

Executive Summary

Following the January 2011 revolt against President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, Tunisia had its first exposure to the vast complex of international expert assistance for transitions. It was a new experience as well for international actors, many of whom had turned a blind eye or been denied full access to the country and were thus unfamiliar with its aspirations. More than two years into Tunisia's transition, results have been mixed: growing ambivalence and confusion about roles and responsibilities prevail. Yet internationals can take simple measures to implement their activities more effectively, and nationals can become more directive in the relationship. This would put the transition on a better track, and help inspire more effective international engagement to replace the haphazard dynamics that persist in transitioning countries within and beyond the Arab world.

Internationals were immediately interested when Tunisia suddenly opened. They also had ample reason to respond in a way that reflected their own lessons learned – from Central America, Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans and Southern Africa in the 1990s, to West Africa, South East Asia, Iraq and Afghanistan in the 2000s. But providing well-structured, organised expertise has proven difficult – and in ways all too familiar.

IFIT studied Tunisia's experience with media, security sector and judicial reforms and youth employment. These are readily recognisable policy sectors that both nationals and internationals identified as priorities early in the country's transition. Developing a clear picture of dynamics within these sectors was nevertheless difficult, since international assistance efforts in each one overlapped with the broader fields of democracy, development, and rule of law. Yet the reported net effect was consistent: most Tunisians find the international influx confusing and, at times, overwhelming.

While positive results for the transition have been achieved, disenchantment in the national-international relationship is emerging as disagreements surface about basic questions of responsibility, coordination, priorities and needs. There is a common feeling that changes achieved across the four sectors have not been proportional to the time and resources invested. Anxiety is increasing as nationals, and many of their international NGO partners, face an inevitable decline in donor funding and activity. Yet, both sides can take simple steps to maximise remaining good-will. Variations on the coordination model recently adopted in the media sector can be replicated in the other three, less-coordinated sectors. Mapping can be done of international experts in other areas of transitional priority.

Problems identified in Tunisia through this research can also help guide measures that target systemic problems in the international response to transitions. A one-stop transition information portal could become an early, funded international task for every democratic or post-conflict transition. A transition preparedness guide for national actors could help them get the best from the international expert assistance machine when it arrives. A voluntary set of international principles to improve the quality of cross-border expertise is also needed and feasible.

The window of opportunity for building the foundation of a more democratic and just Tunisia, and the corresponding support on offer from internationals, remain open. With some simple adjustments in approach, the country can still become a showcase for the international community's delivery of expertise and lessons on effective transitional policymaking.