# Youth Policy in Tunisia: The Internationalization of Youth as a Public Policy Issue

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## Abstract

*Tunisia provides a particularly interesting angle for examining the complex articulation between the national and global power dynamics that are reshaping the landscape of youth policies. The paper deals with a specific aspect of youth policies, namely youth centres and youth organizations focused on informal education and civic participation, drawing on interviews with Tunisian senior officials and field coordinators of national and international youth policy institutions. It shows that, post-uprising, youth policies have shifted from a State monopoly to a field of competition with international stakeholders. Those two steps reflect evolving power dynamics affecting the position of young Tunisians in the international order.*

**Keywords**: Tunisia | Youth | Domestic policy | NGOs

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Tunisia is particularly interesting for the study of youth policies in the Arab region. First, it played a pioneering role in the development of youth centres in the region. The Ministry of Youth and Sport was created immediately after independence in 1956 and, in 1963, the first youth centre was inaugurated. Today, 2,000 youth workers are employed in a nation-wide network of more than 300 youth centres. Second, and more importantly, the revolutionary process that is still shaking the Arab region started in Tunisia. Despite the difficulties of the "democratic transition," it is probably in Tunisia that the promise of change and renewal is the most alive.

These conditions designate Tunisia as a potential model, which gives it an ambivalent role of both benchmark and laboratory for international and Arab political forces. In this context, Tunisia provides a particularly interesting angle for examining the complex articulation between the national and global power dynamics that are reshaping the landscape of youth policies.

With these issues in mind, I chose to ground this study in interviews with senior officials and field coordinators of national and international youth policy institutions, as they are *de facto* public policy decision makers (Lipsky 1980). This choice is also guided by the fact that in the literature I reviewed, the voices of these youth policy actors are seldom given attention (2007 Boutaleb's study on youth centres in Egypt is a notable exception). Thus, my intention is to underline the way "institutions think" (Douglas 1986). I have focused my work on a specific aspect of youth policies, namely youth centres and youth organizations geared towards informal education and civic participation. I think that in the specific context of Tunisia, where

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these institutions have been strong and quite central in the control of youth, it is a sample that provides an interesting point of view on the wider apparatus of youth policies.

I begin this study with a historical review of youth policies in Tunisia. These reflect the construction of the postcolonial State and the authoritarian regime until the fall of Ben Ali (Camau and Geisser 2003, Hibou 2006). I try to identify the main steps, the decisive moments, the conflicts and power struggles that shaped this field of public intervention. Next I argue that the relative weakening of the structures of the Tunisian State opens a new phase of youth policies where different stakeholders, mainly NGOs and international organizations, play an increasingly decisive role.

Finally, I conclude that it is necessary to go beyond pressing recommendations to develop "national cross-sectoral youth strategies" in order to address the need for a more political approach to youth policies that takes into consideration their entrenchment in global power dynamics.

## 2. THE NATIONAL PHASE OF TUNISIAN YOUTH POLICIES: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A STATE MONOPOLY TO OVERSEE YOUNG PEOPLE

In Tunisia, the central institution responsible for youth policies is the Ministry of Youth and Sports (MYS). It appeared immediately after independence in 1956. The first youth centre was created in Rades, a southern working-class suburb of Tunis, in 1963.

According to former Secretary of State for Youth, Fethi Tozri, Tunisian youth centres were developed with both French and socialist models in mind. The first youth centres appeared in Tunisia when André Malraux was the Minister of Culture in France (1959-1969) and as the *Maisons des jeunes et de la culture* were expanding rapidly. But the socialist model also had a major influence. In this model State-led policies were crucial to the development of educated youth, which Tozri depicts as the "most spectacular social innovation at this time."[2] He adds that President Habib Bourguiba "developed a modernized State with a project of civilization in which young people were considered to have an important role. Youth centres were central in that they were five-stars facilities, which showed the privileged place of youth in society."[3] These centres were created with the declared objective of favouring access of young people to educational activities.

A high-ranking official of the MYS adds: "After colonization, we had to fight backwardness and poverty. In a country such as Tunisia, with limited natural resources, you have to invest in human resources, and this investment is education. At that time many young people did not attend school, so youth centres allowed everybody to have an access to permanent education, a true *éducation populaire*."[4] The network of youth centres developed quickly,

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[2] Interview with Fethi Tozri, former Secretary of State for Youth, Tunis, June 2015. This interview, like all the interviews in this field research, was conducted in Arabic.
[3] Interview with Kamal Hnid, director of institutions, Ministry of Youth, Tunis, August 2014.
[4] Idem. Here, the term "*éducation populaire*" refers to the dominant concept in the French paradigm of emancipatory informal education for working classes. I employ italics to denote foreign language words used by the interviewee.

and at the beginning of the eighties, mobile youth centres, "a bus with all you can find in a youth centre,"[5] were created to reach rural regions. The same official underlines the positive outcomes of this policy: "Many important leaders came out of the youth centres."[6]

The youth centres' staff are employees of the Ministry of Youth and Sports. They are all trained at the same institution, initially called *Ècole nationale des cadres de la jeunesse*, established in Bir el Bey. This organization was under the supervision of the Ministry of Youth, before it became the *Institut supérieur de l'animation pour la jeunesse et la culture* (ISAJC) in 1995. At this time, it came under the supervision of the Ministry of Higher Education and began delivering formal higher education diplomas. After graduation, students trained at the Institute enjoy automatic access to employment in youth centres and become civil servants after a one-year internship. Although they do not have to undergo a national examination, they enjoy the same status as secondary school teachers, with the same wages and working hours, namely 18 hours of activities a week.[7]

After 84-year-old Habib Bourguiba was impeached, Ben Ali had an interest in being regarded as the "president of youth." But according to the former head of cabinet of the Minister of Youth and Sport, who was the director of the Ècole nationale des cadres de la jeunesse at that time, the main policies in the youth sector remained unchanged: "Youth centres retained their original curriculum and organization, although young people of the sixties were very different of those of the nineties."[8] A former Secretary of State for Youth adds: "The whole framework became anachronistic."[9] Indeed, most youth policy measures had already been implemented before Ben Ali's investiture.

The continuity of youth policies between these two moments of Tunisian history raises a series of questions: How did the approach to youth evolve with the transformations of authoritarian rule? How did the design of youth policies compete with social, political and cultural forces? Many professionals testify about the growing influence of the Democratic Constitutional Rally (DCR), the ruling party, on their activity.

Khmaies Ben Abda, who has 27 years of experience as a youth worker and today directs a youth centre, says "it was very important to have good relationships with the local authorities, the local governor, the mayor, and the DCR. We were under constant scrutiny, reports were sent to the governor. If you are not cooperative it will be said that the Youth Centre is not working good, that it is dirty, that the doors are always closed, that the work you are doing with the youth is bad, even if it is not true. Many colleagues had a bad experience of this kind."[10] Such negative evaluation by local leaders could prevent youth workers from gaining career advancement.

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[5] Interview with Khmaies Benabda, director of the Youth Centre of Hai Ibn Khaldun, Tunis, June 2015.
[6] Interview with Kamal Hnid, Tunis, August 2014.
[7] Interview with Khmaies Benabda, Tunis, June 2015.
[8] Interview with Hedi Aissa, retired high-ranking official with 30 years' working experience in the Ministry of Youth, Tunis, June 2015.
[9] Interview with Fethi Tozri, Tunis, June 2015.
[10] Interview with Khmaies Benabda, Tunis, June 2015.

Mohammed Habib Khadhraoui, now the Director of the Department of Youth Work Techniques at ISAJC, was a youth worker at the end of the eighties. He explains: "The ruling party reclaimed our work. We had to choose the date of our events in order to fit in the party's agenda. Once when I worked in the Kheiredine Youth Centre, an upper-class suburb of Tunis, we organized a sailboard competition, and we were forced to hold the event on the 7th of November.[11] Media depicted our work as the work of the party. The opening speeches of our events had to be delivered by an official. We had to invite the governor and the local representatives. And their speeches let our work look as if it was in fact the work of the DCR."[12]

Kamal Hnid adds: "Under Ben Ali's rule, we had less freedom. We were manipulated and exploited for the sake of the regime's communication operations. We were young people providers."[13] In fact Tunisian youth workers are confronted with problems often reported by youth workers and civil servants in general in other countries, namely the difficult relation to politics and politicians. But in the nineties, after the fall of most socialist regimes, Tunisia was probably the country where State control over youth workers was the strongest.

Hedi Aissa, who became the head of the Minister's cabinet, explains: "Youth centres were not free of the regime's abuses. At the local level, authorities considered they had the right and even the duty to closely oversee the activities of the centres, the youth workers and the young people who participated in their activities. They banned activities which they considered contradicted State guidelines." Habib Khadhraoui remembers: "It was forbidden to talk about anything related to politics or religion. It is at that time, in the nineties, hat youth centres suddenly stopped celebrating Land Day. It was probably seen as too political."[14]

At least one other study points to the deterioration of the youth centres' image. According to Claire-Hélène Frileux, who carried out interviews at the local level with youth workers and young people, youth centres had become an appendix of the authoritarian regime, a tool in the hands of the single party's youth organizations, a means of controlling young Tunisians (Frileux 2012).

The DCR's control was not only exerted at the local level. According to Fethi Tozri, "policies were designed by the party rather than the Ministry. The DCR formulated the policy, which was then endorsed by the Ministry. The Ministry was only an operational tool."[15] He adds: "Under Ben Ali, youth policy, issues regarding young people in general focused mainly on issues of security. We switched from a vision for development and civilization to a narrow perspective on security." Hedi Aissa notes: "This seriously harmed the credibility of youth centres and the faith youth workers had in their mission."[16]

But despite this will to control and enrol young Tunisians through youth centres and youth workers, the contradiction between the official aims of youth work on the one hand, and

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[11] The anniversary of Ben Ali's take-over.
[12] Interview with Mohamed Habib Khadhraoui, August 2015.
[13] Interview with Kamal Hnid, Tunis, August 2015.
[14] Interview with Mohamed Habib Khadhraoui, August 2015. Land Day commemorates the killing on the 30th of March 1976 of protesters against land confiscation in Palestine.
[15] Interview with Fethi Tozri, Tunis, June 2015.
[16] Interview with Hedi Aissa, Tunis, June 2015.

security and political considerations on the other, led to some resistance.

Mohammad Habib Khadhraoui remembers: "On the 7th of November, we had to organize a competition, an award. We only did the minimum. We put some music, we invited some kids and said: 'OK I did it.' We were intelligent enough to find the path between responding to the political injunctions and answering the social demand to oversee the youth's leisure activities."

Khmaies Benabda was the director of Hai Ibn Khaldoun Youth Centre in 1992, when demonstrations and clashes with the police erupted in the neighbourhood. When asked by security officers to give details on a youngster suspected to have participated in the turmoil, he refused, asking them to follow the procedure and send a letter to the Youth and Sports Ministry, to obtain permission for him to share his files with what he considered a third party. He insists: "To me, it was a question of principle," meaning that it was not politically motivated, since he never was a political activist. But he upheld a certain vision of what a civil servant should be. Following this incident, Benabda was detained and interrogated. "I was threatened with being jailed. In the name of the fight against terror, I was accused of being a khwanji, a member of the Ennahda party. For them, it was the same mentality as Bush, you are with us or against us."

Khadhraoui gives another example of this will to preserve autonomy from the regime's hierarchy. He asserts: "I am the one who conceived the youth consultation of 1998. We gathered 20,000 forms and 100,000 young people took part in the focus group discussions. When we presented the results of the consultation to the Secretary of State Kamel Haj Sassi, he put them aside and replaced them with his own ideas. So we told him: we have finished our job, you have the results, you are the political authority who decides what is going to be done now."

This example shows the will of several youth workers and intermediate level officials not to be completely exploited by the regime. It is probable that in the aftermath of the revolution, some interviewees may exaggerate their past resistance against the regime. Hnid even argues: "We can say that youth centres participated in the revolution. In 2001 youth centres were restructured and many were equipped with computers and Internet access. We often received claims from the authorities because young people connected to the Internet through proxies to escape surveillance."

The relative pressure on youth centres and youth workers is the result of the symbolic centrality of youth in the regime's discourse. Their role as a showcase can also be measured through other symbolic political decisions taken by Ben Ali. For example in 1994, a TV channel meant for youth – Canal 21 – was launched. In 1995, Radio Jeunes was inaugurated. Both began broadcasting their programmes on the 7th of November, the anniversary date of Ben Ali's investiture. It is to be noted that the UN proclaimed the year 2010 "International Year of Youth" following recommendations made by Ben Ali's Tunisia.[17] It is the very same year that the revolutionary process began, ultimately bringing Ben Ali's rule to an end.

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[17] See UN News Centre, *More efforts needed to promote rights of youth, Tunisia tells UN debate*, 28 September 2009, http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=32310.

At the current stage, with major changes having occurred in the social and political arenas, Tunisian youth policy institutions are under pressure. There is an urgent need to reform goals and modus operandi, but this is restricted by the difficulties of the "democratic transition" which have hindered the implementation of new public policies.

Fethi Tozri was in office in Ali Laarayedh's government, from March 2013 until January 2014. "I was aware of the issues pertaining to youth, and I had a vision and a programme from the beginning of my service in the Ministry.[18] It was a vision for a new policy, emanating from youth themselves, from citizens. I began working with the elite in the Ministry; they were highly skilled professionals. We had the support of the Prime Minister to define a programme and tailor a youth strategy. Our mandate was to define a participatory policy for youth. An interministerial committee was formed. For the first time since the revolution we were reaching a global plan for youth. But the murder of Brahmi[19] led to the fall of the cabinet and the following one abandoned our plan and so our work was interrupted."[20]

Chokri Terzi took office in Habib Essid's government, the first one after the constitution was adopted. He says: "I did not find any trace of the work of my predecessors in the troika's governments. I found an empty computer, formatted, no files, no data, the drawers were empty, the shelves were empty. Maybe there were some politicized projects, but my predecessors came and left with them. During the transition, there was no work done on strategy. What they did was recruit staff, sit-ins of unemployed graduates from Bir el Bey reached the corridors of the Ministry, and they answered the claims of the demonstrators.[21] From 2011 to 2015, I see no trace of intellectual and strategic production. Youth centres continued to carry out their mission. It was *business as usual*. There was no vision, no programme, no strategy, nothing."[22]

The contradicting narratives of those high-ranking officials illustrate the extent to which the recent period can be characterized as a period of relative decline of State institutions. This decline plays in favour of international actors who now have much more space and freedom in which to implement their projects. The monopoly on Tunisian youth created and maintained by the authoritarian State is over. Tozri has a crude phrase to sum up this situation: "Tunisian youngsters are a criminal workforce, a terrorist workforce, a cheap workforce. The State has lost its power in face of criminal networks, terrorist networks, and capitalist networks." He expands on this: "I came into office in a complicated political period with a lot of uncertainty, a weakening of State institutions, which benefited international stakeholders, donors, NGOs, embassies and international organizations. Under the authoritarian regime, governmental institutions were strong and imposed strong control. Its downfall allowed these stakeholders to carry out their own projects without any governmental supervision or coordination.

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[18] This is probably a reference to his work as a member of the Parti démocrate progressiste (PDP). Fethi Tozri, *La reforme politique et les questions de jeunesse*, 8 June 2008, http://reformeetjeunesseentunisie.blogspot.com.

[19] Mohamed Brahmi, one of the leaders of the Popular Front, was assassinated on 13 July 2013.

[20] Interview with Fethi Tozri, Tunis, June 2015.

[21] Today, there are almost 300 youth centres, employing some 2,000 youth workers, 1,200 of whom were recruited after the fall of Ben Ali. This represents a 150 percent increase in only two years. In fact, this appeared to offer a double advantage: securing employment for young graduates and improving the services provided to young Tunisians in these centres.

[22] Interview with Chokri Terzi, Secretary of State for Youth, Tunis, August 2015.

It freed them to work with the youth as they wished. This allowed them to advance their priorities, at the expense of ours. The situation was not in our favour, we did not have the institutional means to prevent this mess. Since the number one priority was employment, any project creating jobs was welcome. Under this banner, funding abounded: if a few jobs were created, a few young people trained, it was OK, and the ministry's representation and control capacities were very poor."[23]

## 3. THE INTERNATIONAL PHASE OF YOUTH POLICIES: COMPETITION AND THE EMERGENCE OF A "YOUTH MARKET"

The Tunisian State's monopoly on the design of youth policies is now being replaced by many more multilateral interventions. The growing influence of international stakeholders operates both directly and indirectly. Embassy and international organization programmes target Tunisian youth directly, whereas externally funded Tunisian organizations, thousands of which have been created since 2011 (European Commission 2012), allow donors to reach young Tunisians indirectly.

The impact of these investments in Tunisian youth raises several questions. How do the projects developed by international stakeholders combine or compete with Tunisian government policies? What are the mechanisms through which implicit and explicit values and ideologies are transmitted to young participants? Or stated more explicitly, who are the winners and the losers of the "democratic participation of youth" in these projects?

To answer these questions, I added to my sample of Tunisian officials and civil servants a selected number of Tunisian and international stakeholders. I chose the youth organizations that have the most visibility and credit in the emerging sphere of civil society organizations. I put aside some youth-led organizations that do not work on youth-specific issues and do not define themselves as youth organizations, such as Bawsala or Iwatch. I interviewed the members of three Tunisian youth organizations: Sawty, Jamaity and Reso, as well as the field coordinator of the Net-Med Youth programme, a UNESCO EU-funded project aiming at empowering youth organizations.

Sawty, "the young Tunisians' voice," is one of the partners of the French Institute. It co-organized the 2013 Youth Forum and is now on the board of UNESCO's Net-Med Youth programme. Ghazoua Ltaief, the head of this organization which has six local branches and 300 members, explains: "We have a sixty thousand dollar grant from the Open Society Foundation for our running costs, plus three or four hundred thousand dollars a year for the projects. We are financed by the UNDP; USAID, they provided us with lots of funding during the years of 2012, 2013 and 2014. We also had a project with the Mepi, and the project `ali sawtak with the National Endowment for Democracy. Since I personally was involved in an exchange programme with the State Department, I have privileged relations with the American embassy, they know Ghazoua, they know Sawty, it's OK, we get the funding."[24]

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[23] Interview with Fethi Tozri, Tunis, June 2015.
[24] Interview with Ghazoua Ltaief, head of the board of Sawty, Tunis, June 2015.

A review of the grey literature shows that international stakeholders are not only investing their resources in support of the "democratic transition," they are importing their ideology, their discourse and their practical rationality, often with limited concern for the need to adapt programmes to the local context.

One example of this can be found in a document of the Council of Europe, which opened its first office outside of Europe in Tunis in 2013. Its action plan, entitled Neighbourhood Cooperation Priorities for Tunisia 2012-2014, intends "to assist the process of democratic transition in Tunisia." In the sub-chapter *Investing in Young People*, the stated overall objective is "to support the Government in *its* youth policy-making through [...] promoting *European* democratic values amongst young people" (Council of Europe 2012:17, emphasis added). While the possessive pronoun is used in order to stress the Tunisian authorities' "ownership" of the aid, defining the democratic values they want to promote as "European" can be read as an implicit rejection that a non-European democracy, rooted in the Arabic and Muslim heritage, can exist.

It is also striking that in the focus groups of the World Bank's qualitative research, the discussions were held in French (World Bank 2014:107). This probably constitutes a strong bias, both in the representativeness of the samples and in the outcomes of the discussions: not all Tunisians speak French, and what they say in French is probably different than what they say in Arabic (Badie and Hermet 2001, cited in Barbier 2011:2). It is only recently in 2015 and for its fifth edition, that the Youth Forum organized by the French Institute in Tunis, a branch of the French embassy, had its programme distributed with an Arabic version.

Indeed, it is essential for a young Tunisian involved in civil society organizations to master French and, increasingly, English. This evolution illustrates the relative decline of the former colonial power's hegemony in favour of today's new powers. As a result, the most prominent figures of Tunisian youth organizations communicate in a kind of Newspeak that merges Arabic, often reduced to its most common phrases, and French and English, the languages of modern technique and the privileged vehicles of elaborated concepts (Cartier-Bresson, Destremeau and Lautier 2009). Ghazoua Ltaief's language is an example of this Newspeak: "Pour mettre la pression, on a fait une flash mob, avec une vidéo, je te l'enverrai, il y a des subtitles en English. [...] On a travaillé avec un partner ou deux sur l'advocacy. [...] El yawm el thani na`mloulhom une petite formation `ala tout ce qui est plaidoyer, advocacy, ma`natha al monathara, how ma`natha to advocate for an issue ma`natha you identified fil jiha mta`ak."[25]

Moreover, projects targeting young Tunisians tend to confine them in issues and themes that neutralize the possibility for them to be in any way critical of the international order, and, therefore, to aspire to change it. The 2013 Youth Forum organized by the French Institute in Tunis, despite having evolved from a Franco-Tunisian to a "Mediterranean" dimension, focuses on issues limited to its local and internal dimensions: environment, women's rights, health, citizenship, social entrepreneurship.

A common point between the interviewees of this study is their tendency to dismiss Tunisian State institutions to affirm an alternative legitimacy and professional culture. The field

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[25] Ibid.

coordinator of the Net-Med Youth programme states: "When we think about public policies for youth, we keep asking ourselves if the Ministry has the necessary human resources to carry out a youth policy. It was mainly a Ministry of Propaganda. [...] We are facing questions about the maturity of ministries to share information and data. The former regime promoted a culture of secrecy, where information was meant to be kept secret and hidden. This idea is still widespread."[26] The prevalent distance between new NGOs and State institutions does not only appear through the discourses. Most events, trainings and workshops targeting young people, inside and outside of Tunis, take place in hotels and private facilities. Youth centres are marginalized as a privileged place to mobilize and debate with young people.

Ahmad Zoghlamy is the IT officer of Jamaity, a platform on the Internet meant to provide online services to civil society organizations. He depicts an ideal partnership relation with donors: "They advise us, they guide us, they help us and support us, it's not only money. Our main donors are the British Council, Euromed, the EU, Danish and French embassies, and many others; even if it is not money, they provide us with information, they are cooperative and transparent with us." Jamaity is a project initiated by the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network and funded by the British Council. Talking about them, the young man says: "They are the father and the mother of Jamaity."[27]

As opposed to the Palestinian example documented by Sbeih (2014), where the "civil society" apparatus has been built by former activists of the national struggle, many of whom were imprisoned and paid a heavy price for their commitment, this inquiry – though limited in its scope – tends to show that the emerging category of young civil society professionals in Tunisia were not trained in opposition to the regime. Rather, they stepped in after the fall of Ben Ali and grabbed the opportunity to earn a living and defend a cause they see as fair and positive. Selma Negra says: "Politics? We do not get into that. Political belonging is new to us. I do not know whether I am right or left. This is not an issue."[28] The Tunisian case is an interesting illustration of how professionalization relates to de-politicization. Ahmad Zoghlamy clearly differentiates between volunteer work and professional work. Talking about Jamaity's action he asserts: "This is serious, it's not volunteer work. [...] To me, the long-term vision is that civil society becomes more professional and more specialized." He is convinced that civil society organizations "have to adopt the techniques found in greater firms, the leading edge methods used by the firms of the Silicon Valley." He goes further: "The future is the fusion of business and causes. The examples to follow are social entrepreneurs, but also global companies that are very committed in CSR, such as Orange, Tunisair, Microsoft."[29] It is to be noted that at least two of the companies cited are reported to have been involved with Ben Ali's authoritarian and corrupt regime.[30] This might seem a quite extreme example of how professionals of youth organizations are impregnated with neo-liberal values and discourses,

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[26] Interview with Selma Negra, country coordinator of the Net-Med Youth programme in Tunisia, June 2015, Tunis.
[27] Interview with Ahmad Zoghlamy, ITC officer, Jamaity, June 2015, Tunis.
[28] Interview with Selma Negra, June 2015, Tunis.
[29] Interview with Ahmad Zoghlamy, June 2015, Tunis.
[30] Microsoft has provided the regime with surveillance tools and Orange's branch in Tunisia was created by Ben Ali's daughter. See for example Fabrice Epelboin, "Tunisie: Microsoft complice de la censure numérique par Ben Ali", in *Rue89.com*, 13 March 2011, http://rue89.nouvelobs.com/2011/03/18/tunisie-microsoft-complice-de-la-censure-numerique-par-ben-ali-195693; and Olivier Tesquet, "Ben Ali: les compromissions d'Orange en Tunisie", in *OWNI News*, 3 March 2011, http://owni.fr/2011/03/03/ben-ali-les-compromission-dorange-en-tunisie.

but Jamaity is in fact a fairly central organization in the Tunisian spectrum.

In addition to their direct and indirect interventions targeting Tunisian youth, after the revolution foreign stakeholders are playing a growing role in the design and implementation of the projects of the Ministry of Youth. When asked for an example of the changes that have occurred in youth centres, senior officials of the Ministry of Youth and Sport quote the Agora project, which aims at training young community journalists. But in fact, as the director of the National Youth Observatory stated, "This project has been designed by the British Council rather than the Tunisian government."[31] This is an example of how national initiative is being replaced by foreign initiative. More recently, the World Bank, with its report *Breaking the Barriers to Youth Inclusion*, and UNESCO, which started the Net-Med Youth programme in 2014, are clearly asserting their will to play an important role in the efforts to reshape Tunisian youth policies.

This does not go unnoticed by officials. Chokri Terzi has his own analysis of this phenomenon: "International organizations play the same role as the State's youth sector, in fact, they'd like to replace it. There is a hidden competition. To be blunt, there is a plot to marginalize the State and its youth institutions. Many parties try to justify their presence on the scene by marginalizing others, so they downplay our role. [...] There has been abundant funding during the democratic transition and many associations have profited from it. We need to be aware of this." Fethi Tozri gives what he sees as a striking example of the marginalization of Tunisian State institutions by foreign stakeholders: "One day, I was at the Ministry and I discovered that the French ambassador had gathered 25 youth organizations for a Forum in Monastir. This goes against diplomatic practices: we had not even been informed. This is disrespectful. There is a limit!" The protest seems to have been heard by French authorities. Both French and Tunisian State Secretaries for Youth attended the 2015 forum.[32] The fact the Tunisian cabinet is no longer led by the Islamist Ennahda party may also have played a role in improving the way French authorities deal with their Tunisian counterparts.

In fact, it would be exaggerated to only look at the issue as one of competition and conflict. Even if we look at the field of youth as a market in which different stakeholders compete for control and influence on young Tunisians, this does not prevent some kinds of cooperation. Chokri Tozri remembers: "Once, UNICEF arrived with a project in cooperation with the World Bank. It was a programme designed to rehabilitate youth centres and to develop a youth strategy. We said: 'Welcome if you want to provide the funding, but we will remain the managers of this project.' When you draw clear limits, they understand, they accept them. If you want to cooperate on this issue, OK, fine, but on other issues we remain sovereign." It seems, however, that concern for the preservation of the Tunisian State's sovereignty is being eclipsed by growing security concerns. The nationalist rhetoric identifying foreign powers as a threat is replaced by a growing consensus, which tends to focus on Islamic terrorism as the main threat.

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[31] Interview with Mohamed Jouili, director of the National Youth Observatory, April 2013.
[32] Institut Français de Tunisie, *Retour sur le Forum Jeunesse 2015*, 10 June 2015, http://www.institutfrancais-tunisie.com/?q=node/9513.

The Ministry of Youth and Sport, the institutions under its supervision, Tunisian and international NGOs and the projects explicitly targeting young people represent only a tiny part of the policies that affect Tunisian youth. In order to deal coherently with the specific problems faced by young people today, international organizations with a normative role in the field plead for the establishment of "national cross-sectoral youth strategies" (World Bank 2007, 2014).

The problem is that international powers, in addition to their "investments" in Tunisian youth, continue to allocate most of their resources in the strategic fields of economic cooperation, security, migration control and so on, thus influencing both the Tunisian State and the lives of young Tunisians. The challenge, then, is to consider youth policies in their relationships with the power dynamics at both the national and the international level.

Frantz Fanon described what he called the "battle of the veil," i.e. the way the French colonial administration targeted Algerian women in order to enhance its colonial rule and control. We could draw a parallel and assert, as he did, that the implicit maxim of international action in support of Tunisian youth in the framework of the "democratic transition" is: "let's win over the [*youth*] and the rest will follow" (Fanon 1965:37). The reality is surely more complex.

The stereotyped model of aging and fossilized Arab regimes, vassals of greater international powers, has been made obsolete by the evolving patterns of the international order. The opposition between hard and soft power has been out-dated by the emergence – and the adoption as a quasi-official doctrine by the Obama administration[33] – of the concept of smart power forged by Joseph Nye (2004, 2008). Indeed, international funding, training and networking activities targeting young Arabs combine and interlace with the extension of military bases, surveillance systems, and control and repression technologies (Graham 2010, Chamayou 2015). This opens the necessity to bring in unexpected dimensions in the analysis of youth policies. I suggest this should be the direction of further work to redefine youth policies as an issue of international politics.

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[33] See for example the discourse of Hillary Clinton, *Nomination Hearing to Be Secretary of State*, Statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Washington, 13 January 2009, http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2009a/01/115196.htm.

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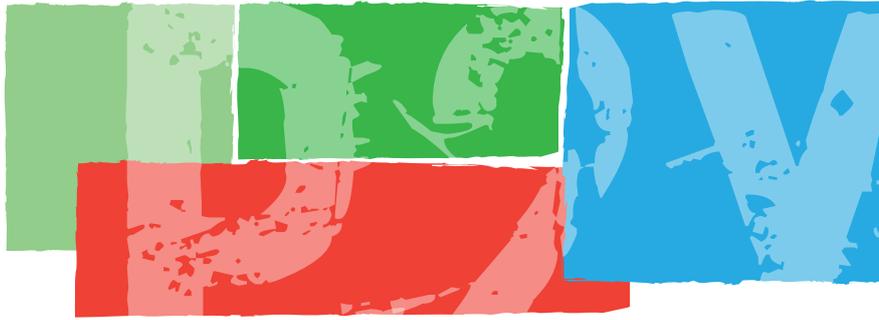
POWER2YOUTH is a research project aimed at offering a critical understanding of youth in the South East Mediterranean (SEM) region through a comprehensive interdisciplinary, multi-level and gender sensitive approach. By combining the economic, political and socio-cultural spheres and a macro (policy/institutional), meso (organizational) and micro (individual) level analysis, POWER2YOUTH explores the root causes and complex dynamics of the processes of youth exclusion and inclusion in the labour market and civic/political life, while investigating the potentially transformative effect of youth collective and individual agency. The project has a cross-national comparative design with the case studies of Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Occupied Palestinian Territories and Turkey. POWER2YOUTH's participants are 13 research and academic institutions based in the EU member states, Norway, Switzerland and South East Mediterranean (SEM) countries. The project is mainly funded under the European Union's 7th Framework Programme.