



# The Middle East in London

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**THIS ISSUE: TUNISIA** • Tunisia: seven years later • Tunisia's ballooning civil society • Literature unchained • The cultural environment in post-2011 Tunisia • Authoritarian revival and elite reconfiguration in Tunisia • Al-Nahda • Women's rights in Tunisia since the 2011 uprisings • Reforming Tunisia's informal economy • Photo competition results • **PLUS** Reviews and events in London





Nja Mahdaoui, *Graphemes on Arches II*, 2011. Ink on Arches vellum paper, 200 x 140 cm. Courtesy of Nja Mahdaoui © Nja Mahdaoui

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# The Middle East in London

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# Tunisia's ballooning civil society



© Mohamed-Salah Omri

The headquarters of the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) in Tunis, Tunisia. Photograph taken by Mohamed-Salah Omri

Civil society is a productive location from which to observe and register the changes that have taken place in Tunisia since 2011; for the Tunisian Revolution was also a revolution in civil society. At a period characterised by the atomisation of the political field, the proliferation of parties and the creation of major rifts among the political class and society as a whole, civil society is both a reflection of the state of Tunisia and a place where new forms of citizen action can be observed. Since the Revolution, the scene of civil society in Tunisia has become considerably more complex, so I will limit myself to three

telling phenomena: the reversal in the roles of important pre-2011 civil society associations; the expanding presence of civil society in the political field; and the problematic diversity and proliferation of civil associations.

Early on, the powerful trade union, the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), the Lawyers Association and the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH) – the key focal points of protest and resistance prior to 2011 – struggled with possible loss of purpose, clout and appeal. The overthrow of the head of state and the legalisation of freedom of movement, association and expression in the country,

together with the rise of new actors on the scene, including elected politicians and parties, threatened to limit the field in which civil society operated and to break the monopoly of several associations, chief among them the UGTT. The abolition of the old law governing associations opened the floodgates, resulting in the creation of more than 20,000 associations as of September 2017. But the post-revolution reality provided different and unexpected fortunes for pre-2011 civil society organisations and for the UGTT in particular.

With persistent economic difficulties in the country, a stable activist leadership linked to a wide base and a strong record of engagement, the UGTT moved from being an incubator of protest (with occasional close relationships to the ruling party) to a power broker and

*Involvement in civil society has in fact become ubiquitous, increasing the potential to influence policy and the overall direction of the country*

mediator at the highest level. At one point in time, Houcine Abbassi, the former Secretary General of the UGTT, wielded so much power that he was sometimes perceived as a 'fourth president' – the other three being the presidents of the Republic and National Assembly and the head of government. It was for this role that the union and its Quartet partners were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2016.

Likewise remarkable is the ascension to power of activists from the UGTT, the Association of Women Democrats (AFD) and the Tunisian League of Human Rights (LTDH), as well as the employers union (UTICA). To mention only the most notable examples, the former Interim President of Tunisia, Moncef Marzouki was previously president of the LTDH; Saida Garrache, the spokesperson for the current President, was prominent in the Lawyers Association as well as in the AFD; a number of prominent UGTT leaders joined successive governments, including the current Minister of Social Affairs (Mohamed Trabelsi) and the former Minister of Public Service (Abid Briki), both of whom were members of the UGTT Executive Bureau.

Involvement in civil society has in fact become ubiquitous, via institutions and more individual activism, increasing the potential to influence policy and the overall direction of the country. To mention a recent example, many observers credit Garrache with Essebsi's remarkable move on 13 August 2017 to abolish the ban preventing Tunisian women from marrying non-Muslim men and with his hint at radical changes in the inheritance law, both demands had been on the agenda of civil society for decades.

In addition, the revolutionary winds of change brought unprecedented diversity in the scope and patterns of civic engagement, with remarkable increases in the participation of youth, women and activists from a wide spectrum of socio-economic backgrounds. These groups have established large numbers of associations (some of which focus on local or single issues, some of which are local branches of foreign associations and some of which are country-wide), all with attendant diversity in agendas, funding and modes of action. This wide range includes, for example, an economic cooperative in the oasis of Jimna; *Shams*, an association to defend gay rights; an Amazigh rights association, and

*Confronted with a rising number of religious associations, voices began to question the 'civil' component in civil society, often accusing these new associations of undermining the foundations of the civil state enshrined in the new constitution*

*Bawsala* for open government. They also include thousands of charitable religious associations, tens of branches of Qur'anic teaching associations and the now-banned Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution (LPR).

In addition to an increase in the availability of state funding, a new culture of fundraising has managed to attract foreign donations from the Gulf States, European and American think tanks, and international organisations. The growth was spontaneous, largely chaotic and almost completely outside government oversight. A survey conducted by government in 2015 revealed a messy situation in which most associations manifested irregularities in administration or in regulatory or financial accountability. Some 200 associations were suspected of ties to terrorist activities and several of them have since been suspended.

Confronted with a rising number of religious associations, voices began to question the 'civil' component in civil society, often accusing these new associations of undermining the foundations of the civil state enshrined in the new constitution. Others pointed out the dangers associated with the politicisation of civil society as associations began to operate as wings of political parties. Established associations faced serious challenges and had to respond to pressures to keep up with the

democratisation of society as a whole. The UGTT has been challenged to adjust to the post-revolutionary, pluralistic civil society while continuing to remain the principal driver in advocating policies in defence of the weaker sections of society. Critics expect the organisation to exert control over the proliferation of a troublesome, professional sectarian solidarity, to employ a more effective media strategy and to attract greater numbers of women and young people. In January 2017 the latest congress of the UGTT made overtures to encourage women's participation in its leadership and promised a review of its internal procedures.

These problems aside, the creation of a vibrant civil society remains a positive outcome of the Revolution and perhaps the main guarantor that its ideals and goals are kept on the agenda. Tunisia now has a ministry devoted to relations with civil society; and civil society has won a regular seat at the table at the local as well as at the national level. The freeing of the media, cyberspace in particular, amplified the impact of a civil society which has become adept at quick responses and mobilisation, often turning issues into matters of public interest and thereby forcing government to act.



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