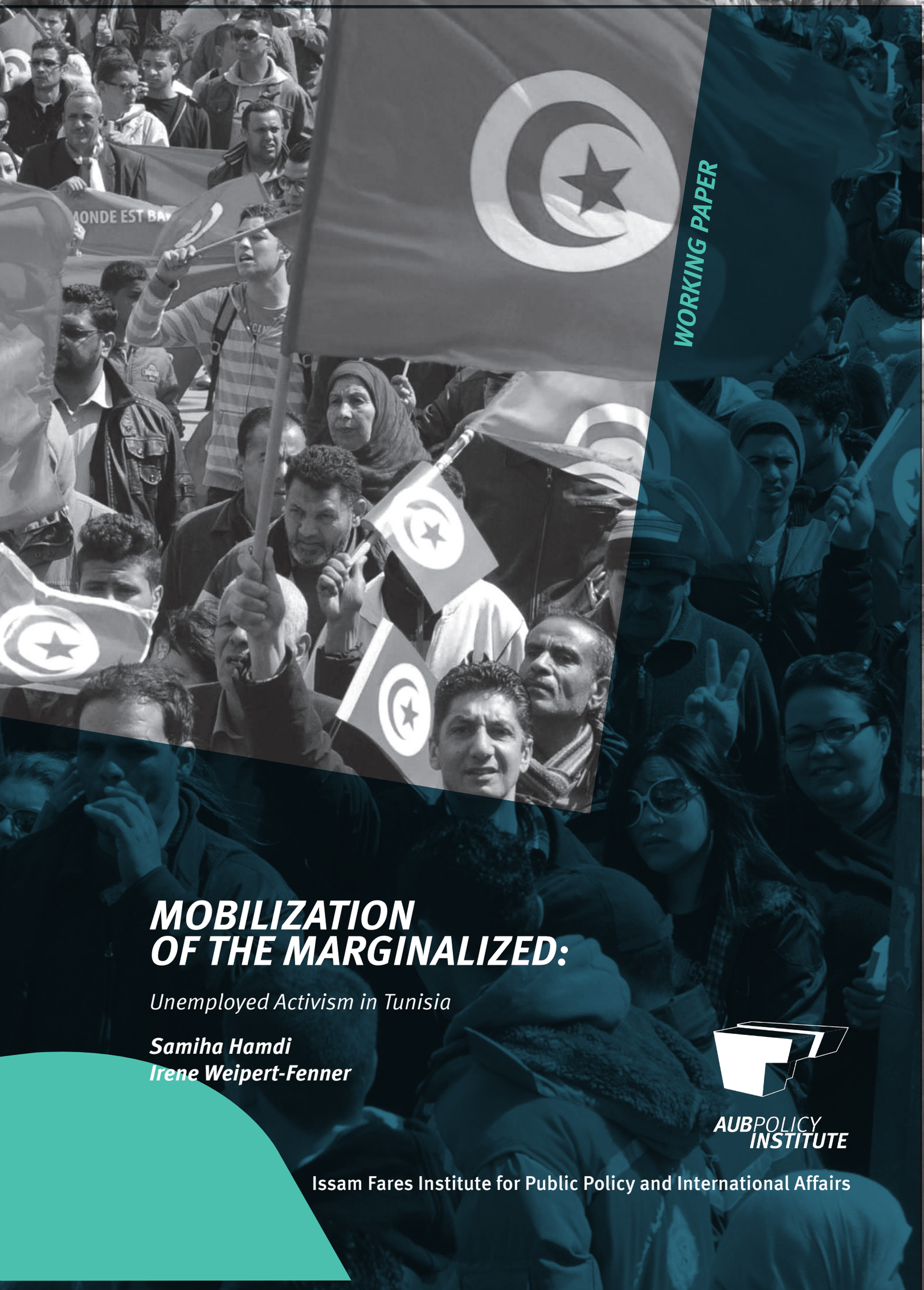

WORKING PAPER

MOBILIZATION OF THE MARGINALIZED:

Unemployed Activism in Tunisia

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AUB POLICY INSTITUTE

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WORKING PAPER #43

MOBILIZATION OF THE MARGINALIZED: UNEMPLOYED ACTIVISM IN TUNISIA

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“Unemployed protests are the most important form of socioeconomic contention in Tunisia. Calls for employment and condemnations of corrupt recruitment procedures have fueled large-scale protests since the mid 2000s.”

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION[1]

Unemployed protests are the most important form of socioeconomic contention in Tunisia. Calls for employment and condemnations of corrupt recruitment procedures have fueled large-scale protests since the mid 2000s. They began to receive nation-wide attention when, in 2008, in several cities from the Gafsa mining basin, manipulation of the phosphate mining company's recruitment procedures, by regional trade union leaders, caused protests lasting over six months, only to be halted by security forces. Only two years later, "Work, Freedom, National Dignity" became the major slogan of the mass mobilization that ended the 23-year rule of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Waves of unemployed protests have since been recurring. Outbursts of discontent received wide attention again when, in spring 2015, protesters in Gafsa blocked streets and railways, and pitched tents to bring the extraction and transportation of phosphate to a complete standstill, an unprecedented achievement. In 2016, if only for ten days, mobilization of the unemployed spread from Kasserine to other marginalized regions, and even the capital, Tunis. This episode made clear that five years after the end of authoritarian rule, socioeconomic contention could rock the nation.

Despite massive discontent, unemployed mobilization has thus far lacked political leverage. Unemployment rates remain high, especially in Tunisia's marginalized interior regions, and among university graduates. Politicians have acknowledged the need for regional development and employment during electoral campaigns, but have refrained from any structural change or economic reform programs. As a result, frustration is increasing, and the impression that "nothing has changed" prevails among unemployed activists.

In this working paper, we assess if the dynamics of mobilization in Tunisia can explain unemployed protests' lack of political leverage. Supported by the Tunisian NGO Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Economiques et Sociaux – Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES) that tracks social movements in Tunisia – our own field studies revealed that the majority of unemployed mobilization can be characterized as unorganized and spontaneous. Protest actors raised limited claims, mostly demanding their own employment, and making use of disruptive protests, such as street and railway blockages. The nation-wide scene of unemployed mobilization, on the other hand, is captured by the 2006-formed Union des diplômés chômeurs (Union of Unemployed Graduates, UDC). In this working paper we seek to compare these two forms of activism by the unemployed: those of the UDC and the unorganized unemployed protests, using the Gafsa mining basin as our case study.[2]

We have identified two divergent trajectories since 2011. The UDC has expanded its membership, offices, and contentious actions, and increased its levels of organization and professionalism. By contrast, the Gafsa mining basin protesters fragmented, despite an increase in discrete protest events. We try to explain these dynamics by explicating the social meaning of the activists' grievances. We then compare their mobilization networks before looking at how diverse activists have perceived political opportunities and threats since 2011. Finally, we will try to draw conclusions on the different forms of unemployed activism and their interplay with political change in Tunisia.

1 Research for this paper has been supported by a grant from the Volkswagen Stiftung in the context of the research project titled "Socioeconomic Protests and Political Transformation: Dynamics of Contentious Politics in Egypt and Tunisia against the Background of South American Experiences" (see Weipert-Fenner and Wolff 2015) at the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF, Germany), carried out in cooperation with the Arab Forum for Alternatives (AFA, Cairo/Egypt) and the University of Sfax (Tunisia). We thank Johanna Faulstich and Giuseppe Campisi for their research support.

2 Around 30 interviews with UDC activists, trade unionists, politicians, and journalists were conducted in Tunis, Sfax, Gabes and Redeyef in November 2014, March 2015, and October and November 2016. Additional participant observation and group discussions were possible during the World Social Forum in Tunis in March 2015. The case study of Gafsa builds on fieldwork conducted between 2015 and 2016 in Redeyef and Om Larayes—20 interviews, five focus groups with unemployed activists (graduates and non-graduates), and four interviews with members of UGTT local and regional offices.

BACKGROUND

Unemployment is among the most salient grievances in Tunisia. The issue is especially pressing for university graduates, and those in marginalized interior regions, with graduates in the hinterland being worst-off. This divergence results from economic policies pursued since the 1950s, and the structural adjustment attempts of the 1980s. After independence, Tunisia followed a state-developmental model, with high levels of investment in higher education, and the absorption of well-educated young people into the public sector. Like employment in large public sector companies, civil service employment came with a number of socioeconomic benefits, such as health services and pensions. Scholars have described the state employment of university graduates as part of an authoritarian social contract (Hertog, 2016), or the "authoritarian bargain" (Desai et al., 2009) by which the political loyalty of highly educated Tunisians was secured with a bundle of socioeconomic benefits. Hafaïedh (2000) stresses that the Tunisian regime presented university degrees as key to social mobility. This promise was broken when the public sector shrunk to accommodate budgetary cutbacks. However, the number of university graduates increased drastically, from 121,000 in 1997 to 336,000 in 2007 (Timoumi, 2013, p. 118).

Concurrently, the education budget was slashed, undermining the quality of university degrees. This also explains the drastic rise in unemployment rates among university graduates: from below 5% in 1994 to 14% in 2005, jumping to 22.9% in 2010, and to around 30% since 2011 (Touhami, 2012).

Furthermore, the extreme divergence between the coastal and interior regions along demographic, economic, social, and infrastructural axes has developed since the colonial era. This was exacerbated by the state's withdrawal from welfare provision and job creation.[3] In spite of politicians' promises for change, private and public investment still flows to the coastal regions, which have 80% of Tunisia's industrial zones.[4] This is manifest in poverty rates: In 2011, poverty rates in the coastal regions of Ariana, Sousse, and Monastir were at 10.1%, 14.9%, and 15.8%, respectively. In the marginalized hinterland regions of Kasserine, Sidi Bouzid, and Gafsa they were at 46.4%, 42.3%, and 30.9%, respectively. Although overall poverty has decreased, with Gafsa down 18% in 2015, the regional divergence remains striking.

This divergence in poverty rates is correlated with increases in unemployment. In Gafsa, which produces 80% of Tunisia's phosphate, the unemployment rate is among the highest in Tunisia, at 28.3%, with 46.5% being unemployed university graduates. By comparison, in the governorate of Monastir, with its high tourist volume and near dearth of natural resources, only 6.1% of the population is unemployed.

3 For an overview of this development in Gafsa see Hibou 2015.
4 "Développement régional en Tunisie : 80% des zones industrielles sont situées dans les régions côtières," LaPresse News, February 16, 2016, accessed October 17, 2016, http://www.lapressenews.tn/article/developpement-regional-en-tunisie-80-des-zones-industrielles-sont-situees-dans-les-regions-cotieres/94/3264. The two major parties, Nidaa Tunis and al-Nahda, called the development of marginalized regions, with job creation as a top priority. See for instance the first speech of Beji Caid Essebsi, "Speech of the Tunisian President Beji Caid Essebsi after his swearing in", Channel 9, December 31, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BIpfRh0bxbI. See also Rashid Ghanoushi, General Secretary of al-Nahda party, during the 10th Party Congress on May 21, 2016: "Speech of Rashid Ghanoushi at the opening of the al-Nahda's 10th conference," Tunisian News Network, May 20, 2016, accessed October 17, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FN9BAptqCAA.

Figure 1

Regional poverty rates in 2015[5]

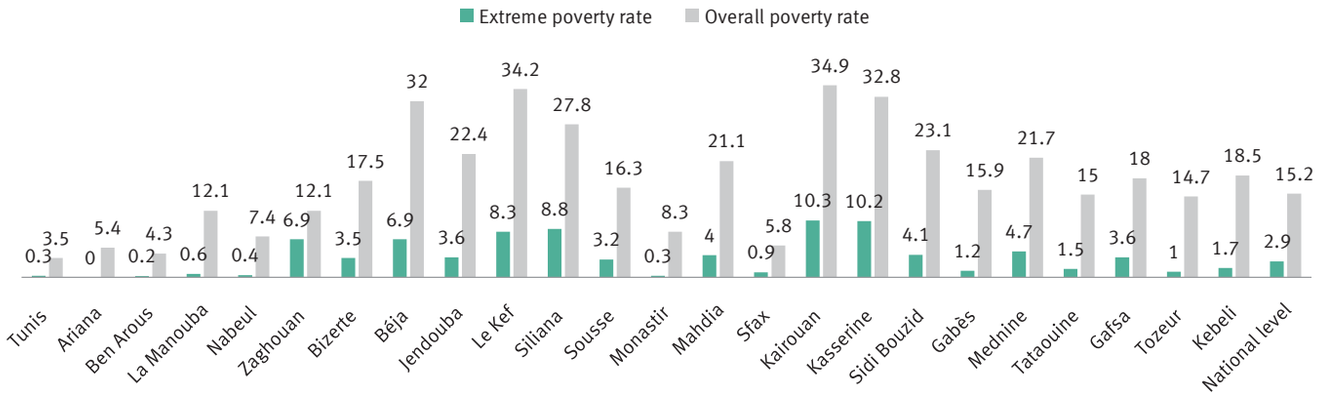
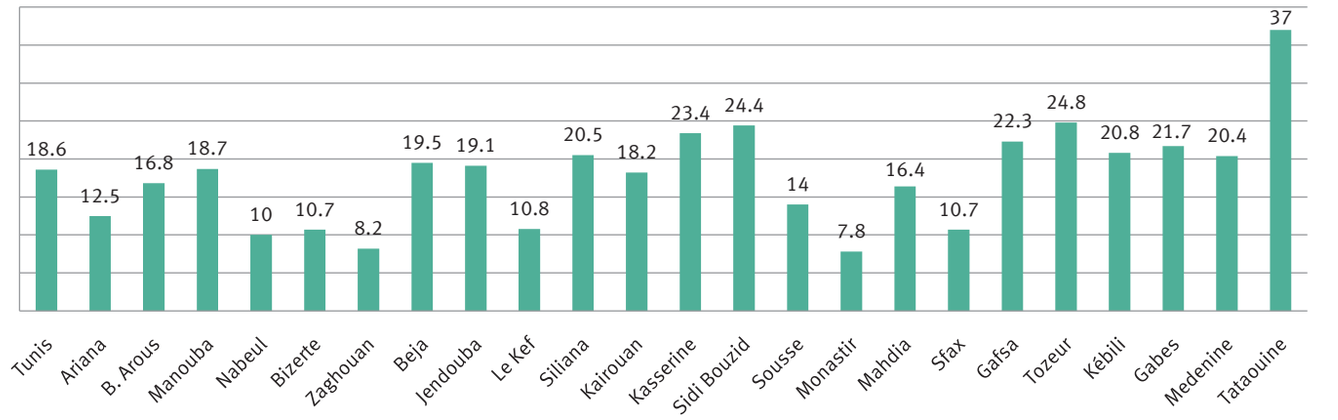


Figure 2

Regional rates of unemployment in 2013[6]



This divergence in poverty rates is correlated with Given the relatively constant grievances, the ups and downs of unemployed mobilization deserve our attention. Unfortunately, there is no comprehensive data on unemployed protests available, let alone differentiated data on organized and unorganized unemployed activism. The best data set on contention, generally, comes from the FTDES, which collects data on protests based on media reports, and observations from four regional sections (Gafsa, Kairouan, Kasserine, and Monastir). Figure 3 and 4 show the development of protests between March 2014 and October 2016, when the FTDES started collecting protest data. Waves of contention become clear when looking at protests in Tunisia as a whole, and the Gafsa region in particular.

5 INS, http://www.ins.tn/sites/default/files/pdf_actualites/presentation_final_0.pdf.
6 Tunisian Institute of Statistics, National Survey of Population and Employment for 2013, http://www.ins.tn/sites/default/files/publication/pdf/emploi2013%20avec%20lien.pdf.

Figure 3

Protests in Tunisia, March 2014-October 2016 (source: Observatoire Social Tunisien [OST] reports, FTDES)

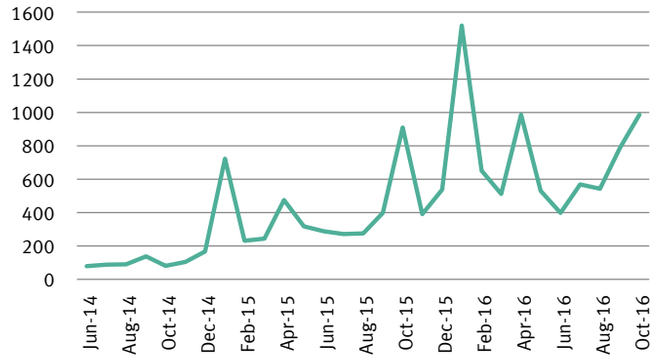
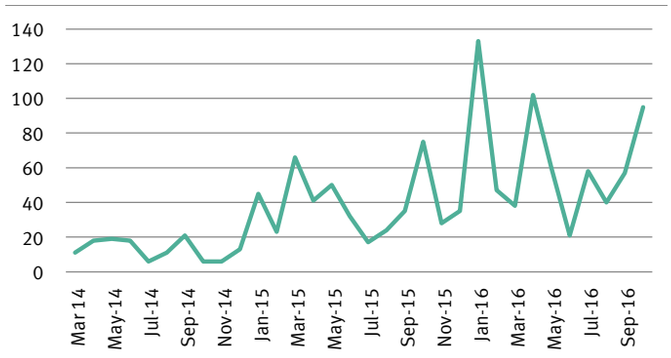


Figure 4

Protests in the governorate of Gafsa, March 2014-October 2016 (source: OST reports, FTDES)

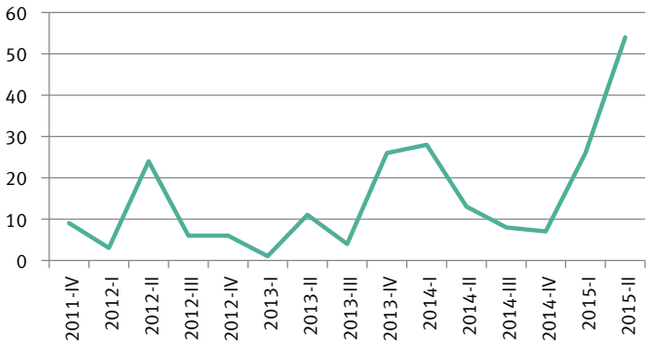


Looking at the numbers of protests in the Gafsa region, we find that these peaks only give limited insight into the qualitative impact of protest events. For instance, the protest wave between April and June 2015 does not stand out quantitatively, despite it being the first time in post-independence Tunisia that protests in the mining basin halted phosphate production.[7]

To get an overview of UDC protest events, and identify the (shifting) claims and (evolving) repertoire of contention, we created our own dataset based on Facebook pages of the UDC's national bureau and regional offices. The set includes 226 actions from September 2011, when the union began using the social media platform to report its activities (until June 2015). Figure 5 shows a general upward trend punctuated by spikes.

Figure 5

UDC Total number of collective actions September 2011-June 2015 (Own data compilation based on UDC Facebook posts)



It must be acknowledged, however, that Facebook posts do not indicate events' qualitative impact, for example, in terms of numbers of participants, or bystanders. Furthermore, it is impossible to compare the UDC data set in absolute terms with the FTDES data, given the different types of sources. Still, both sets show a similar tendency: increasing waves of contention. Based on our own fieldwork, expert interviews, and media reports, we can conclude that, in the marginalized interior regions, most of the protests can be characterized as actions for employment and regional development. A more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of the two forms of unemployed activism came through activist interviews, participant observations, and focus groups.

7 Eileen Byrne, "Jobless locals bring Tunisia's phosphate industry to a halt," The National UAE Edition, May 23, 2015, accessed October 18, 2016, http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/jobless-locals-bring-tunisias-phosphate-industry-to-a-halt.

THE SOCIAL MEANING OF UNEMPLOYED GRIEVANCES

To explain why we find mobilization in particular areas, among specific segments of society, we follow Erica Simmons (2014, 2016) who pointed out the importance of social meaning of grievances on the emergence and dynamics of social mobilization. In contrast to earlier scholarship that focused on the severity of grievances, she argues for the need to understand their material as well as ideational dimension and the context in which they are embedded.

"When we understand grievances as meaning-laden we can begin to uncover some of the mechanisms at work in transforming political context into political opportunity and how group identifications are summoned by particular kinds of threats in particular ways." (Simmons, 2014, p. 518)

We conducted interviews and focus groups that reveal unemployment is framed as injustice in various ways,[8] whilst elucidating similarities and differences between the two types of unemployed activism. Both sought jobs in the public sector (Gafsa) and the civil service (UDC), and thus saw the state as job provider. In both cases, the activists had never been employed, according to their notions of employment. Nonetheless, some worked in the informal sector and/or were formally employed in the private sector on limited contracts, in low skilled and poorly paid jobs. Both types of activists expressed suffering in waiting for inclusion, not only with formal, secure public sector employment, but also with access to its contingent socioeconomic benefits. They lacked access to salaried jobs that would allow them to shift from adolescence to adulthood, by moving into their own apartments, marrying, and starting a family. What is often described as "youth activism" is therefore not defined by age but is a socially constructed category, better understood in terms of intergenerational relations. "Youth activism" in this sense means to overcome that situation of "waithood" (Singerman, 2007), which is perceived as undignified. This is the main aim of unemployed activists.

Looking at how activists framed their grievances in broad political terms, we found considerable overlap between these two types of activism. They were unified in demands to develop Tunisia's interior regions, and in criticizing corrupt job distribution practices. However, excepting the UDC's national board, grievances were not translated into political demands. For both activist types, their fundamental demand was state employment.

Beyond these similarities, each movement framed their situation in different ways. The protesters in the Gafsa mining basin perceived their situation as unjust because (a) other regions have prospered, in particular from resources extracted from Gafsa; (b) the socioeconomic situation in Gafsa declined drastically ("paradise lost"); and (c) job distribution practices in Gafsa were perceived as corrupt, dominated by clientelist networks, thereby provoking feelings of injustice.

Firstly, unemployed activists in Gafsa understood their situation as unjust due to the contrast between resources, wealth, and experienced poverty. Seeing other regions prosper piques feelings of being left behind (Chouikha & Geisser, 2009). Interviewees referred to hogra, or "humiliation." As one young unemployed person explained:

"In the Gafsa mining basin, we produce richness, the CPG [Compagnie Phospate de Gafsa or Gafsa Phosphate Company] is the backbone of the Tunisian economy, but, to the contrary, richness accumulates on the coastal regions, and leaves us in unemployment, poverty, and disease."[9]

The second dimension of injustice derives from Gafsa's relative deprivation over time. Its history has been bound with the fate of the CPG. Created in the late 19th century, the company was first owned by French colonialists, and nationalized after independence in 1956. The four mining cities of Redeyef, Om Larayes, M'dhila, and Metlaoui were birthed by the phosphate industry. The CPG did not only ensure employment in the region, but also basic social services (including drinking water and electricity, health services, education, grocery stores, and even golf courses). From the 1970s, however, Tunisia embarked on a "modernization" process equated with economic liberalization. The phosphate mining company had to undergo reforms, causing its retreat from service provision. In the mid-1980s, the World Bank and IMF pushed Tunisia to speed up public sector reforms, resulting in a CPG labor force reduction from 10,000 to 4,800 in 2008, and the quality of services and infrastructure in the region also dropped (Allal, 2010).

8 For the concept of "injustice frames" see Gamson (1992, p. 31-58) and Tarrow (2011, p. 140-156).

9 Interview with unorganized unemployed activist, Om Larayes, 16 August 2015.

In a region where job opportunities are limited, these reforms led to youth unemployment. However, the collective memory of a golden era, when the phosphate extraction industry was a workers' paradise, lives on. This is closely associated with the active developmental role in the early post-independence era. As Jean-Claude Abric (1994, p. 62-63) argued: It is important to understand activists' world vision to fully comprehend their mobilization dynamics. To that end, it needs to be acknowledged that adults passed on their memory of a golden age to the next generation, for whom this vision frames expectations. The idea of a well-off class, and a stable working population is closely associated with the CPG. Identification with the company goes to the extent of one interviewee describing that "[the CPG] is part of our existence...it is my father...it is our history."[10] The sharp contrast between "the good old times", when the region was perceived as ahead of all, and its current miseries today, was expressed by another activist:[11]

"Here in Redeyef it was paradise. We lived here in a golden era, during and after independence. It was here that the first electric lamp was illuminated, here was the first golf course, [and] here we had the first super market. But they steal our richness and give us nothing. There is only poverty, deadly diseases; even with drinking water we face enormous shortages. We are thirsty, and the water quality is very bad. We don't even have the right to laugh like the others because of the yellow stains on our teeth, caused by the quality of [our] water."[12]

This malaise is blamed on the state, whose perceived responsibility is to correct unemployment, poverty, and regional imbalances. In contrast to an efficient state that fairly and equally distributes goods and services, the reality is marked by a new form of clientelism. Since the CPG was scaled back, and its manifold services and functions outsourced, regional power holders, including regional UGTT institutions, have manipulated recruitment procedures to favor their clients, be they relationships of kinship, or bribery (Allal, 2010; Gobe, 2010). This sparked the 2008 protests, and today, remains a fuel for discontent.

We found that the primary grievances of the unemployed graduates' organization, the UDC, were (a) the broken promise of social mobility via higher education; (b) a lack of development for marginalized regions; and (c) corruption in public recruitment procedures. UDC activists in interviews explicitly addressed the first problem, complaining about university education that did not qualify them for the labor market.[13] Interestingly, mobilization education did not play a major role. This could be explained by the unsuitability of higher education grievances for a collective action frame shared by those unemployed without a diploma. In their internal collective action frame, however, the past guarantees of state employment on graduation underpin their perceived entitlement to state jobs.

The Gafsa mining basin exemplifies grievances of higher public resonance, over the marginalization of interior regions. This perceived injustice is tied up with the fate of unemployed university graduates. Upon its inception, the UDC established two offices in the hinterland, in Jendouba and Redeyef. Figure 2 illustrates that unemployment rates among graduates are particularly high in these regions. Local mobilization dynamics have played an important role in the development of the UDC, as indicated by the Gafsa uprising in 2008. In the early stages of organizational development, local activists and the UGTT largely supported uncoordinated protests (Allal, 2010). The demand for personal employment and specific political measures, yet to be suggested, is connected to the common denominator for regional marginalization. Thus, marginalization grievances serve more as a diagnostic tool, rather than a prognostic frame to singling out solutions (cf. Benford & Snow, 2000).

Thirdly, UDC grievances incorporate a critique of recruitment procedures for the civil service, the concours. These annual exams are purported to ensure that civil service jobs are distributed on merit. UDC activists contend that they are rife with corruption. Jobs are either distributed in exchange for money, or along clientelist networks. These might be based on kinship or partisanship. Under Ben Ali, the ruling party distributed jobs to its own clients; for the activists, this persisted after 2011, when the al-Nahda party,

10 Interview with unorganized unemployed activist, Sfax, 20 June 2013.
11 Interview with unorganized unemployed activist, Redeyef, 17 August 2015.
12 Interview with unorganized unemployed activist, Redeyef, 17 August 2015.

13 Interview with Salam Ayari, group interviews, Tunis, March 2015.

heading the troika government, distributed 18,000 jobs to its sympathizers.[14] Gafsa protesters taking to the streets against rigged employment lists mirror this grievance. Additionally, the UDC criticized the concours system for distributing far too few jobs, to present most with a real chance of being hired.[15]

Again, diploma holders felt fooled by the concours system, which promised prosperity, as a reward for dedicated study. Behind this perceived injustice is the rebellion against waithood. As Hafaïedh (2000) argued, concours are another form of waiting for inclusion: Instead of being unemployed, the state gave university graduates the status of "waiting for another round of exams." Naming their struggle – being an unemployed university graduate – is the first step to overcoming it. The second is reforming recruitment procedures. The UDC, for instance, proposed sitting one of its members on the concours supervisory board, to ensure transparency. The third step is expanding job availability, bringing us back to the question of sustainable development.

14 Focus group with UDC activists, Tunis, March 2015. See also: «Appel à une stratégie nationale de lutte contre le chômage,» La presse de Tunisie, January 30, 2014, http://www.lapresse.tn/component/nationals/?task=article&id=78236.

15 See for example the criticism of the UDC of the recruitment of secondary-school teachers (Certificat d'aptitude au professorat de l'enseignement du second degré - CAPES). See Hamza Marzouk, «UDC: chômage et système éducatif sont intimement liés,» L'Economiste Maghrébin, February 18, 2014, http://www.leconomistemaghrebin.com/2014/02/18/udc-chomage-systeme-educatif-lies/.

MOBILIZING STRUCTURES OF THE ORGANIZED AND UNORGANIZED UNEMPLOYED

Local mobilizing structures have been pivotal in the Gafsa mining basin, as it was for the UDC. In the 2008 uprising, protest dynamics varied from city to city, despite limited information exchange amongst protesters, limited cooperation between unemployed activists with leftist parties (illegal at the time), local cadres of the UGTT and UDC, as well as other NGOs. Since 2011, mobilization has fragmented further around family and neighborhood networks. Disruptive techniques have been used to pressure family members into employment. With these limited demands, the expansion of networks proves difficult, particularly as any cooperation, with organizations such as the UGTT or UDC, is now rejected for fear of politicization – UGTT and UDC are perceived as part of the left camp. However, mobilization based on small social units expresses the frustrations of these networks, especially families, who have long sheltered unemployed youth. Nevertheless, it seems families' capacity to compensate for state withdrawal from welfare provision has reached its limits.

Within the UDC, the most important pre-existing network has been the student union, Union générale des étudiants de Tunisie (UGET), which provided experienced activists who shared world-views, and relations, based on trust. The UDC, as part of the left camp, profited from UGTT support from local cadres, who had maintained some independence from the co-opted national leadership. With the politicization of the newly elected UGTT leadership, the UDC, post-2011, felt exploited by trade unionists that continued providing shelter and solidarity for UDC protests. Yet as soon as the UGTT entered negotiations with the government, it prioritized workers' interests (salaries) over grievances of the unemployed (job creation). Still, regarding the scant resources of unemployed activists, and their lack of a strong political ally (see Section 4), the UGTT remains the strongest partner to the UDC. Regarding internal organization, local UDC offices act autonomously from the national leadership. Similar to the Gafsa protests, they staged hunger strikes and sit-ins for personal employment but lacked a common political agenda. Fragmented and decentralized mobilization, in sum, can help explain unemployed activists' meager political leverage.

Scholars, who have studied protest movements in Tunisia since 2011, have stressed the spontaneous character of these movements, carried out by non-politicized actors independent of political institutions.[16] Our present study supports these findings, but pushes one step further: We argue that protest movements in the Gafsa mining basin are fragmenting further. In 2008, mobilization was coordinated with actors of varying degrees of organization: political opposition parties, trade unionists, civil society organizations – such as the Association tunisienne des femmes democrats (Tunisian Association of Democratic Women, ATFD), and the Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme (Tunisian Human Rights League, LTDH) – journalists, the unemployed youth, families, and women (Allal, 2010; Gobe, 2010). Additional support came from Tunisian expatriates from Gafsa living in France, who organized solidarity marches, notably in Nantes. Protests after 2011 appeared increasingly fragmented and disunited, which were based on familial ties, independent of political parties, or trade unions. In some cases, even the right to work was derived from familial entitlements to a certain locality:

"We are all the cousins of "arch Awled Salem" [tribe of Salem's children]. We built the [sit-in] tent at the phosphate mine, because, by accident, this place was owned by our family once, before it was made available to the CPG, which gives us priority in getting employed."[17]

A similar situation was found in Om Larayes, where families organized sit-ins at CPG installations to support unemployed relatives. Although family and clan solidarities played a role in 2008, they have gained in importance. Economic insecurity has increased the dependence of individuals on their closest social linkages (Daoud, 2011; Elbahi, 2005). It seems that now, mobilization along these primary relationships, is regarded as the only way to overcome individual marginalization. Mobilization based on identities constructed along local ties, such as a neighborhood or a tribe, has replaced other mobilizing networks that were still effective in 2008.

Furthermore, the ambivalent nature of the UGTT has driven the unemployed toward local mobilization. The UGTT has historically played the double role of a political actor at the national level, and a societal actor at the local level. This dates back to the first years after independence, when UGTT leader Ahmed Ben Salah

16 See for instance Dakhli (2011), Bendana (2014), Salmon (2016).
17 Interview with unorganized unemployed activist, Om Larayes, 16 August 2015.

was caught undecided between forming a union or a political party (Chouika & Geisser, 2010). The UGTT leadership (e.g. Farhat Hached, Ahmed Tlili, Ahmed Ben Salah, and Habib Achour) long played a political role, as the UGTT remained militant, mobilizing for protest movements such as the general strike of 1978 (peaking on "Black Thursday," January 26, 1978), or the bread riots of January 4, 1984. Security crackdowns on large protests hemmed in the national leadership. Yet, at least at the local level, the UGTT served as an umbrella for different kinds of opposition forces, integrating political rivalries, social and ideological conflicts, and protest movements (Beinin, 2016). Under this loose structure, local cadres could remain militant, and act autonomously.

This dynamic was evident in Gafsa, in 2008, when local trade unionists supported the uprising and Adnan Hajji, a local unionist activist. Hajji eventually became the unofficial leader of the protest movement. At the same time, the regional branch of the union, and the mining unions, opposed the contestation. The general secretary of the regional UGTT unit, and Member of Parliament for the then ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) Amara Abbassi – who allegedly had manipulated the recruitment lists in favor of his clientelist networks – condemned the protesters and the trade unionists that supported the movement. The regional UGTT office even organized a protest march against the movement.[18] At the national level though, the unions for primary and secondary education, health, and postal workers did not stake out a position in 2008. At the local level, by contrast, the rank-and-file of the primary and secondary education, and health unions supported the movement. This is why young activists staged their sit-in and hunger strike at the UGTT facilities.[19]

Despite these mixed UGTT strategies prior to 2011, a young unemployed activist in 2013 stressed the memory of betrayal, "The unions of the mines only take care of their interests. They are the profiteers, and the corrupted. They have always sided against the protest movements."[20] This rift is fortified as the UGTT national and regional leaderships repeatedly reject the unemployed protests. As one representative of the regional UGTT in Gafsa put it:

"We are in favor of the right to work, that the young unemployed demand, but we condemn the halt of phosphate production. In fact, the UGTT has not organized the protest movements; 90% of the protests are spontaneous, and not within the framework of UGTT. Furthermore, in the communiqué after the decisions of the ministers' council for the governorate of Gafsa, we considered the decisions taken as acceptable."[21]

This is at variance with the local UGTT offices' criticism of these decisions, which led to the organization of a general strike on May 20, 2015, after the government announced its development plan for Gafsa. This illustrates a general dilemma of relations between trade unions and unemployed movements: The UGTT prioritizes the interests of CPG workers, who cannot afford frequent work stoppages, and their consequent bonus reductions. This applies not only to Gafsa's workers, who support the protests because of their strong ties to the region's unemployed, but also to workers in other cities, such as Gabes and Sfax, where downstream phosphate processing installations are located. A standstill in Gafsa means no work in Gabes and Sfax.[22] Additionally, the new UGTT leadership carefully weighs the social demands of its local base, with gains to its political position, whilst maintaining good relationships with regional and national authorities. Supporting protests, in particular those who are non-members, comes at a price. As the above quote shows, unemployed protesters are aware of the UGTT's balancing act.

Interestingly, even the UDC is not regarded as an ally. Unemployed activists in Gafsa feel that political parties and civil society actors only support the claims of politicized youth, not ordinary Tunisians. "We only trust our group," one employed graduate explained. "The UDC, for instance, only defends the interests of its politicized members. I was a member of the UDC and I know very well that [for] those who are politicized, their parties will support them. They always seek to manipulate the protests for political reasons. We refuse to be pawns."[23]

18 Interview with the trade unionist, Om Larayes, 16 August 2015.
19 Interview with one of the initiators of the 2008 uprising, Redeyef, 25 June 2013.
20 Interview with unorganized unemployed activist, 16 August 2015, Om Larayes.
21 Interview with a member of the UGTT regional office in Gafsa, August 2015, Gafsa.
22 Interview with a member of the UGTT executive board, Tunis, November 2014.
23 Focus group with young unemployed graduates, Redeyef, January 2016.

To understand this lack of trust and cooperation, we must look to the UDC's mobilization networks. The union is clearly associated with the left camp, linking student union activism within the UGET to labor activism within the UGTT. Former student unionists, who staged a sit-in at the Ministry of the Interior in 2006 against corrupt civil service recruitment practices, founded the UDC. Officials ignored these protests, and this neglect sparked the union's foundation. Student activism remains the backbone of the UDC's organizational skills, while providing a common world-view. As with other dissident voices under Ben Ali, the UDC profited from the space given by the UGTT. Staging protests in front of UGTT's local offices played a major part in the repertoire of contention in authoritarian Tunisia (Beinin, 2016). Staging protests inside UGTT headquarters is of equal importance, as the increasing number of hunger strikes (up since 2014) held at UGTT buildings illustrate. While the UGTT publicly supports many UDC protests, like the unorganized unemployed activists, UDC members see the UGTT's role as ambivalent. Fear of being exploited by the trade unions prevails: The UDC might be good enough to mobilize and build pressure on the street, but as soon as the trade union sits at the negotiating table with the government, it cares about workers' interests (mainly salaries) rather than job creation.[24]

When considering the UDC's mobilizing networks, one must differentiate between the local and national levels – the former acting autonomously from the latter. Protest actions are decided at the grass-roots level, and then carried out with local allies (such as the local UGTT cadres). This means there is no mobilization strategy coordinated from the national office. Instead, many, often small, contentious actions are carried out as the movement approaches a pattern of "unorganized unemployed". Since 2014, hunger strikes, in which UDC activists demand jobs for themselves, have grown more numerous. No political measures, beyond the call for job creation and regional development, are demanded, which is at odds with the national office's declarations calling for broad changes. Yet, given the union's limited material resources, the national level often tries to provide support, especially through media attention, for fellow activists at the local level. That the decentralized network absorbs resources without pursuing political goals explains the union's lack of political influence.

24 Interview Salam al-Ayari, Tunis, March 2015.

OPPORTUNITY AND THREAT PERCEPTION: THE INTERPLAY WITH THE NEW POLITICAL ORDER

With Ben Ali's fall, and the onset of the democratization in Tunisia, the newly won freedom of speech and freedom of association increased opportunities for expressing discontent, for both activists in the Gafsa mining basin, as well as UDC members. The number of potential political allies jumped, as new parties mushroomed throughout the country. However, unemployed movements still distrusted parties, fearing exploitation. Nonetheless, political representatives were being elected freely and fairly, nourishing hope that future governments would be more responsive and open to civil society actors. The experience of both movements was similar: ad-hoc, low level negotiations with state officials (mostly at the governorate level), providing limited concessions with no structural change. In marginalized regions, the state remains absent, giving the impression that the unemployed have to take care of themselves; protesting for jobs remain the only apparent way to secure a living.

The 2011 uprising opened up the political space, which enabled new forms of contentious action. Gafsa activists perceived this new freedom as state weakness, allowing for disruptive forms of protest for personal interests, without the shelter of civil society institutions or political support. The UDC, by contrast, used their newfound freedoms to expand their organization. Finally, as a legal entity, its membership was increased to 16,000, of which 2,000 to 3,000 are considered active members.[25] Offices were established in every governorate. Internal elections were held with Salam al-Ayari – the long-time informal leader of the UDC – who became its official general secretary. Al-Ayari took to the media, speaking on behalf of unemployed graduates. Internal and external communication is now openly carried out via new social media, mainly Facebook. Thus, the increased political freedom spurred the fragmentation of the protest movement in Gafsa, juxtaposed with higher levels of organization within the UDC.

Looking for potential political allies to support unemployed demands, the UDC found its match in the left-wing Popular Front (Jabha Sha'abiyya) bloc, led by Hamma Hammami. Yet it remains a weak partner, holding only 15 of the 217 parliamentary seats. It had not joined any government since 2011, refusing cooperation with the ruling Nidaa Tunis, for fear of cooptation. The UDC has avoided identification with the Popular Front by not endorsing Hammami's presidential campaign. For the Gafsa activists, even an informal leader of the 2008 uprising, the local UGTT activist Adnan Hajji (elected to parliament in 2014) ceased to be a unifying figure when he tried to stop regional protest waves in 2015. This contrasts with the uprising of 2008, when most opposition parties were illegal and weak, vis-à-vis Ben Ali's repression. Still, the Tunisian Communist Workers Party (now the Workers' Party, and member of the Popular Front), and the Tajdid Movement were able to support the protests in the mining basin, mainly through the latter's newspaper al-Tariq al-Jadid, which covered the security crackdowns, and lawsuits against activists. Party support also helped unify the movement, enabling negotiation. The result was a release of imprisoned activists, and some measures favoring the young unemployed, and regional development.[26]

One explanation for why cooperation with certain political actors was feasible under authoritarian rule, but not in post-2011 Tunisia, is that parties remained paralyzed by restrictions inherited from the Ben Ali regime, while facing competition from an influx of new parties and associations. As a result, the former lost influence on young protesters, contributing to the fragmentation of the protest movement. Still, it is striking that activists overwhelmingly mistrusted political parties, and the trade union federation: In interviews, the unemployed activists recurrently expressed their skepticism. One activist asserted that, "the political parties and the UGTT only pursue their own interests. We only see them during their electoral campaigns. They use us for the affairs of the politicians."[27]

This crisis of trust influenced the perception of opportunities and threats (of exploitation), and might also be the result of a general disappointment with politicians, who apparently have not delivered anything more than promises to take care of unemployment. Furthermore, the instability of governments – with six successive cabinets since 2011 – does not augur for the implementation of a long-term political program. Activists explicitly said

25 Interview with Salam al-Ayari, Tunis, March 2015.

26 The governorate made promises to create 2,700 jobs and encourage the private sector to invest in the region. Sustainable development was never achieved (Hibou 2015: 317-319).

27 Interview with unorganized unemployed activist, Redeyef, August 2015.

their relation to political parties is solely pragmatic. "I only look for employment," one explained, "nothing else is of interest for me. I do not have any other worries; neither politics nor political parties are of interest to me."[28]

They refuse cooperation with the UDC because they consider it politicized, as part of the left camp, because of its strong ties with the student union UGET, the UGTT, and leftist parties. Unorganized unemployed activists think that the UDC can settle their issues more easily. In summary, despite greater political opportunities, and potential political allies, unorganized unemployed activists feel that the political system does not provide access, or realistic chances, to realizing their aims. Therefore, they resort to contentious actions, especially by disruptive protests.

The UDC shares this disappointment with the impotency of successive governments. Its seemingly natural alliance with the leftist camp garners it support from the Popular Front – mostly in public solidarity displays, but also with legal support for UDC activists facing state repression. Yet the UDC also shares a fear of being exploited by political actors: first used to create pressure on the street, then neglected during policy making (Antonakis-Nashif, 2016, p. 139). The major ruling parties, Nidaa Tunis and al-Nahda, are regarded as too neoliberal. Additionally, the dividing line between Islamist and secular forces makes any cooperation with al-Nahda unthinkable for the UDC.[29]

Given the obvious crisis of political representation among unemployed activists, we find a push for unmediated interaction with the state. Unemployed activists in Gafsa feel that political parties and civil society actors support politicized youth only, rather than ordinary Tunisians, and therefore refer to direct interaction. "We have the capacity to negotiate with the authorities ourselves," said one unemployed graduate, "we do not have any trust, neither in political parties, nor in the UGTT or UDC."[30] By the same token, one could also argue that this stems from political actors' strategies. It is usually the governor who selects the most active protesters, and starts negotiating job distribution, thereby splitting protesters into small groups. This incentivized the mobilized unemployed to adapt their strategies by organizing around more resilient units, such as family. From their perspective, this has increased their individual chances of employment. In contrast to 2008, when six trade unionists were selected to negotiate with the government on their behalf, young protesters now negotiate with the local (and occasionally national) authorities[31] without intermediaries, simultaneously building pressure through disruptive, and at times, violent forms of protest: blocking roads and railways, halting phosphate production, hunger strikes, and suicide.[32]

In marginalized regions, unemployed protesters have struggled to gain direct access to the state. Infrastructure remains derelict, while state institutions do not work properly, or are simply absent. In the city of Redeyef, no police station can be found, youth clubs lack basic equipment, and protestors occupy municipal properties. "The only project implemented in Om Larayes, since 2015, was the closure of the factory Yasaki," said one interviewee.[33] Another claimed that, "in Redeyef, the state does not exist. The delegate[34] exercises his function from a distance, from the headquarters of the governorate at Gafsa city."[35]

Direct negotiations with state authorities occasionally took place with the UDC, and always on an ad-hoc basis. Often meetings were cancelled, or postponed by state officials. In our analysis of Facebook posts, we found that other kinds of state responses – neglect and repression, by and large – exacerbated tensions to the extent of triggering protests.[36] From 2011 to 2015, almost 25% of all protests dealt with state responses, especially in the period after 2014. These were motivated either by the complete neglect of fellow activists that necessitated rallying for publicity, in solidarity with union comrades, or increasing levels of state repression. Imprisonment of protesters, and violent dispersals of sit-ins, only caused more protests.

28 Interview with unorganized unemployed activist, Om Larayes, August 2015.
29 Interview both with UDC and al-Nahda members. For more on the Islamist versus secularist cleavage that dominated the Tunisian transformation process until late 2013 see Boubekeur 2016.
30 Focus group with unemployed graduates, Sit-in in Redeyef, January 2016.
31 Ministerial delegation to Gafsa, April, 23 2015; meetings of Kamel Jandoubi, Minister for Relations with Constitutional Institutions, Civil Society and Human Rights; as well as interviews with young protesters, May 26-7, 2015, in Tunis.
32 Houssem Ben Azaz from Om Larayes committed suicide by self-immolation on February 4, 2016.The most unconventional protest form was a march toward Algeria with participants threatening to give up Tunisian citizenship.
33 Focus group interview with unemployed graduates and demonstrators at the delegation of Om Larayes, February 5, 2016.
34 This is an appointed state official responsible for a sub-regional "delegation" serving as the intermediary between the governorate and the smallest administrative unit, the so-called sector (imada).
35 Interview with unorganized unemployed activist, Redeyef, August 2015.
36 For a conceptual framework on state responses to social movements see Weipert-Fenner and Wolff (2015), and Weipert-Fenner and Wolff: "Repertoires of Counter-contention: Conceptualizing institutional responses to social movements." Available at: https://bretterblog.wordpress.com/2016/10/26/repertoires-of-counter-contention-conceptualizing-institutional-responses-to-social-movements/.

OUTLOOK: UNEMPLOYED ACTIVISM AND POLITICAL CHANGE

Despite increased opportunities to express grievances, activists in both movements today feel acute frustration. "Nothing has changed" is how most sum up the political transformation process. From the state, they get neglect and repression, which increasingly inspires dramatic protest events, such as hunger strikes. Interest in the grievances of unemployed activists seems non-existent.

This stands in sharp contrast to the Tunisian democratization process's novel resolution for a number of social justice questions. Article 12 of the 2014 constitution, for instance, obligates the positive discrimination of marginalized regions. The transitional justice law covers economic crimes, and violations of social and economic rights, in unprecedented ways. For example, not only individuals but also entire regions can be victimized.[37]

Employment has thus been recognized as a top priority. Around 90,000 new state jobs were created in 2011 alone.[38] In Gafsa's state-run phosphate company, employment increased from 5,000 in 2007 to almost 30,000 employees today. Politicians did react. Yet in the first case (2007), al-Nahda allegedly handed out public sector jobs to reward its clientele.[39] Regarding the latter figure, it is clear that this employment spike, at the CPG, was a short-run maneuver to assuage protesters. For proof, consider that the additions were not an externality of growth in the industry – phosphate production dropped from 8.8 million tons/year in 2010, to 3 million after 2011. The addition of CPG employees thus ought not to be considered as part of any genuine effort to fulfill the obligations of Article 12.[40]

President Beji Caid Essebsi asked for patience when he took his post in 2014. Unemployment would not be solved "within 90 days," he said.[41] In 2015, during the Gafsa protests – and after terrorist attacks on tourism hot spots – Essebsi portrayed the protesters as instigators of chaos, and threats to national security, enabling terrorists to further destabilize the country (Marzouki, 2015). During the massive mobilization of January 2016, he made the same suggestions, but then asked the government to "prepare a program to deal with the crisis of unemployment, and improve the situation of the interior regions."[42] Concurrently, he blamed parties for "agendas aiming at exploiting the demands of the young unemployed in order to destabilize the country,"[43] suggesting that the Popular Front would use the unemployed activists for their cause. This diverse set of discursive strategies reflects an indecisive handling of unemployment, for both types of unemployed activists. The government asks for time, promising changes without implementing them, and then delegitimizes protesters as either political puppets, or permissive causes of terrorism.

37 The FTDES together with Avocats Sans Frontiers filed a submission to the Truth and Dignity Commission for the region of Kasserine, complaining of its systematic marginalization in the pre-2011 period. See "[ESCR-JUST] Transitional Justice in Tunisia -- marginalization of a region," ESCR-Net, https://www.escr-net.org/node/366232.

38 Institut national des statistiques (INS): https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1vIRSbcJKTrPSDTyBrHcr_NKALkxSb-pms4IocPBMo34/edit#gid=842205693.

39 See for instance: http://www.essahafa.tn/index.php?id=62&tx_ttnews%5Bpointer%5D=66&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=54976&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=f6c63d658d.

40 Another example is the May 2015 action plan for Gafsa. Then-Prime Minister Habib Essid announced the plan to stop the ongoing wave of contention. To local activists, the plan was not innovative; it relied on the old mix of promises for new jobs to be created (1,500) before 2018; for consultations between the national and regional level; and between political and civil society actors; activation of environmental organizations to reduce pollution; an audit of the CPG according to environmental protection standards; and an evaluation of those responsible at the regional level, followed by replacement of inefficient employees. See https://www.tunisienumerique.com/tunisie-gafsa-les-decisions-du-conseil-ministeriel-pour-debloquer-la-situation-dans-le-bassin-minier/.

41 See "The President of the Republic on the Program Today al-Yom al-Thamin the Tunisian Dialogue Channel," Tunisian Dialogue Channel, May 11, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_o_YjbDjrbQ.

42 "Baji Caid Essebsi: Tunisia is targeted," Qafsa Broadcasting, December 22, 2016, http://www.radiogafsa.tn/الباجي-قائد-السبسي-تونس-مستهدفة-في-أمن/

43 "Address to the nation by President Essebsi after stoppages in a number states," Hannibal TV, January 22, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BErtI5wuRo8.

How can political actors continue to ignore, repress, or halfheartedly engage with the massive discontent of the unemployed? Part of the answer seems to lie in two dynamics uncovered here. Though protests in marginalized regions, at times, mobilized huge numbers of people, they fragmented, and lost their capacity for wide-reaching change. The only organized actor, the Union of Unemployed Graduates, strengthened its internal cohesion. While remaining comparably small, they lacked capacity to build political pressure. Both movement types struggle with a lack of trust, a fear of being exploited, and a perception that the most promising opportunities are protests limited to apolitical demands for personal employment.

The negative externalities of this strategy include a waning support from a public that has grown tired of disruptive protests hampering their daily business. This makes it difficult for politicians, assuming their willingness, to find long-term sustainable solutions in negotiations with diffuse actor groups, rather than coherent organizations. Only the national-level UDC could be regarded as a possible negotiating partner. Yet the mistrust of the unorganized unemployed vis-à-vis the UDC – as well as the decentralized structure of the union itself – limits its capacity to negotiate on behalf of a broader unemployed movement. The current state of affairs, thus, seems to be a missed opportunity, given that there is much common ground between the two movement types: on grievances, a joint desire to find paths toward sustainable regional development, increase in job opportunities, and fair access to employment.

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