deteriorating economic situation, the increasing mobilization of radical Salafists and the assassination of two secular opposition leaders further polarized the Tunisian political environment. The crisis reached its peak in late 2013 when the Constituent was nearly dissolved more than once without having approved a constitution (Arieff, 2013; Arieff & Humud, 2014). The crisis was only resolved after the "Quartet," consisting of leaders from key civil society groups, negotiated a compromise in December 2013. Under the terms of the deal, the Ennahda-led government ceded power to a technocratic government that would conclude negotiations on the new constitution (Arieff & Humud, 2015). The new Constitution, passed in January 2014, created a mixed-presidential parliamentary system with a strong executive.

CHAPTER 7

THE US RESPONSE TO TUNISIA'S ARAB SPRING

US – Tunisia Relations Before the Arab Spring

Prior to January 2011, Tunisia did not constitute a foreign policy priority for the United States. While the US and Tunisia have a long history of diplomatic ties (Tunisia was one of the first countries to recognize the United States in 1799), it's small size and even smaller bilateral trade relationship made Tunisia a low priority for the US.[9] Tunisia was the ninth largest recipient of bilateral aid in the Middle East and North Africa in FY 2010. In the decade prior to the Arab Spring, bilateral cooperation focused primarily on security relations including drug interdiction efforts and counterterrorism. The overwhelming majority of bilateral aid to Tunisia consisted of military aid meant to finance the maintenance of US made military equipment. In FY 2010, military aid accounted for $19.9 million of the $21.9 million in bilateral aid given to Tunisia (McInerney & Bockenfeld, 2015). While the Tunisian government expressed interest in deepening trade relations with the US through a free trade agreement, negotiations were not pursued because the Tunisian government had not completed necessary economic reforms (Arieff, 2011, Dec 16).

US Democracy Promotion in Tunisia

Prior to December 2010, Tunisia received little aid for democracy promotion and was rarely publically criticized by the administration for its policies on human rights. This was in part

[9] More than 60% of Tunisia's external trade is conducted with Europe (Arieff, 2011, Jan 18a). Tunisia was the US's 92nd biggest trade partner in 2010 (*U.S. International Trade in Goods and Services: Annual Revision for 2010.*, 2011).

because Tunisia was considered "to be an ally, a moderate Arab, Muslim state, and a partner in international counterterrorism efforts" (Arieff, 2011, Jan 18b). While the regional field office of the Middle East Partnership Initiative, a Bush-era program designed to promote democracy and economic development in the region, is located in Tunis, the office did not regularly conduct programs in-country (McInerney, 2011). Powel (2009) describes US democracy promotion activities in the 2000's as guided by the "little and rarely" approach. He argues that because Tunisia was viewed as an "island of stability" in a region filled with potential security threats, policy makers prioritized continued stability over democracy promotion.

Democracy promotion policy in Tunisia prior to December 2012 was consistent with the broader trend of US foreign policy in the Middle East. While US policymakers have touted their support for democracy and human rights in public rhetoric consistently since the end of World War II, they have also supported dictatorships in the region in the name of preserving stability (Fowler, 2015). Repeated foreign interventions, especially the US-sponsored coup against the democratically elected government of Iran in 1953, have left many in the Middle East with a fatalistic attitude towards politics and suspicion of external actors (Zunes & Ibrahim, 2009). The Bush-era "Freedom Agenda," while marking a more strident rhetorical shift, did not alter this trend because the most critical rhetoric about democracy was generally directed at opponents of the US's foreign policy objectives. Meanwhile, the rights violations of allies were routinely ignored (Latif & Abbas, 2011).

This hypocritical policy tarnished the reputation of US democracy promotion efforts in the region (Zunes & Ibrahim, 2009). In a poll conducted in 2010, only 16 percent of Arab citizens described their attitudes about US foreign policy in the Middle East to be hopeful while more than 63 percent of respondents were discouraged about his policies. In that same poll, only

5 percent of respondents thought that promoting democracy was one of the US's foreign policy priorities in the Middle East while 77 percent of respondents named the United States when asked to choose the two countries that pose the biggest threat to them (Telhami, 2010). Dictators used the specter of foreign intervention to discredit opposition parties and limit democratic reforms (Bellin, 2004).

The legacy of US foreign policy in the Middle East, particularly the Iraq War, had a profound effect on Obama's foreign policy worldview (Hamid, 2016). From the start of his administration, Obama expressed an awareness of the legacy that the war left for American engagement in the region. In a speech in Cairo in 2009 that was designed to "reset" relations with the region, Obama acknowledged that legacy saying: "I know there has been controversy about the promotion of democracy in recent years, and much of this controversy is connected to the war in Iraq … So let me be clear: no system of government can or should be imposed upon one nation by any other" (Lizza, 2011). Instead of pursuing the strong rhetorical strategies of the Bush years, the Obama administration focused on the "long game" of democracy promotion through using quiet diplomacy and multilateralism. At the same, it attempted to refocus Middle East policy generally by actively engaging with autocratic partners in the region rather than publically criticizing them for human rights violations (Carothers, 2012). Obama in particular also showed an awareness of the importance of how the US may respond to popular demands for change in the region. In a memo to top staffers written in August 2010, he wrote that "our regional and international credibility will be undermined if we are seen or perceived to be backing repressive regimes and ignoring the rights and aspirations of citizens." Failure to respond to these demands "could have negative implications for U.S. interests, including for our

standing among Arab publics" (Lizza, 2011). Obama was aware of the lack of credibility that the US had in the Middle East and curtailed his strategy in the region accordingly.

US Reaction to Regime Change

The Obama administration was completely surprised by events in Tunisia (Carothers, 2012). It did not publically address the growing crisis in Tunisia until January 7 2011. In a statement, a State Department official urged "all parties to show restraint as citizens exercise their right of public assembly" and noted that the administration had "conveyed [its] views directly to the Tunisian government" (Crowley, 2011). In response, the Tunisian government summoned US Ambassador Gordon Gray to formally protest that statement. On January 11, in an interview with Al-Arabiya, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton expressed concern about the protests and the potential for instability in the region. However, she stopped short of condemning any actions by any regime, emphasizing that the US was "not taking sides" and that she had not been in direct communication with regional leaders on the subject (Arieff, 2011, April 15). The administration stepped up its rhetoric slightly on the 13th when, in a speech in Doha, Qatar, Clinton challenged the regimes of the region to meet the demands of the protestors, saying:

> You can help build a future that your young people will believe in, stay for, and defend. Some of you are already demonstrating that. But for others it will take new visions, new strategies and new commitments. It is time to see civil society not as a threat, but as a partner. And it is time for the elites in every society to invest in the futures of their own countries. Those who cling to the status quo may be able to hold back the full impact of their countries' problems for a little while, but not forever. (Clinton, 2011a)

Clinton went on to emphasize the importance of meeting the needs of the people in order to counter potential sources of extremism.

The administration did not make any formal declaration of support for the protestors until after Ben Ali's departure on the 14th, but even then it was cautious. In his official statement, President Obama condemned the violence with which the Ben Ali regime had responded to protests and praised the courage of the protestors. While he called on the government of Tunisia to act quickly "to respect human rights, and to hold free and fair elections in the near future that reflect the true will and aspirations of the Tunisian people," he made no promises of aid and no explicit reference to democracy (Obama, 2011b). Secretary Clinton's official statement was more explicit:

> Clearly this is a moment of significant transition in Tunisia and through this period and beyond it is important that the Tunisian Government respect the right of its people to peacefully assemble and express their views. We look to the Tunisian Government to build a stronger foundation for Tunisia's future with economic, social, and political reforms, and call for free and fair elections in the near future that reflect the true will and aspirations of the Tunisian people … Addressing these concerns will be challenging, but the United States stands ready to help. (Clinton, 2011b)

The Obama administration compounded its rhetorical support by dispatching Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman to meet with Tunisian leaders to discuss possible electoral assistance. At a press conference on January 26, Feltman said that "the United States and the international community stand ready to assist *as appropriate and as requested* [emphasis added]" (*Interview with Feltman & Gray*, 2011). Feltman also pushed back against assertions that the US had pressured Ben Ali to resign emphasizing that "this was a

Tunisian story" and the US did not seek to meddle or influence the course of Tunisia's transition. The cautious nature of the US's response was a direct result of the administration's concern about the US's lack of credibility. In an interview with the New York Times on January 25th, Samantha Power, a senior director at the National Security Council, said that "the president was adamant that we take stock of the brittleness and hidden risks of the status quo" (Landler, 2011b).

US Policy Before the Embassy Attacks

After Ben Ali's departure, the Obama administration moved to back its rhetoric with more concrete diplomatic efforts and foreign aid programs. In the period prior to the September 2012 embassy attacks, the Obama administration concentrated its efforts on providing economic assistance while emphasizing a general support for democracy with a commitment to remaining neutral about Tunisia's domestic debates. The bulk of initial aid allocations to Tunisia came from reprogrammed aid rather than new allocations. In March 2011, the State Department reprogrammed $20 million in Middle Eastern Partnership Initiative (MEPI) funds to support democracy promotion programs in Tunisia. An addition $12 million was also pulled from other accounts to facilitate election monitoring activities, fund economic assistance programs and set up cross-national exchange programs with other countries that had previously undergone democratic transitions. USAID reorganized its Office of Democracy and Governance to better coordinate aid programs in the region. USAID also set up a local Office of Transition Initiatives in Tunis to coordinate aid (McInerney, 2011).[10]

[10] One constraint on the immediate aid response was the timing of the protests in relation to the Federal Budget cycle. Ben Ali was not removed from office until after the Obama administration had already submitted its budget request for the next fiscal year (McInerney, 2011).

In the spring of 2011, the Obama administration began to develop a more coherent and comprehensive policy response to the unrest in the region. The key pillars of this response were outlined in a speech in May 2011 at the State Department. President Obama outlined a response that focused primarily on addressing the economic problems that prompted the regional unrest. The key features of Obama's response plan were:

- Organizing multilateral economic aid through the G8 (what would become the Deauville Partnership);
- Relieving transitional countries international debt obligations (especially for Egypt);
- Creating Tunisian (and Egyptian) Enterprise Funds to promote small and medium businesses, as well as extending the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development to include transitional countries;
- Establishing a comprehensive Trade and Investment Partnership for the Middle East and North Africa;
- Anti-corruption programs.

No mention was made of democracy promotion assistance. Instead, Obama acknowledged the United States complicated legacy in the region. He stated that "it will be the policy of the United States to promote reform across the region, and to support transitions to democracy" but that the US "must proceed with a sense of humility" (Obama, 2011a).

Some within Tunisia, and the Middle East more broadly, greeted Obama's proposals with optimism. Those who watched the speech praised Obama's focus on the economic problems that led to the Arab Spring (Kirkpatrick, 2011). A poll from mid-2011 found that nearly 40 percent of Tunisian's thought that US influence on the development of democracy in their country had been somewhat or very positive, compared to less than 20 percent who said

that the US's influence had been somewhat or very negative (Jamal & Tessler, 2011). However, not everyone was so optimistic. Many in the region thought that the proposals didn't go far enough to dispel the US's hesitancy to endorse protests from the beginning. One observer from Jordan said that "everybody still has it in the back of their minds how America flip-flopped in their position toward these Arab revolutions." Others compared the rhetoric in Obama's speech to the one he gave in Cairo in 2009. While that speech had initially raised expectations of a new course for US strategy in the region, it ultimately "evaporated" after a few weeks (Kirkpatrick, 2011). A Pew Poll from May 2011 found that this view was widespread throughout the region. Majorities of respondents disapproved of the US's response to calls for change in the region, showed no confidence in President Obama, and believed that the US did not consider the domestic interests of Middle Eastern countries when formulating policy (*Obama's Challenge*, 2011).

A few weeks later, at the G8 meeting in Deauville, President Obama pressured world leaders to match the US's economic commitments to Tunisia and the rest of the region (Landler, 2011a). At the end of the meeting, members of the G8 announced the creation of the Deauville Partnership to coordinate multilateral aid. The groups priorities reflected Obama's focus on addressing the economic challenges presented by the Arab Spring while downplaying the political (Secretary, 2012). In order to support this diplomatic effort, the Obama administration created the Office of the Special Coordinator for Middle East Transitions within the State Department in September 2011. Ambassador William Taylor was named the first Special Coordinator. The goal of the Special Coordinator was "to formulate, secure resources for, and oversee the implementation of, coordinated strategies to support NEA countries in transition" (Department, 2011). A few weeks before Tunisia's first elections in October 2011,

President Obama hosted Interim Prime Minister Beji Caid es-Sebsi at the White House (Melki, 2011). The new initiatives announced at that meeting (the return of the Peace Corps to Tunisia, the selection of Tunisia for the Millennium Challenge Corporation Threshold Program and loan guarantees to facilitate international investment) further illustrated the administration's emphasis on economic aid (Secretary, 2011).

Throughout this period, the administration was cognizant of the limits of US credibility in the region. During a panel for US policy makers at the US Institute for Peace, Ellen Laipson of the Stimson Center said that the US was "not now the most credible or accepted partner in this period of transition." Consequently, the best response was to structure aid such that it "doesn't feel like it's the project of a foreign government." At that same forum, Ambassador Taylor reiterated the US's commitment to neutrality saying "we're not flying these planes … we're giving advice to the pilots" (Omestad, 2012). Overall, the administration's policies made little impact in the region and did nothing to dispel popular opinion about the US as an unreliable democracy promoter (Carothers, 2012).

US Policy After the Embassy Attacks

US policy towards Tunisia shifted towards security after protests over the release of an anti-Islamic film led to an attack on embassies in Libya, Tunisia and Sudan. In Tunisia, protesters breached the embassy compound, smashed windows and set fires. At the nearby American Cooperative School of Tunis, protestors removed security cameras, looted supplies, and set the building on fire (Gladstone, 2012). The Tunisian government's handling of event, particularly the release without trial of suspected participants in the attacks, cooled support for bilateral aid to Tunisia in Congress. Whereas security related aid made up only 15% of bilateral

aid to Tunisia in 2011 and 2012, by 2013 security aid rose to slightly more than half of bilateral aid (McInerney & Bockenfeld, 2013). Concerns about security issues in Tunisia and budget battles in Congress delayed or halted many of the policies that the administration proposed prior to September 2012 (Greenfield, 2013). Whereas in the first year and a half after Ben Ali's removal, the US reallocated some $400 million in aid to Tunisia for various projects (including democracy promotion aid), between 2013 and 2015 the administration only allocated an additional $200 million (with plans to allocate another $100 million in 2016) ("Fact Sheet: Enduring US-Tunisian Relations," 2015; McInerney & Bockenfeld, 2013).

The attack also prompted a rhetorical shift on the part of the Obama administration. In a speech two months after the attack, Secretary Clinton reiterated the US's support for the democratic transitions in the region, but also said that the administration was "making clear that rights and freedoms come with responsibilities," namely addressing "threats arising from inside their borders; fight[ing] terrorism and extremism; and honor[ing] international commitments" (Clinton, 2012). A telling example of the shift in priorities for the administration comes from statements made by nominees for Ambassador to Tunisia before and after the attacks at their confirmation hearings. At Ambassador Jacob Walles confirmation hearing in March 2012, Walles devoted most of his statement to the challenges facing the transitional government and the need to support Tunisia's democratic transition. A brief mention of the importance of building stronger ties on regional security issues appears only at the end of his remarks (Walles, 2012). Two years later, when Ambassador Daniel Rubinstein appeared at his confirmation hearing, he named security concerns as his top priority after confirmation (Rubinstein, 2014).

The need to improve security at the US embassy in Tunis after the attacks also prompted a draw down in the diplomatic resources available to the administration in the region. In the

immediate aftermath, embassy staff were reduced to essential personnel only and the embassy was classified as an "unaccompanied post" meaning that US personnel could not house family members in country.[11] These restrictions have complicated the ability of the embassy in Tunisia to fill key staff positions and limited its ability to engage actively with the population and civil society in the region (McInerney & Bockenfeld, 2015). Despite pressure from within the foreign policy community, Tunisia continues to lack a permanent USAID Mission. The USAID Office of Transition Initiatives that opened in Tunisia in 2011 began to draw down its activities in 2014 after the successful parliamentary elections (McInerney & Bockenfeld, 2014). Finally, in 2015 it was announced that the Middle East Partnership Initiative office in Tunisia would be relocated to the US embassy in Rabat (McInerney & Bockenfeld, 2015).

Diplomatic shifts on the ground in Tunisia were mirrored by changes in Washington. Beginning in 2013, the Obama administration conducted a foreign policy review of its Middle East strategy. The administration's new policy, outlined in Obama's address to the United Nations that year, sought to reduce the administrations footprint in the region and focus its attention on the key threats to US national security. In this more "modest" approach, democracy promotion was not listed as a core foreign policy goal (Landler, 2013). That fall, after Ambassador Taylor left his position as the Special Coordinator for Middle East Transitions, the position was left vacant and the tasks of his office were distributed among various other agencies (Greenfield, 2013). Security politics continued to dominate US-Tunisia relations through 2014. In February 2014, the US inaugurated the first meeting of the US-Tunisia Strategy Dialogue. In remarks following the meeting, Secretary of State John Kerry said that the dialogue "will focus

[11] As of 2015, the US embassy is the only major Western country to place such a restriction on its embassy staff (McInerney & Bockenfeld, 2015).

on cooperation in security matters and on promoting closer economic ties between our two nations" (Kerry, 2014).

The Obama administration's policy retreat in Tunisia eroded public trust and drew criticism from democracy advocates in the region. Whereas in 2011, nearly 40% of Tunisians found the influence of the US to be somewhat or very positive on the development of democracy in Tunisia, by 2013 that number had fallen to less than 20%. Nearly 40% of respondents said that the US had a somewhat or very negative influence on the development of democracy. In that same poll, nearly 60% percent of respondents saw foreign interference as an obstacle to reform, up from 40% in 2011 (Jamal & Tessler, 2011, 2013). Tunisians also expressed little confidence in key American policy makers and skepticism about the US motivations (*Most Muslims Want Democracy*, 2012). Critics argued that past policy "too often US policy has focused on strengthening actors in the Tunisian government and working with them to achieve security and stability" (*Moving Beyond Rhetoric*, 2013). Too little engagement with mid-level and low-level actors has left the US with limited leverage and exacerbates the credibility gap. Failure to deliver on many of the key economic policies promised early on in the transition further weakened the administrations credibility (Shaikh & Hamid, 2012). Others have criticized the administration's caution and limited engagement with the region. They argue that relying too heavily on pronouncements and rhetoric at the level of cabinet secretaries and the President limits the ability of the administration to respond quickly to changing circumstances. The administration "needs a high-octane troubleshooter—one with the credibility that comes with being seen as having the confidence of the president and the authority to act fast" (*Moving Beyond Rhetoric*, 2013). Finally, many critics cite President Obama's reliance on rhetoric at the expense of tangible action (Melhem, 2016).

CHAPTER 8

DID ANY OF IT MATTER?

The Tunisian case illustrates the limits of external influence when the external actor lacks credibility in the target state. Decades of inconsistent and hypocritical policies towards democracy promotion in the region led to reduced US credibility in the region. As a result, when the US was surprised by the rise of democratic protests against Ben Ali, it hesitated and played no role in Ben Ali's removal (Carothers, 2012). After Ben Ali's removal, US policymakers moved to cautiously support the protests, but repeatedly stressed its neutrality on domestic questions. Because of the US's lack of credibility, caution was perceived by the Tunisian public as insincerity. This limited the extent to which the US could influence the domestic situation. Furthermore, the administration intentionally stayed away from many of the key debates of Tunisia's transition period in order to avoid being seen as meddling. As a result, the process of domestic democratization and the US's response became detached. The US could not serve as a legitimizer to democratic voices within the Tunisian domestic scene, as external actors had successfully done in the Eastern European context (Vauchdova, 2005). The security challenges posed by the 2012 attacks on the US embassy in Tunis only furthered this cycle of limited engagement by limiting the diplomatic tools with which US policymakers could work and reducing domestic support within the US for further aid. Because of these limitations, the positive feedback loop that has characterized past examples of successful external actor support for democratization, for example in Eastern Europe, could not form.

The US's lack of credibility need not have been an obstacle to deeper engagement in Tunisia's transition. While concerns about appearing to be meddling in domestic affairs were certainly legitimate, there is evidence that, given the right kind of intervention, the US could have been more supportive of Tunisia's transition. Throughout this period, key domestic actors repeatedly stressed the importance of US support to Tunisia's transition. Ennahda leader Rachid Ghannouchi said in an interview in 2012 that he "highly appreciate[s] U.S. support of the democratic transition in the Arab world" (Ghannouchi, 2012). President Essebsi called U.S. support, and of external partners generally, "important to safeguard the situation in the country" and that the success of the Tunisian model in the region "depends on the role that the United States wishes to play" (Essebsi, 2015).

At lower levels, Tunisian actors have welcomed support from US linked non-governmental organizations and experts. Civil society actors have welcomed outside democracy promotion aid, but been frustrated by its short-term focus and lack of coordination (Bush, 2015; Marks, 2013; Shaikh & Hamid, 2012). During the designing of the constitution, Ennahda and other political parties welcomed outside technical assistance and "eagerly referenced scholars and international constitution-building experts" during debates over whether to implement a parliamentary or presidential system (Marks, 2014). Outside election monitoring has also been positively received as "crucially important" to the external legitimacy of the election and to settling internal disputes between parties (NDI, 2014).

All of this evidence suggests that while credibility is an important factor in effective support for a democratic transition, there was room in the minds of the Tunisian public to change perceptions of the US as an external actor. By pursuing an overly cautious response to the transition in Tunisia, the Obama administration confirmed prior perceptions of the US as

motivated by short-term interests and emphasizing stability over the interests of domestic publics. Ben Ali's removal, and the wave of popular protests it inspired, was an opportunity for US policymakers to break with the past. If the administration had pursued a bolder, more broadly engaged strategy from the beginning, it might have had room to undo the damage created by past legacies of interaction and regain some credibility in the region. Instead, it's cautious policy only confirmed prior expectations about US motivations.

This case study illustrates the importance of credibility and perceptions about credibility in the responses of external actors to democratization. It also shows the importance of sequencing and domestic-international interactions to the understanding of how policy responses are formulated. This study does have some limitations. First, we lack access to the Obama administrations private deliberations about policy responses and communications with Tunisian officials. It's possible that given the US's reduced credibility in the region it may have intentionally pursued a more cautious public strategy while taking more forceful action in private. Second, this study was limited to English language sources. While polling data and foreign news articles can give some insight into Tunisian public opinion about US policy during this period, access to Arabic or French language sources would improve our understanding of popular response to key foreign policy initiatives. How the media reported on the Obama administration and what key actors said to domestic audiences would give greater insight into the Tunisian half of the above described feedback loop. More research is needed to fully explore the role of credibility of external actors in democracy promotion.

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