

THE RESHAPED CIVIC POLITICS OF EURO-MEDITERRANEAN RELATIONS

RICHARD YOUNGS

Senior Fellow Democracy, Conflict, and Governance Program.
Carnegie Europe - Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

The EU's support for civil society has improved but remains behind the curve, as it struggles to keep pace with the emergence of dynamic innovations in civic activism.

The Euromed Survey 2019 reveals that the civil society dimension of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) remains of pivotal importance but needs updating. In recent years, civil society has shifted shape in the southern Mediterranean, and indeed within EU member states too. While civil society has in some ways been on the defensive since the revolts of 2011, it has in some contexts taken on interesting new forms. The EU's support for civil society has improved but remains behind the curve, as it struggles to keep pace with the emergence of dynamic innovations in civic activism. Key policy changes are currently in the pipeline that will have a significant impact on the EMP's civil society component. The EU will need to consider a range of far-reaching changes if it is to improve its contribution to southern Mediterranean civil society.

A new civil society?

Mediterranean states were in the forefront of an intensive wave of social protests in the early 2010s. The revolts of the Arab spring came to symbolise the emergence of a more contentious form of civic politics. And this was a genuinely cross-Mediterranean phenomenon, as protests also erupted in many EU member states like Greece and Spain around the same time.

Of course, these citizen mobilisations did not achieve far-reaching political or economic change in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region. Even where they were strong enough to push regimes from office, they did not lead to democratisation – with the one partial exception of Tunisia. Yet despite the disappointment of the Arab spring, a willingness to protest still exists across the region. Indeed, such is the current upswing in protest activity that talk abounds of a renewed momentum of Arab reform.

Recently, of course, this has been seen in Algeria, where large protests involving a diverse range of social actors got the military to push president Bouteflika from power. The Algerian protests have been especially notable for continuing over many months and for their organisational acuity. The country is, of course, still only in the foothills of prospective political change and protestors have begun to face the challenge of engaging military leaders over the sequencing of political changes.

Lebanon's protests during October 2019 have been equally dramatic. These recent revolts came on the back of the 2015 You Stink protests that were triggered by the issue of refuse collection, but took on a broader set of policy concerns. It is these demands for a fundamental reshaping of Lebanon's inter-denominational power-sharing system that dominate the current wave of protest. At the time of writing, these protests have succeeded in dislodging the government, while it remains unclear how far they will bring about structural political reform.

While the Algerian protests have been in the headlines, mobilisations also continue elsewhere, albeit at a lower level. Some protests have occurred recently under the current military-

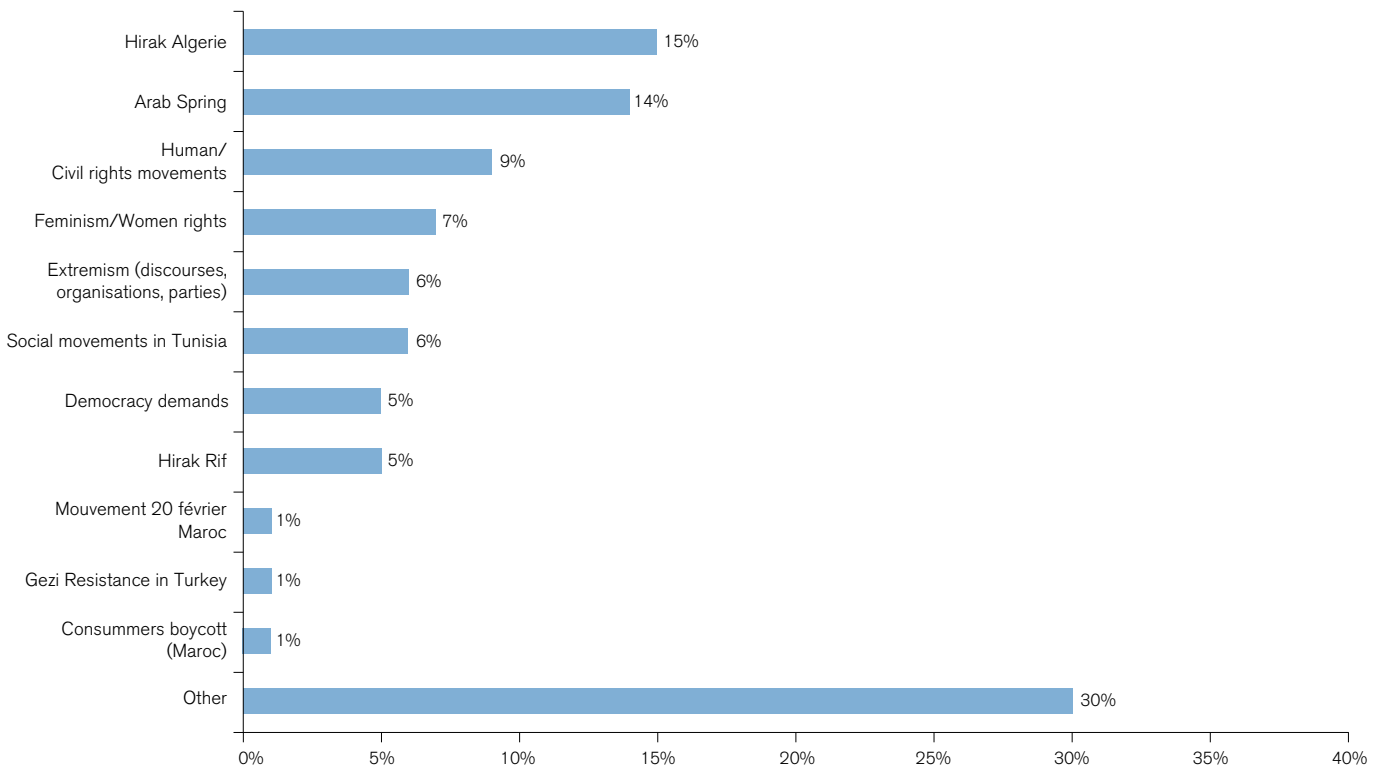
controlled regime in Egypt. In Tunisia, thousands of small-scale protests now occur each year, triggered by a whole range of grievances from university conditions, job losses, terrorism and security concerns, uneven regional development, the stalling of democratic reforms and religion. Tunisian activists define them as non-movements, more locally focused and spontaneous than the 2011 uprising. In December 2017 the so-called Hassebhom movement orchestrated protests against the government's proposed security law that would hand significant powers to the police. And in 2018 protests rocked a dozen Tunisian cities in response to price rises and tax hikes, orchestrated by a small informal movement called 'What are we waiting for?'

In Tunisia, thousands of small-scale protests now occur each year. These protests are triggered by a whole range of grievances.

In the last two or three years large protests have flared sporadically in the Moroccan region of Rif, coordinated by the so-called Hirak movement – these have focused on issues of local infrastructure, health and education in contrast to the 2011 protests that homed in on constitutional change.

Graph 1: Among recent social movements, which ones do you consider had the greatest political impact in SEM countries?

(categories developed from the open-ended answers)

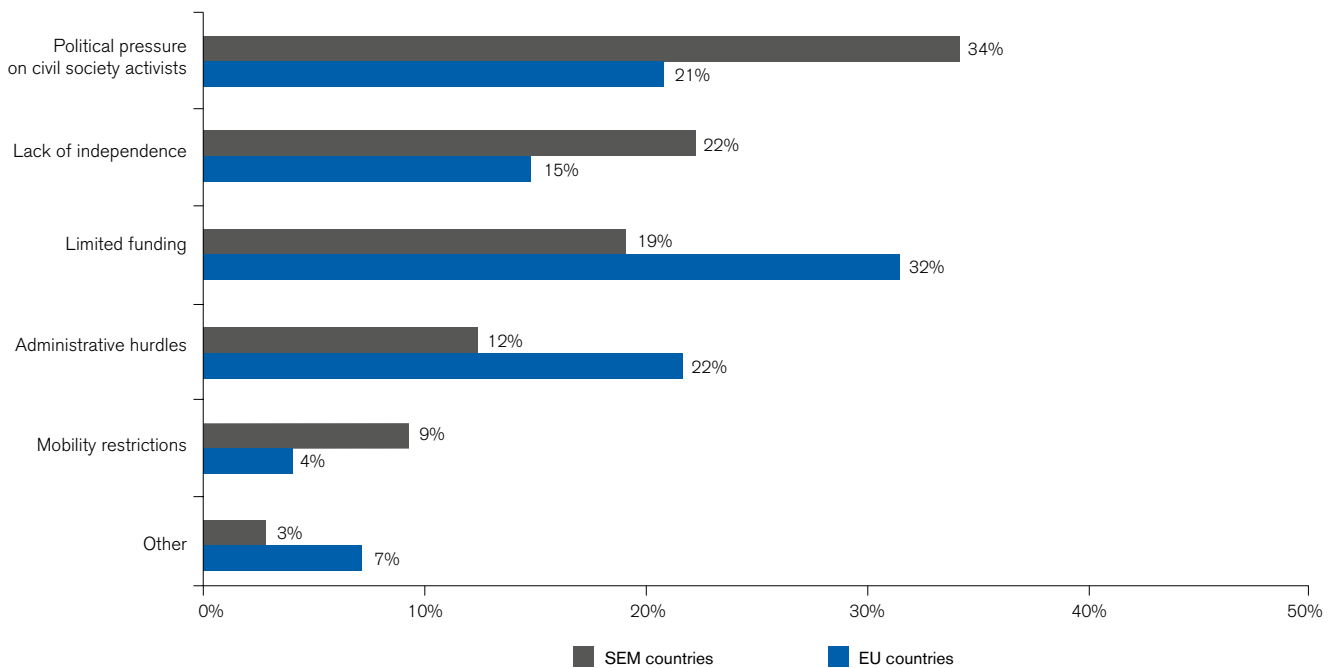


Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 10th Euromed Survey

While some protest ethos persists, most Arab governments have responded by trying to stifle civic politics. Civil society in the southern Mediterranean has in recent years faced more draconian repression. Regimes have introduced more severe restrictions on civil society organisations. While Egypt's restrictive NGO laws are well known, even supposedly more open governments like those in Tunisia and Morocco have found ways of constricting civil society operations. This is another common Euro-Mediterranean trend as many EU governments have introduced similar restrictions in an effort to limit and control civic activism.

Southern Mediterranean governments have found ways of constricting civil society operations. This is another common Euro-Mediterranean trend as many EU governments have introduced similar restrictions.

Graph 2: What are the obstacles for establishing a successfully working civil society?
(respondents were asked to choose 2 options out of 5)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 10th Euromed Survey

Activists in Arab countries have begun to articulate more informal and community-rooted forms of civil society activity.

The combination of these developments has spurred new forms of civic activism. As in other regions of the world, activists in Arab countries have begun to articulate more informal and community-rooted forms of civil society activity. Even if regimes contained the Arab spring protests, these revolts galvanised a new layer of dynamic activism that has moved away from the region's larger, formal and best-known NGOs. New civic initiatives have sprung up across the region to organise local communities in providing food, medical assistance, and vocational training. Young people are turning toward social entrepreneurship and volunteerism as alternatives to engaging with NGOs.

Much of the new activism is about making communities more resilient by circumventing dysfunctional government institutions – rather than about advocacy campaigns linked to the policies of the international community. Alternative social networks have grown in the region in the years since 2011. This emerging activism is diverse in nature: some of it is driven by conservative religious activists, while much of it is strictly functional – based around groups of like street vendors, doctors or urban-renewal specialists.

Fluid and informal activism is the incipient strategy for getting round regime clampdowns on NGOs.

This trend is in part a positive strategy to correct the perceived shortcomings of the bigger NGOs, but also in part a necessary adjustment to regime repression. Governments' new measures to narrow the civic space have in places like Egypt effectively driven activists into more cautious, subterranean and less overtly politicised activity. Fluid and informal activism is the incipient strategy for getting round regime clampdowns on NGOs.

In Syria and Lebanon organisations have emerged to provide humanitarian relief within communities scarred by Syria's conflict, relying on crowdsourcing for operational funds. Non-formalised civic groups have retained a deliberate looseness and fluidity of structure in an effort to push back against the Assad regime. In Lebanon, this kind of conflict-linked activism has distanced itself from the formal civil society organisations that are linked to the patronage of political families and notables.

In Palestine, new types of civic organisations are detaching themselves from the parameters of two-state peace talks and organising for de facto and functional local autonomy from Israeli influence. In Libya, kinship groups have become more important, as NGO-type structures have struggled to take root in the years since Colonel Qaddafi was ousted from power. In Morocco, the February 20 Movement has moved from protest into so-called 'liquid' initiatives of self-organisation.

Taken together, these changes are significant, even if in many cases they are not a game-changer. In many ways, civil society is on the defensive, cornered by increasingly intrusive and repressive regime tactics, but there are also new avenues of civic dynamism and citizen initiatives to find more effective ways to influence local policies. Contrary to many assumptions, the uprisings of the Arab spring were not a one-off that have entirely subsided back into the status quo ante. Rather they have contributed, along with other factors, to alternative kinds of civic activism taking root, in some ways more dynamic and more locally resonant than the kind of formalised NGO campaigns that predominated before 2011. The formal NGO sector is still extremely important and has itself begun to adjust; but it is today one part of a more varied spectrum of civic politics across the southern Mediterranean.

The future of EU support

These trends suggest that the EMP's civil society dimension is still relevant – and indeed increasingly so. The EU's challenge is to keep pace with these civic changes if it is to offer effective support to Arab civil society. IEMed's expert survey uncovers concerns that the union is not doing nearly enough to help protect and strengthen civil society in the southern Mediterranean – in particular due to its security priorities.

In many respects, the EU has begun to react to the new civic politics in recent years. It has increased its use of sub-granting, to make sure that funds move from larger NGO partners into smaller civic groups out of capital cities. The EU has made an effort to broaden its support beyond highly formalised NGOs to engage with individuals and non-registered entities. The European Commission has begun to listen more to local Arab civic actors before defining its calls of proposals, in an effort to make its core funding procedure less top-down. It has also been exploring ways of providing CSOs with more core support rather than just funding one-off projects. The EU has moved towards a greater mainstreaming of civil society support by increasing support to civil society as part of its other areas of development aid.

The EU has introduced several innovations to get funds out more quickly to civil society activists, especially those facing arrest or physical attacks from their governments. Under a rapid response mechanism for civil society it can now get funds of up to 60,000 euros out to CSOs within two months. More of the EU's funding now goes directly to protecting activists from state repression, in particular from its so-called Protectdefenders.eu initiative. Egyptian civil society has been the largest recipient of these funds anywhere in the world.

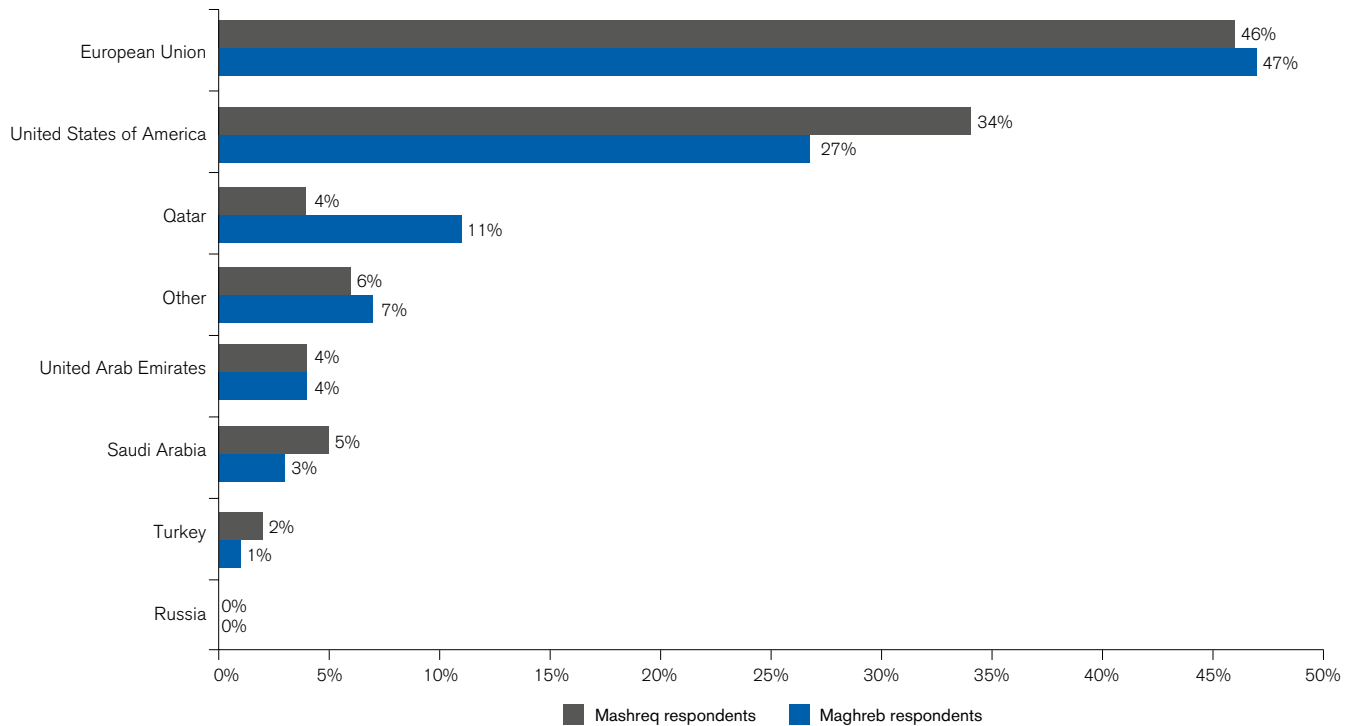
These changes are positive but for now remain tentative. In addition, there are on-going debates about funding levels for civil society. The European Commission's proposals for the post-2020 budget promise to ring-fence 1.5 billion euros for civil society out of a 68 billion aid total – a 6 per cent increase on the current period. However, some in the southern Mediterranean have expressed concern because funds that up to now have been allocated specifically for the MENA countries will be folded into a single financial instrument covering all aid recipients worldwide (except candidate countries).

The formal NGO sector is still extremely important and has itself begun to adjust; but it is today one part of a more varied spectrum of civic politics across the southern Mediterranean.

These trends suggest that the EMP's civil society dimension is still relevant – and indeed increasingly so.

EU has begun to react to the new civic politics: broadened support beyond formalised NGOs, less top-down funding procedures, increased support to civil society as part of its other areas of development aid.

Graph 3: In your country foreign support to civil society comes mainly from:
(respondents were asked to choose 2 options out of 7)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 10th Euromed Survey

The Commission insists that the single instrument will simplify funding procedures and allow funds to reach civic activists in the south more quickly and on more flexible terms. It also indicates that civil society could receive more money from the bilateral aid programmes for each recipient country than is currently the case. Yet, there is uncertainty over whether Arab civil society actors risk losing funds to other regions.

In recent years, the EU has in practice been reluctant to fund projects without the consent of governments.

The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) will benefit from a slightly increased amount of funding under the proposals. Through this, the EU will be able to fund projects without the consent of governments. In recent years, however, the EU has in practice been reluctant to do this in Arab countries, reducing the potential value of the EIDHR to Euro-Mediterranean relations. In the current political climate and with a security-first EU foreign policy, it is not clear that this is likely to change in any positive sense.

Many member states want more flexibility to move funds away from civil society and human rights objectives into funding for security and migration-control purposes.

Even if there may be some gains for civil society actors under these proposals, there are remaining doubts. Many member states are pushing for changes to the Commission's proposals. They want more flexibility to move funds away from civil society and human rights objectives into funding for security and migration-control purposes.

If the EU is to help retain a meaningful and forward-looking civil society strand to the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership it will need to do more than simply guarantee a sufficient level of funding. The union will need to find ways of engaging helpfully with protests across the region. The EU cannot and should not seek to engineer protests and when these do occur it will often make sense to stand back and not interfere. But more could be done to help activists devise better strategies to keep reform momentum going after protests die down, to adopt more long-term political strategies and build broader alliances with other parts of society. These steps failed in the period after the Egyptian revolution in 2011; they will be

of vital importance in Algeria and Lebanon in the coming months and years and the union will face a crucial test case here.

The EU will need to add further to the flexibility of its funding to help reach the new forms of activism taking root across the southern Mediterranean. It should be able to ensure that a greater – perhaps even pre-set – share of its funding goes to new civic actors that have not previously received European support. It will need to rethink its traditional model of funding in an era when activists are often looking for more political support rather than the standard form of civil society capacity-building or training project. Part of this should entail helping civil society generate funds from local sources to reduce donor dependency. The EU will need to decide whether it has the political will to react as Arab regimes clampdown on the region's dynamic activists in increasingly harsh fashion – the IEMed survey reveals concerns that the union needs to do this without being counter-productive in leaving civic actors more vulnerable. A promising idea would be to shift more EU funds to civil society as and when regimes abuse human rights commitments.

These kinds of changes would take on board the evolution of civic activism in the southern Mediterranean. It is far from certain that member states have the political will to agree to them, in large measure due to familiar security and geopolitical reasons.

A final reflection: while there is scope for EU civil society support to improve in the southern Mediterranean, a deeper and intriguing trend is that many of the same civic politics are today evident within EU member states. Protests occur with greater frequency, a more dynamic layer of community-level activism has gained traction, and in response most EU governments have sought to restrict civic space. This calls for far deeper and more intense linkages and coordination between European and MENA civil society, quite separate from what formal EU support may or may not exist. A genuinely Euro-Mediterranean civic space may be emerging – in both positive and less benign ways – and may prove capable of making the EMP's civil society component more of a tangible reality than has previously been the case.

While there is scope for EU civil society support to improve in the southern Mediterranean, many of the same civic politics are today evident within EU member states. This calls for deeper and more intense linkages and coordination between European and MENA civil society.