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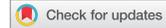
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Evolving role of North African civil society actors in the foreign policymaking process: youth, women's, labour and human rights organisations

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the evolving foreign policy roles of four sets of civil society actors – youth, women's, labour and human rights groups – in Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia during the Arab Spring and beyond. Our findings demonstrate that civil society groups initially flourished in the Arab Spring, with the region's average 'civil society rights score' registering positive increases in 2011 and 2012. The period of 2013 to 2018 witnessed a deterioration in this average score, as civil society faced an authoritarian backlash from illiberal (authoritarian) and liberal (democratic) North African regimes. An examination of individual civil society organisations further demonstrates a range of influence on foreign policy. Youth groups exert the least impact on North African foreign policies, despite high expectations associated with their central role in revolutionary protests and change associated with the Arab Spring. In contrast, women's, labour and especially human rights organisations have played more influential if still limited foreign policy roles. Finally, the impact of civil society on foreign policy is strongly mediated by a country's level of democracy. Only in Tunisia, which made a successful transition to democracy, have civil society organisations in the post-Arab Spring continuously enjoyed the freedoms to organise, protest and provide input into policy, including foreign policy.

KEYWORDS Delete civil society rights score; authoritarian backlash; democratisation; civil society

Introduction

Prior to the Arab Spring, authoritarian North African regimes suppressed civil society organisations except for those that served government interests. As a method of feigning political openness and a commitment to human rights, authoritarian leaders often allowed selective groups to operate within their borders but maintained control by imposing pro-regime leaderships. This relationship shifted during the Arab Spring, when North African civil society played a critical role in opening up authoritarian regimes, including

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promoting regime transitions in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia. One prominent scholar of North African politics compared the shift in North African civil society to the fall of the Soviet Union:

The changes that took place over 2011 across the Middle East and North Africa seemed to signal to many the awakening of civil society in the face of political authoritarianism in a repeat of what occurred in Eastern Europe in 1989 (Cavartorta 2012, 75).

The implication was that civil society would play increasing roles in both domestic politics and foreign policy. By 2013, however, civil society organisations found themselves in dire political straits, as regimes imposed tighter restrictions on the activities of existing organisations and the registration of new groups. Only in Tunisia, which made a successful transition to democracy, have civil society organisations in the post-Arab Spring continuously enjoyed the freedoms to organise, protest and provide input into policy, including foreign policy.

The remainder of this article is divided into six sections. First, we provide an assessment of the evolution of civil society rights in North Africa from the pre- to post-Arab Spring eras. This section provides the context for better understanding the impact on foreign policy of four civil society actors – youth, women’s, labour and human rights groups – that are discussed in four subsequent sections. These actors are explored in order of foreign policy influence. Youth groups exert the least impact on North African foreign policies, despite high expectations associated with their central role in revolutionary protests and change associated with the Arab Spring. In contrast, women’s, labour and especially human rights organisations have played more influential if still limited foreign policy roles. A final section offers general conclusions. Our treatment of North African civil society is not meant to be exhaustive (there are other civil society groups, such as ethnic groups, that could be examined), nor do we claim to provide definitive in-depth analyses of all four civil society groups selected for analysis. We instead provide initial reflections about the evolving foreign policy roles of these groups.

North Africa’s evolving associational and organisational context (2005–18)

Civil society encompasses voluntary organisations that seek access to the formal institutions of state power, such as the presidency and the parliament, with the objective of influencing both domestic and foreign policies (Schraeder 2004, 177). Civil society is a critical component of the processes of political liberalisation and democratisation, playing a central role in the opening up of authoritarian regimes (Stepan 1986; see also O’Donnell, Schmitter, and

Whitehead 1986; Cavatorta and Durac 2011). The assumption is that civil society can pressure authoritarian regimes to cede power and control over public life, thereby further allowing civil society to flourish and organise (Cavatorta and Durac 2011). In so doing, it is expected that civil associations will play more important roles in the making of domestic and foreign policies in countries undertaking political liberalisation and especially transitions to democracy. These are not unilinear processes, however, as witnessed by a post-Arab Spring authoritarian backlash in North Africa and around the world – what one author refers to as the ‘great civil society choke-out’ – as both liberal (democratic) and illiberal (authoritarian) governments ‘are doing their best to strangle funding for the civilian groups that dare to challenge their power and hold them to account’ (Roth 2016).

The evolving strength of civil society in each North African country is aptly demonstrated by the adoption of a ‘civil society rights score’ that ranges from 0 (low level of civil society rights) to 12 (high level of civil society rights).¹ In the five years preceding the Arab Spring, the average civil society rights score for all five North African countries was a poor 3.2 out of 12 (see Table 1). This score illustrates the difficulty for civil associations to organise let alone influence policy within the authoritarian political environments of North Africa. The Arab Spring (2011–12) marked the beginning of a shift, leading to optimistic projections regarding the role of civil society in the policymaking process. The average score increased to a 5.4 in 2011 and a 6 in 2012, when civil society rights were at their highest. In following years, however, a regional authoritarian backlash resulted in the decline of civil society rights, to an average 5.8 in 2013 and an average 4.6 in 2017, the last year for which data are available.

Table 1. Civil society rights in North Africa (2005–17).

Year	Algeria	Egypt	Libya	Morocco	Tunisia	Average
2005	6	3	0	6	2	3.4
2006	6	2	0	6	2	3.2
2007	6	2	0	6	2	3.2
2008	6	2	0	6	2	3.2
2009	6	2	0	6	2	3.2
2010	6	2	0	6	2	3.2
2011	5	5	3	6	8	5.4
2012	5	5	6	6	8	6.0
2013	5	4	5	6	9	5.8
2014	4	4	3	6	10	5.4
2015	5	4	3	5	9	5.2
2016	5	4	2	6	9	5.2
2017	5	2	2	5	9	4.6
Average	5.4	3.2	1.9	5.9	5.7	

Scale: 0–12 = range of civil society rights.

0 = low level of civil society rights (i.e. low level of ‘associational and organisational rights’).

12 = high level of civil society rights (i.e. high level of ‘associational and organisational rights’).

Source: Freedom House. 2018. ‘Associational and Organisational Rights’ variable (0–12 points) of the Freedom in the World Index.

Tunisia is the North African country that witnessed the greatest opening for civil society. Although the country had a poor civil society rights score of 2 in 2010 (the last full year of the Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali dictatorship), civil society played a central role in ensuring the success of Tunisia's 2011 Dignity Revolution and transition to democracy. The impact of this transition was demonstrated by a quadrupling of the country's civil society rights score to 8 in 2011 (the year in which elections were held for a transitional Constituent Assembly tasked with writing a new constitution), and 10 in 2014 (the year of the country's first democratic legislative and presidential elections under the new constitution). Public and governmental concerns with potential national security threats, most notably terrorist attacks at a beach resort in Sousse and at the Bardo Museum in Tunis in 2015, nonetheless led to a slight retrenchment in Tunisia's civil society rights score to 9 in 2015, where it remained in 2016 and 2017. This retrenchment occurred under the democratically-elected government of President Beji Caid Essebsi, who assumed office in December 2014 on a platform of promoting domestic stability as the necessary precondition for economic development. Under this vision, slight restrictions on civil society organisations are considered 'necessary evils' in the name of national security.

Civil society-state relations in authoritarian Algeria and Morocco were different. Both countries exhibited a civil society rights score of 6 in 2010, the year preceding the Arab Spring. In Morocco, this middling score was at least partially due to 'political liberalisation from above' that was undertaken by King Mohammed VI, who assumed the throne in 1999 from his father, King Hassan II. In Algeria, reforms from above were also undertaken, but in the aftermath of a civil war and under a military dictatorship led by President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. The Arab Spring outcomes of regime overthrow in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia were perceived in Algiers and Rabat as threats to their own stability, prompting the Bouteflika and Mohammed VI dictatorships to strengthen repressive measures against civil society. A special focus was placed on passing 'foreign agent' laws targeting civil society groups that accept funding from abroad. In Morocco, for example, the government is 'prosecuting five civil society activists for 'harming internal security' for accepting foreign funding to organise a workshop to empower journalism through a smartphone app' (Roth 2016). The net result is that Morocco's civil society rights score deteriorated to 5 in 2014, where it remains as of 2017. The authoritarian response of the Algerian dictatorship occurred earlier, with the country's civil society rights score deteriorating to 5 in 2011, further decreasing to 4 in 2014, only to return to 5 in 2017. It is noteworthy that both authoritarian regimes – one a personalised monarchy and the other a military dictatorship – staved off regime change through repressive policies against civil society.

In Libya, expectations for the flourishing of civil society after regime change were met by the harsh reality of a failed state and civil war. Under the

personalistic dictatorship of Muammar Qaddafi, Libya's civil society rights score was 0 – the lowest possible score and the worst of all North African countries in the five years preceding the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring unleashed civil protests and civil war, accompanied by foreign military intervention led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), which resulted in the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime and Qaddafi's execution at the hands of rival militias. During this period, Libya's civil society rights score increased to 3 in 2011 and 6 in 2012. The inability of opposition militias to form a stable central government in the aftermath of NATO-led military intervention, and the descent of the country into a failed state wracked by civil war, led to the gradual deterioration of the country's civil society rights score of 5 in 2013, to 3 in 2014 and 2015 and 2 in 2016 and 2017. This low score is less the result of a centralised, coordinated authoritarian backlash, than to the dangers of operating in a relatively lawless environment in which violent non-state actors threaten the activities of civil society groups.

The authoritarian backlash against civil society was particularly pronounced in Egypt. In 2010, Egypt's civil society rights score was 2 under the military dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak. This increased to a score of 5 in 2011 in the aftermath of the Egyptian revolution and transition to the democratically-elected government of President Mohamed Morsi. This opening for civil society was short-lived, as Army General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi led a military *coup d'état* in 2013 that overthrew the Morsi government, followed by Sisi's election in 2014 and re-election in 2018 as president amid a return to military dictatorship. Egypt's civil society rights score deteriorated to 4 during 2013–16, followed by a precipitous drop to 2 in 2017. This precipitous drop was the result of Sisi's enacting of a law in May 2017 restricting foreign and domestic non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Under the new law, NGOs 'may not use donated money for work related to political activities, such as funding parliamentary candidates or political parties', are not 'allowed to carry out or publish the results of a study or survey without prior permission from the government security organisations', and 'are prohibited from opening headquarters or offices in any province without written approval from the Ministry of Social Solidarity' (U.S. Library of Congress 2017). Egypt is emblematic of the processes whereby the Arab Spring provided an opening for civil associations to exercise greater influence on foreign policy (including in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia), followed by an authoritarian backlash in all five North African countries.

Youth groups: drivers of revolutionary change but absent in the foreign policy realm

Prior to the Arab Spring, authoritarian regimes courted youth, defined here as individuals aged 18-30, with political rhetoric and propaganda.² In 2010, for example, Samir Labidi, Minister of Youth, Sports, and Physical Education

under Tunisia's Ben Ali regime, played a role in the passage of the UN 'International Year of Youth' resolution, which committed signatories to 'increase commitment to, and investment in, youth; increase participation and partnerships; and increase intercultural understanding among youth' (UNFP 2010). Labidi's rhetoric at the UN and at home was more appearance than reality; Ben Ali's regime largely ignored and excluded youth from formal political processes. In the extreme, youth organisations, like other members of civil society, were suppressed by a regime focused on maintaining stability and control (Hibou 2006). This was largely the case throughout North Africa.

Arab youth emerged upon the international scene by playing a central role in the Arab Spring uprisings that led to the downfall of authoritarian regimes (Cole 2014). 'In an especially ironic twist', explained an early analysis of the Tunisian revolution, 'Tunisian dictator Ben Ali had declared 2010 to be the 'Year of Youth', little dreaming that so many of those whom he 'honoured' would take to the streets to topple the regime' (Schraeder and Redissi 2011, 12). Simple demographics captured the youth story in the Tunisian revolution, which was replicated across North Africa. More than two of every five Tunisians were under 25 years old, almost 35 percent of those between 19 and 24 were students and one of every three young persons was unemployed. Schraeder and Redissi argue that 'it is thus no surprise that a large portion of the Tunisian protesters were under 30, with students or jobless recent graduates swelling their ranks' (2011, 12). In this sense, the Arab Spring was a 'Youth Spring'.

The central role of youth in promoting revolutionary change led to optimistic observations that youth would play equally important roles in shaping domestic and foreign policies in post-transition political systems. This assumption was unfounded. In Tunisia, high levels of youth involvement in revolutionary protests were followed by growing levels of youth apathy in 'normal politics', including within the foreign policy realm (Dobbs forthcoming 2018). This is best demonstrated by declining levels of youth voting from poor turnout in the Constituent Assembly elections of 2011 to the municipal elections of 2018 (Dobbs forthcoming 2018). Although the reasons for youth apathy are many, students we interviewed in Tunisia criticised the emergence of new elites and political systems that do not reflect youth interests. They also argued that corruption and the lack of socio-economic reform under the new regime have not changed the socio-economic realities confronted by youth (e.g. continued high unemployment). To these reasons can be added the lack of resources and government support, but also the 'ill-defined political agendas' of youth groups themselves. In Morocco, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) has argued that Moroccan youth groups do not have a cohesive political agenda. Whereas youth groups in the southern and interior parts of Morocco are principally focused

on local economic development, those in the more elite coastal towns are focused on human rights (IFES 2013).

Youth activities in the post-Arab Spring have followed three basic, limited patterns. First and foremost, youth groups engage in largely sporadic efforts at changing domestic policy. In the case of Libya, the youth group H2O broke ground as one of the first to undertake a grassroots effort toward educating Libyans about the importance of a democratic transition. H2O developed civic materials and promoted a civic education campaign on social media (USAID 2012). Second, North African youth organisations have created transnational ties with like-minded groups overseas. Egypt's 6 April Movement and Morocco's 20 February Movement coordinated with 'Otpor!' in Serbia and 'Pora!' in Ukraine to undertake resistance training to authoritarian rule. Third, youth groups have sought assistance from international organisations. Algerian, Egyptian, Moroccan and Tunisian youth groups have benefited from the Euro-Med Youth Program IV, which 'supports and strengthens the participation and contribution of youth organisations and youth from the Euro-Mediterranean region to the development of society and democracy, and promotes dialogue and understanding' (Churchill 2013). This latter dimension remains the most important.

Examples of youth groups attempting to influence foreign policy are at best sporadic. In 2015, the Tunisian watchdog group, I WATCH, urged the Tunisian government to refuse a deal from the Swiss government that would have paid 60 million francs to settle over assets belonging to Ben Ali and his extended family that were still frozen in Swiss banks (Tunisia-TN.com 2016). The Tunisian government did not settle and continues to investigate the legal violations behind these assets. This decision nonetheless coincided with and was not due to the pressure exerted by I WATCH. In February 2011, the 6 April Movement demanded that the Egyptian military halt shipments of natural gas to Israel to protest its government's mistreatment of Palestinians (*The Jerusalem Post* 2011). The Egyptian government eventually halted gas shipments to Israel, but according to officials this halt was in response to Israel violating contractual obligations and not because they met with youth representatives from the 6 April Movement (CNN Wire Staff 2012). In sum, although youth groups in some cases were the drivers of revolutionary change, they have been largely absent in the foreign policy realm during the Arab Spring. They were allowed to do so as long as they accepted the authority of the ruling regime.

Women's groups: selective foreign policy impact in the realm of women's rights

Prior to the Arab Spring, North African dictatorships permitted the emergence of women's organisations, such as the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights,

the Democratic Association of Moroccan Women and the Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development, as long as they did not challenge the regime's hold over power. For example, the Center of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR), created in 1993 and headquartered in Tunis, was able to promote transnational ties with like-minded women's organisations in North Africa and the wider Middle East as well as within the international community (Moghadam 1997).

North African dictatorships also used gender reform prior to the Arab Spring as a means of strengthening their hold over power, despite the lack of significant changes in political or human rights, which remained poor across the region. Tunisia, under President Habib Bourguiba, advanced gender reforms from above while at the same time fostering an increasingly personalistic and authoritarian regime (Hibou 2006). Indeed, targeted gender reforms were designed by authoritarian regimes to foster majority support while holding at bay two groups most often intent on seeking their overthrow: liberal pro-democracy activists supportive of creating Western-style secular democracies based on the separation of mosque and state, and conservative Islamist groups seeking to impose theocratic forms of governance uniting mosque and state. 'Rulers make some compromises to guarantee secularist support, or they restrict reforms so as not to anger the conservatives', explains Louisa Dris-Aït-Hamadouche in a compelling pre-Arab Spring analysis, adding 'they hope to stay in power by balancing different tendencies' (2007, 115). Most important, these women's organisations, and the rights they were pursuing, were tightly monitored and controlled, with their foreign policy impact being negligible at best.

The most progressive women's groups hoped that the Arab Spring would be accompanied by a feminist revolution, including in the realm of foreign policy (Alvi 2015). The record is mixed. First, the impact of women's groups remains largely restricted to the domestic arena. In Algeria and Tunisia, for example, women's groups have successfully focused their efforts on reducing domestic violence. In March 2015, the Algerian government passed a bill that criminalised domestic violence against women (Ghorbani 2015). In July 2017, the Tunisian government passed a law protecting women from acts of domestic violence that includes provisions against public harassment and discrimination (Human Rights Watch 2017b). Second, women's groups in the post-Arab Spring have successfully expanded transnational ties with like-minded groups. For example, the Libyan Women's Platform for Peace (LWPP), an association committed to influencing foreign policy, has teamed up with a coalition of Libyan NGOs called The Platform, which in turn are led by the Cairo Institute for Human Rights (CIHR). The LWPP and The Platform were particularly critical of a Libyan government travel ban instituted in early 2017, preventing women under the age of sixty from travelling outside of Libya without a male guardian. The LWPP issued a statement calling for the

government to retract the ban due to its violation of international laws and conventions, which Libya has ratified (BBC News 2012). This effort reflects the growing webs of ties between domestic and international women's groups, especially in North Africa.

Women's groups achieved selective foreign policy success in the realm of women's rights. The best example revolves around the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). CEDAW urges its signatories to ensure that policies meet international gender equality standards. The convention includes a preamble and thirty articles that define what constitutes discrimination against women. It also establishes a national agenda in which all forms of discrimination against women can be eliminated. Countries that accept CEDAW commit themselves to

incorporate the principle of equality of men and women in their legal system, abolish all discriminatory laws and adopt appropriate ones prohibiting discrimination against women; to establish tribunals and other public institutions to ensure the effective protection of women against discrimination; and to ensure elimination of all acts of discrimination against women by persons, organisations or enterprises (UN Women 2009).

Prior to the Arab Spring, all five North African countries signed and ratified CEDAW but with strong reservations that allowed them to suspend certain provisions. All five North African countries reserved the right to opt out of Article 16, which states: 'Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations and in particular shall ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women'. Algeria, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia held reservations on Article 9, which allows women to pass their nationality on to their children, as well as on Article 29, which states that discrepancies in the interpretation of the convention among parties may be submitted by at least one party to the International Court of Justice for review. Algeria, Egypt, Libya and Morocco held reservations on Article 2, which 'condemns discrimination against women in all its forms' including the national constitution and legislation. Finally, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia also held reservations on Article 15, which gives women greater legal rights including the right to own property and to be in control of legal contracts.

Activism among women's groups during the Arab Spring resulted in the lifting of several reservations to CEDAW. For example, in August 2011, women's groups in Tunisia organised large sit-ins that called on the government to lift their reservations (Arfaoui 2014). These sit-ins were successful and in April 2014, Tunisia became the first country in the region to withdraw its reservations (Human Rights Watch 2014b). It also was one of two countries in the region (the other is Libya) that adopted an optional protocol that permits Tunisians to file complaints about gender discrimination to be directly

submitted to the international CEDAW committee. The Essebsi administration nonetheless maintained a general reservation that Tunisia would not comply with CEDAW if it contradicted Article 1 of the Tunisian constitution, which notes that Tunisia 'is a free, independent, sovereign state; its religion is Islam, its language Arabic, and its system is republican' (Tunis Afrique Press 2014). Women's groups in other North African countries have achieved more modest success regarding CEDAW. The Democratic Association of Moroccan Women, along with other Moroccan women's organisations, mounted protests that in April 2011 led the Moroccan monarchy to drop reservations to Articles 9 and 16. Pressure by Egyptian women's groups also prompted the Egyptian government to drop reservations to Article 9. In Algeria and Libya, however, no changes have been made to the reservations that existed prior to the Arab Spring. Together these examples demonstrate a varied but nonetheless important foreign policy role for women's organisations within a targeted realm of women's rights.

Labour groups: opposition to unfair (and often foreign-imposed) economic policies

Labour groups across North Africa historically have played a prominent role in the region's contentious politics. Starting with the anti-colonial struggles of the 1950s, labour groups considered 'work place contestations as an integral component of nationalist struggles against colonial rule' (Beinin and Vairel 2013, 5). Authoritarian North African regimes typically authorised only one nationwide union to represent workers, as in the case of Tunisia's General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT), created in 1946, which just prior to 2011 included twenty-four regional unions, nineteen labour federations, twenty-one general unions and thousands of affiliates. Other, more heavily regime-dominated counterparts within the region included the Moroccan Workers Union (UMT) created in 1955, the General Union of Algerian Workers (UGTA) created in 1956, the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) created in 1957 and Libya's National Trade Unions' Federation (NTUF) created in 1972. These and other labour groups sought to influence governmental policies during the contemporary independence era, sometimes leading to violent upheaval, as witnessed by periodic instability in Gafsa, a southwestern town in Tunisia dominated by the phosphate mining industry and several mining-related unions (Allal 2010). The entrance of labour groups into the foreign policy realm was typically in opposition to what the leadership and union activists believed to be unfair economic policies. They are especially critical of structural adjustment programmes imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the wider international economic community, and implemented by local political elites.

This central claim is that such policies harm local communities and especially workers.

Labour groups and union members actively participated in the Arab Spring, perceiving the protests as an opportunity to influence governmental policy, particularly related to workers' rights (Hartshorn 2016). This involvement ranged from the more confrontational stance of the UGTT in Tunisia, which supported the protesters and called for free and fair elections and a dismantling of the Ben Ali regime (Hartshorn 2016), to the ETUF in Egypt, which remained supportive of the government, although thousands of individual union activists joined the revolutionary protests, which led to the downfall of the Mubarak regime. The new political environment associated with the Arab Spring appeared promising for labour relations throughout the region. In February 2011, Moroccan labour unions engaged in a dialogue with the government to improve the rights of workers, successfully negotiating an increase in the minimum wage and retirement pension funds for all public sector employees (Buehler 2015).

North African labour organisations have entered the foreign policy realm in numerous ways. They have coordinated together in the pursuit of common goals. For example, Egyptian and Tunisian trade unionists 'shared information both implicitly and tacitly throughout their transitions' (Hartshorn 2016, 354). In February 2015, in the aftermath of these transitions, Egypt's ETUF, Tunisia's UGTT and Libya's NTUF coordinated with the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to evacuate twenty-one Egyptian fishermen from Libya (*Mada Masr* 2015). North African workers have also sought to create regional labour organisations designed to provide national unions with greater political clout, in both domestic and foreign policy. In September 2011, fifteen independent Arab trade unions from ten Middle Eastern countries created the Arab Democratic Trade Union Forum (ADTUF) in Amman, Jordan, which seeks 'to promote the fundamental values of democratic and independent trade unionism and to increase regional union solidarity and union' (ITUC 2011). Six independent trade unions from four North African countries were part of ADTUF's original signatories, including Tunisia's UGTT, the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU), the Free Libyan Workers Federation (FLWF) and three groups from Morocco – the Moroccan Workers' Union (UMT), the Democratic Confederation of Labour (CDT) and the General Union of Moroccan Workers (UGTM) (International Trade Union Confederation 2011). North African labour has also sought ties with international organisations, such as the American Federation of Labour and Congress of Industrial Organisations (AFL-CIO) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

Beginning in 2013, trade unions found it increasingly difficult to organise and make their voices heard. Independent labour unions in particular encountered new obstacles when applying for legal status, especially under military-dominated regimes in Algeria and Egypt. Such actions were resoundingly

criticised by the ILO and human rights organisations, such as Human Rights Watch. What in essence constituted an authoritarian reaction to the Arab Spring further intensified in 2016. In February of that year, the Mohammed VI regime suppressed strikes that were undertaken by Moroccan labour unions, refusing to engage in dialogue as had been the case in 2011 (Connel 2016). Increasingly authoritarian regimes also sought to restrict the ability of national labour unions to coordinate with transnational organisations, such as the Arab Trade Union Confederation (ATUC). In May 2016, the Algerian regime refused to allow ATUC officials to enter Algeria while on their way to the Western Sahara. This rejection was ironic, in that Algeria is supportive of the Western Sahara's quest for self-determination, which ATUC was trying to mediate. The Algerian military regime opposed their move because the ATUC has also been a strong and vocal proponent of independent worker unions in Algeria (see, e.g. ITUC 2016).

The union bright spot in the region is the UGTT, which successfully operates as one of the key political actors in post-transition Tunisia. The UGTT was one of four actors known as the Quartet that in 2015 were awarded the Nobel Prize. (The other three were the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts (UTICA), the Tunisian Order of Lawyers and the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH).) In the award statement, the Nobel Peace Prize Committee credited the Quartet with leading a national dialogue that brought Tunisia back from the brink of civil war, thereby preventing the potential collapse of Tunisia's transition to democracy: 'It was thus instrumental in enabling Tunisia, in the space of a few years, to establish a constitutional system of government guaranteeing fundamental rights for the entire population, irrespective of gender, political conviction or religious belief' (Nobel Peace Prize Committee 2015).

Although the UGTT is primarily concerned with defending the rights of domestic workers, the organisation has well-defined foreign policy interests. In an interview with the Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP) related to the Libyan civil war and Western intervention in 2011, a UGTT veteran, Kheireddine Bouslah, stated that 'we support the decisions of the Arab League and the UN Security Council to impose a no-fly zone'. He nonetheless noted that the UGTT 'opposed the dispatch of foreign troops to Libya', and that they were 'quicker than the international community to mount relief efforts for [Libyan] refugees on the border' (Toensing 2011). In this regard, the UGTT has oscillated between being an ally and critic of the Tunisian government. For example, it was critical of the Ennahda-dominated 'troika' government, which also included the Ettakatol and Congress for the Republic (CPR) parties, because it feared an Islamist tilt in Ennahda's foreign policy toward more radical Islamist elements within the Middle East and the wider Islamic world. Accordingly, the UGTT was one of the most vocal political actors calling for Ennahda to withdraw from power, which it did.

The UGTT has been especially prominent in foreign policy issues influencing Tunisia's domestic economy, most notably structural adjustment programmes. This foreign policy position has led to sharp clashes between the UGTT and the Essebsi administration, which became especially severe in January 2018, evident in numerous strikes being called by both the UGTT leadership and its various affiliates (Blaise 2018; see also Daragahi 2018). The UGTT is particularly critical of Essebsi's acceptance of a structural adjustment programme imposed by the IMF and Tunisia's Western partners, most notably the European Union and the United States. This programme included raising national taxes, adopting free trade policies, a devaluation of the Tunisian currency and, most important, the elimination of public sector jobs, which typically has been a 'stronghold for national labour unions' in North Africa (Hartshorn 2016, 351). Studies have estimated, for example, that public sector jobs constitute 800,000 in a country with a labour force of slightly over 4,000,000 (Benoit-Lavelle 2016). Although critics claim that the UGTT is 'holding Tunisia back' with its repeated strikes, the UGTT leadership responds that it is simply playing an important foreign policy 'watch-dog' role regarding international economic policies that affect its rank-and-file (Benoit-Lavelle 2016).

Human rights groups: promoting a more human-rights infused foreign policy

Human rights organisations in North Africa emerged later on the political scene than its youth, gender and labour counterparts. The Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH) was formed in 1976 and the Moroccan Association of Human Rights (AMDH) in 1979, but the Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights (LADDH) and the Egyptian Organisation for Human Rights (EOHR) were formed only in 1985. Unlike these nationally-based human rights organisations, the Libyan League for Human Rights (LLHR) was established in 1989 in Geneva, Switzerland. Human rights groups also potentially witnessed more severe forms of repression than youth, gender and labour, because their organisations raised especially sensitive issues (i.e. civil and political rights). Human rights organisations most squarely confronted the very meaning and existence of the '*mukhabarat*' (national security structure) that sought to maintain stability and control throughout North Africa. In Tunisia, the Ben Ali regime in 2000 suspended the LTDH and assumed control of its office, sentencing Moncef Marzouki, former LTDH president, spokesperson for the National Council for Liberties in Tunisia (CNLT) and chairperson of the Arab Commission for Human Rights, to one year in prison (Human Rights Watch 2001). Marzouki, like many human rights activists, ultimately was forced into exile in France; others went to the United Kingdom and Italy. As a result, the influence of human rights organisations in the

formulation and implementation of the foreign policies of authoritarian regimes was limited. Human rights groups nonetheless affected the foreign policies of their respective countries by calling attention to human rights shortcomings that were documented by international human rights organisations.

The Arab Spring ushered in an almost euphoric expectation among human rights activists who hoped to craft more human rights-friendly political systems at home as well as more human rights-friendly foreign policies abroad. Several trends were evident, with important implications for foreign policy. The region witnessed a dramatic growth in the number and coordination of domestic human rights groups and organisations. Libya, for example, saw the emergence in 2016 of The Platform, a coalition of sixteen civil society organisations, along with the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS), whose primary objective was listed as 'breaking the isolation between civil society organisations working in the field of human rights, and defenders inside and outside Libya, and working towards a better distribution of roles between them' (The Platform 2018). Also, international legal groups and human rights organisations, such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the American Bar Association, opened or expanded existing offices in North Africa (Harrelson-Stephens and Callaway 2014). In July 2011, the UN opened its first North African human rights office in Tunisia. These local offices expanded 'eyes on the ground', and hence the ability to train local activists, pressure local governments and report back to the parent organisations which publish internationally-distributed reports.

Human rights groups most notably emerged as new players in the foreign policy realm. The potential for foreign policy influence was strongest in countries that witnessed the overthrow of authoritarian regimes: Egypt, Libya and Tunisia. Although civil conflict in Libya and the 2013 military coup d'état in Egypt limited the foreign policy ascent of human rights groups, Tunisia serves as an excellent example of how human rights were infused into the foreign policy of a transitional democracy. As demonstrated by Schraeder's article on ministries of foreign affairs in this special issue of the *Journal of North African Studies*, the LTDH coordinated with the Tunisian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to incorporate human rights into Tunisian foreign policy. The transitional government ratified several international treaties, including the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture, the UN Convention on Enforced Disappearances and the Rome Statute for the International Criminal Court. Human rights activists were buoyed by the fact that former LTDH president Marzouki was elected and served as President of Tunisia from 2011 to 2014. Although there were numerous shortcomings associated with Marzouki's administration that resulted in the emergence of a new transitional government and elections that ushered in the Essebsi

administration, Marzouki and the human rights organisations that he represented throughout his political life made human rights a central component of Tunisian foreign policy. Indeed, by 2015, the LTDH was considered one of the most influential human rights organisations in North Africa (Civil Rights Defenders 2015).

Human rights groups found themselves under pressure almost immediately following the beginning of the Arab Spring from both authoritarian and transitional regimes that in varying degrees were suspicious of human rights activities. Egypt provides a clear example of authoritarian backlash. In December 2011, approximately ten months after the Mubarak regime had been overthrown, Egyptian security forces raided the offices of seventeen civil society groups, including human rights and pro-democracy groups such as the U.S.-backed International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI). These organisations were accused of violating Egyptian laws, such as not having permits, as well as being funded by foreign entities that wished to destabilise the country. Kenneth Wollack, NDI president, underscored the adverse consequences of these actions for his organisation: 'Cracking down on organisations whose sole purpose is to support the democratic process during Egypt's historic transition sends a disturbing signal' (Al Jazeera 2011). Egyptian human rights activists in turn noted that they were 'facing the worst assault in their history' (*The Washington Post* 2016). This authoritarian reaction intensified in 2013, when the local office of Freedom House was shut down by the government along with those of other local and foreign pro-democracy groups (IRI 2013). In 2016, the Obama administration raised concerns over a 'new wave of persecution' against human rights and other non-governmental actors in Egypt (*Daily News Egypt* 2016).

In Algeria and Morocco, which did not experience transitions, the authoritarian reaction was equally effective in suppressing civil rights associations. Under the military-dominated Algerian regime, the LADDH remains an 'unofficial' organisation, hampered by a law instituted in 2012 requiring all associations to re-apply for legal status (Human Rights Watch 2014a). The government also continues to restrict visits by international human rights groups; UN special rapporteurs on torture and freedom of peaceful assembly and association continue to be denied entry into Algeria (Human Rights Watch 2016). In Morocco, a crackdown on human rights groups became increasingly evident in 2014, as the AMDH and other human rights organisations were more directly harassed and oppressed by governmental authorities. One of the dictatorship's 'rationales' for such actions is the accusation that human rights groups have been 'obstructing the government's counterterrorism agenda' (Human Rights Watch 2017a). Human Rights Watch estimates that, by the beginning of 2017, more than 125 of AMDH's meetings and conferences have been blocked by the Moroccan government, which exerts pressure on managers and owners of the spaces where AMDH seeks to

host their activities (Human Rights Watch 2017a). As in Egypt, foreign human rights activists from groups such as Amnesty International were expelled from the country. Since 2015, these activists have yet to receive governmental approval to re-enter the country to conduct research on purported human rights abuses.

Libya constitutes a unique case, in that human rights groups have struggled to formalise institutions within a chaotic and unstable environment. Human rights groups in Libya are still struggling to create avenues of communication between themselves and their government amid fluctuating political institutions and competing political factions. This situation began to change with the establishment of the Government of National Accord in December 2015, after which human rights groups began calling on that institution to 'take serious steps to enable Libyan civil society to contribute to sustainable peace and to fight terrorism' (Libyan Women's Platform for Peace 2016). However, even this nascent central government sought to impose restrictions. Since November 2015, human rights and other civil society organisations are required to alert the government of any conferences or events taking place outside of Libya that they intend to attend. Moreover, these organisations are required to request prior government approval before participating in these international events (Libyan Women's Platform for Peace 2016). Although the degree to which these demands are followed remains unclear, it is striking that even a weak Libyan central government is intent on controlling the role of Libyan human rights groups within the international system.

Human rights organisations nonetheless have become stronger, integral elements of their respective societies, with influence on foreign policy. At the bare minimum, they are altering the contours of foreign policy debate, even within authoritarian regimes that are increasingly forced to justify their actions at home and abroad. The case of Tunisia's debate over counterterrorism measures is instructive. Human rights organisations played a vocal role in debates that resulted in the Tunisian parliament's adoption of a new counterterrorism law in July 2015 that replaced a 2003 version instituted during the Ben Ali era. Human rights and other civil society organisations have criticised the 2015 law as draconian, taking part in ongoing national debates calling for the law's revision. The LTDH argues that the 2015 law is unconstitutional and counter to the principles of the Tunisian Revolution (Samti 2015). International human rights groups such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the Carter Center have written a joint communiqué arguing that the 2015 law violates the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Human Rights Watch 2015). Others, such as Antonio Manganella, head of the Tunis-based office of Lawyers without Frontiers (ASF), have emphasised what they consider to be 'particularly repressive clauses' in the 2015 law, most notably its 'ambiguity in the definition of the

term terrorism' and what constitutes 'terrorism-related offenses' (Africa News 2017). Among the elements that human rights organisations hope to change include a terrorism suspect's lack of access to a lawyer during the first 48 h of custody as well as the length of time that a suspect can be initially held (up to 15 days). As of May 2018, the 2015 law has come under review (although changes have yet to be made). There is no doubt that human rights groups continue to play an important 'watch-dog' role regarding an issue with important implications for Tunisian foreign policy.

Conclusion

The primary purpose of this article was to examine the evolving foreign policy roles of four sets of civil society actors – youth, women's, labour and human rights groups – in North Africa during the Arab Spring and beyond. Our findings demonstrate that civil society groups initially flourished in the Arab Spring, with the region's average civil society rights score registering positive increases in 2011 and 2012. The period of 2013 to 2018 witnessed a deterioration in this average score, as civil society faced an authoritarian backlash from illiberal (authoritarian) and liberal (democratic) North African regimes.

Our examination of individual civil society organisations further demonstrates a range of foreign policy impacts. First, all four sets of civil society groups not surprisingly focus first and foremost on influencing the domestic policies that affect their constituencies, whether youth, women or labour, with human rights organisations encompassing all three. Second, youth groups exert the least influence on North African foreign policies, despite the high expectations created by their central role in revolutionary protests and change associated with the Arab Spring. In contrast, women's, labour and especially human rights organisations have played more influential if still limited foreign policy roles. Third, the Arab Spring typically led civil society groups to seek closer ties with like-minded groups across North Africa, the wider Middle East and the international system. These ties included the creation of regional and transnational groups designed to share information but more importantly to provide North African civil society groups with greater political and foreign policy affluence. Fourth, foreign policy successes on the part of North African civil society actors typically have been in specific issue areas of greatest concern to individual groups, whether support for women's rights under CEDAW for women's organisations, opposition to unfair and often foreign-imposed structural adjustment policies for labour organisations and the adoption of internationally-recognised human rights standards for human rights groups. The growing distrust between civil society and government is a disconcerting trend throughout North Africa. Even in the case of Tunisia, where civil associations have the greatest freedom of action among their North African counterparts, these groups

have raised growing concerns over the government's shift toward national security concerns, as in the case of the new anti-terrorism laws. Finally, the impact of civil society on foreign policy is strongly mediated by a country's level of democracy. Only in Tunisia, which has made a successful transition to democracy, has civil society in the post-Arab Spring continuously afforded the freedoms to organise, protest and provide input into policy, including foreign policy. It is also within Tunisia's democracy that women's, labour and human rights groups have had the greatest foreign policy impacts. This is a point meriting future research.

Notes

1. This score is created by drawing on the 'associational and organisational rights' variable that comprises one part of the 'political and civil liberties' score compiled by Freedom House (Freedom House 2018). Three sets of questions are utilised by Freedom House to compile this variable: (1) 'Is there freedom of assembly, demonstration, and open public discussion?' (2) 'Is there freedom for nongovernmental organisations?' (3) 'Are there free trade union and peasant organisations or equivalents, and is there collective bargaining?'
2. Definitions of youth vary. The UN defines youth as ages 15–24 (www.UNESCO.org), IFES defines youth as 25 years and younger (www.IFES.org) and NDI defines youth as individuals aged 18–30 (www.NDI.org).

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