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Published online: 13 Nov 2018.

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Unemployed mobilisation in times of democratisation: the Union of Unemployed Graduates in post-Ben Ali Tunisia

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ABSTRACT
The Union of Unemployed Graduates (UDC) is the only organisation of unemployed individuals in Tunisia that operates nation-wide. Though it grew in membership and outreach after 2011, it has failed to develop into a key actor for the increasingly mobilised unemployed, who do not join or build formal organisations. The latter reject co-operation because they perceive the UDC to be weak and 'politicized'. The article examines this assessment using interviews and focus groups conducted during extensive fieldwork and Facebook posts made by the unemployed union. An analysis of UDC's internal dynamics and of the precautions it takes to remain autonomous from societal and political actors only partially supports this accusation. Instead, fragmentation is better explained by state responses that reward isolated protesters with limited demands rather than negotiating with actors in organisations to reach sustainable solutions.

Introduction

While the political system in Tunisia has been undergoing a fairly successful process of democratisation, socio-economic protests[1] have reached record highs: an analysis based on the *Armed Conflict Location &Event Data Project* (ACLED) database (Raleigh et al. 2010) showed that, in 2016, they outnumbered political protests and even surpassed the number of protest events measured during the 2010/2011 revolution (Vatthauer and Weipert-Fenner 2017, 11).[2] On its own, this observation might not seem particularly

astonishing considering that Tunisia's democratic opening came with a tremendous increase in political and civil rights that have allowed for more public protests and free speech. What is remarkable, however, is that the sharp increase in socio-economic protests did not occur immediately after the fall of dictatorship but rather four years later. It coincided with a growing disappointment in the socio-economic output of democracy, reflected, for instance, in the Arab Barometer survey.[3] Besides workers protesting for better working conditions and higher salaries, the ACLED data showed that these protests are largely driven by unemployed individuals. At the same time that their protests were increasing in number, protests by the unemployed became more fragmented and single-issue focused: their major demand is personal employment in the public sector or the civil service (Vatthauer and Weipert-Fenner 2017, 10, 13). Another study based on ethnographic fieldwork in Tunisia revealed that they are mostly conducted by actors who operate outside of formal organisations; they are spontaneous, horizontal, locally limited and have increasingly tended to rely on disruptive techniques such as blocking roads or railways. Many protests continue for weeks or months at a time, with protesters making use of their main resources: time and public space. Furthermore, it is striking that active co-operation with societal and political actors which existed prior to the revolution has ceased (Hamdi and Weipert-Fenner 2017).[4]

Given this general trend of growing fragmentation among unemployed protesters, this article investigates the only organisation of unemployed that operates nation-wide, the Union of Unemployed Graduates (better known by the French acronym, UDC – *Union des Diplômés Chômeurs*). The article asks why the UDC has neither become a unifying or mediating actor nor a role model for the autonomous unemployed protesters who constitute the vast majority of unemployed mobilisation.

The origins of the UDC date back to 2006. The unemployed organisation started with only a few hundred activists who demanded a reform of nontransparent and corrupt procedures through which public-sector jobs were distributed among university graduates.[5] Operating illegally during the Ben Ali regime, the most prominent act of mobilisation was the UDC's participation in the popular uprising in the Gafsa mining basin in 2008. The organisation helped sustain and organise the protests in co-operation with local trade unionists.[6] It also had an impact at the discursive level: the UDC's major slogan '*shughl, hurriyya, karama wataniyya*' (work, freedom and national dignity) was adopted and widely chanted in the 2008 uprising in the Gafsa region. During the 2010/2011 uprising as well, 'work, freedom, and national dignity' became a central slogan heard from the outset of the revolution. It served as a perfect umbrella phrase for the more socially and economically motivated protesters from the Tunisian *hinterland* as well as for protesters from coastal regions who focused on political rights (Allal 2013; Chomiak 2011).

Finally attaining legal registration after the revolution, the UDC expanded its membership base along with its regional and local offices while also developing internal democratic structures and a set of broader political demands. During interviews for this study, however, independent protesters voiced two reasons as to why they refrained from co-operating with the UDC: the organisation is too weak and too politicised.[7] Both reasons require explanation and contextualisation, especially in accounting for why autonomous protesters, whose mobilisation base has been shrinking to the family or neighbourhood level (cf. Hamdi and Weipert-Fenner 2017), believe they are stronger when demonstrating by themselves than as part of a relatively well-established organisation.

Seeking to identify the reasons as to why the organisation has been incapable of becoming an influential actor, this article first introduces the broader social meaning of unemployment, particularly for university graduates.[8] Second, it analyses UDC activism since 2011 along with its major demands and other internal developments that may account for fragmentation among the unemployed. Third, the article analyses UDC's relationships with societal and political actors, reflecting the extent to which the UDC can be regarded as 'politicized', a term used to delegitimize an actor for only pursuing partisan goals instead of the public good and for instrumentalizing others for his/her own interests. A closer look into state responses to unemployed protests in the fourth section helps explain this observation: the incentive structure inherited from Tunisia's authoritarian past and set by successive governments since 2011 rewards 'non-political' protests, i.e. protests that do not raise demands for broad political change and are carried out by small autonomous groups of activists on the local level and do not form alliances. Yet, the blame for a lack of positive results through cooperation rests with parties and organisations. Strikingly, even local UDC activists act according to this pattern. The concluding section contextualises these findings by considering other unemployed organisations in the MENA region.

The study draws from fieldwork in Tunisia, semi-structured interviews, focus groups and participant observations to reconstruct the activists' interpretations of their situation and the meaning they ascribe to their grievances. Interviews with political and societal actors concerning their perception of the UDC complement this data.[9] In addition, an event data set was established using UDC Facebook posts made by regional offices and by the national office for the period between September 2011 and June 2015. As Facebook has become a major medium of internal and external communication for the UDC since 2011, a collection of data based on UDC posts served to create an overview of the development of activities, of the specific form of activities (particularly different forms of protest), their regional distribution, and the claims made; additional desk research was conducted on every single event to find further information. As media coverage about UDC

activities has been fairly limited (which is discussed later as a lack of public responsiveness to UDC mobilisation), media analysis did not generate comprehensive additional data e.g. about state responses or reactions from societal actors. I therefore rely on 226 protest events and public declarations in total and use them to gain deeper insights into internal activities in the section on mobilisation. As the dataset does not present information on the impact of the single events in terms of number of participants or bystanders, it only provides one additional, albeit limited, source of information on UDC activism since 2011.

The social meaning of unemployment

In Tunisia, as in other resource-poor countries in North Africa, authoritarian regimes pursued a state-led developmental model in the 1960s that included jobs for university graduates as part of a 'social contract' (Hertog 2016). Until the 1980s and early 1990s, the public and governmental sector absorbed young people willing to enter the job market. This was interpreted as the 'authoritarian bargain' (Desai, Olofsgard, and Yousef 2009): in exchange for political loyalty, the state ensured welfare and jobs. The latter also provided access to social protections such as health insurance and pension funds, while also presenting education as a guarantee for social mobility (cf. Hafaïedh 2000). When Tunisia embarked on neoliberal reforms in the late 1980s, however, privatisation and liberalisation reduced the number of jobs that the regime could distribute via the public sector. This particularly affected university graduates: budget cuts led to lower investment in public education, creating a gap between mass academic institutions and a small number of *grandes écoles* for a privileged minority. The option of studying abroad – most importantly in Europe – was increasingly closed for ordinary Tunisians. Along with the diminishing quality of education, the number of university graduates on the job market increased drastically, from 121,000 in 1997 to 336,000 in 2007 (Timoumi 2013, 118).

With shrinking job opportunities in the civil service sector and growing numbers of graduates, unemployment rates among university graduates rose from 3.8 per cent (1994) and 8.6 per cent (1999) to 14.0 per cent (2005) and 22.9 per cent (2010) (Touhami 2012). The official total unemployment rate remained between 13–14 per cent in the 2000s. After the ouster of Ben Ali, unemployment rose sharply to 19 per cent in 2011, hovering around 15 per cent since 2012.[10] However, the share of unemployed graduates increased dramatically to 30 per cent and has remained at this high level ever since.[11] In addition, educational meritocracy in job distribution became increasingly supplanted by clientelism, a different social mechanism for distribution. Here, familial and regional solidarities overshadowed qualifications,

with only a minority enjoying privileges and the majority feeling excluded (Hafaïedh 2000).

With these statistics in mind, one specific aspect to stress about this type of unemployed movement (the movement of unemployed university graduates) is that the activists had never been employed before, at least not in their understanding of proper employment. As such, they therefore claim a right to work that they have never held. In the understanding of unemployed protesters, this right is violated if they are forced to work in the informal sector, are only temporarily contracted in the formal sector or have a job that does not correspond to their level of academic education (Hamdi and Weipert-Fenner 2017).[12] They demand employment in the public sector and civil service, since such positions still offer social benefits hardly found in the private sector and certainly not in the informal sector – socio-economic benefits to which they feel entitled due to their higher education. As Hertog (2016, 14) argues, this expectation may be a legacy of former populist policies. The activists who were interviewed, however, held absolutely no degree of romanticism for the times under the dictatorship. They exhibited no willingness to forgo their newly acquired political liberties in exchange for employment, rather seeking to fight for socio-economic rights by using these new political rights.

In contrast to many other cases of unemployed movements outside of the MENA region (e.g. Chabanet and Faniel 2012; Giugni 2008; Reiss and Perry 2011), the root of grievances is not based on *exclusion* from the labour market, but on the imposed situation of *waiting for inclusion*. This phenomenon is part of a larger social issue, often labelled as 'waithood' (Dhillon and Yousef 2009; Singerman 2007) which predominates delayed adulthood due to the lack of resources, most importantly work. Without regular income, other aspects of adulthood, such as founding a family through marriage or moving out of the parents' home, are all put on hold. Back in 2000, Hafaïedh described how waiting had become the pervasive situation among university graduates, supported by a state system created to cover up the status of waithood through internships or annual recruitment exams (those who did not pass merely waited for the next round). In the context of the authoritarian social contract, waithood also reflected a submission to the state as a welfare provider (Hafaïedh 2000).

Young people stuck in the phase of adolescence were long associated with passivity, and agency was only found in individual coping strategies. Honwana (2014) finds collective action against waithood to hold transformative potential, though 'only' as spontaneous protests without sustained and organised mobilisation. Unemployed mobilisation must be understood against this backdrop. Activists try to overcome waithood, first, by recognising the situation for what it is: rather than seeking excuses for informal economic activities or waiting for the next round of recruitment exams, they define themselves as

unemployed. The same holds true for individuals with temporary contracts and jobs perceived as inadequate for university graduates. Unemployment has therefore become an element of identity in a political struggle that aims to reclaim the right to work to escape 'waithood'. As UDC general secretary Salam al-Ayari stated: 'You have to be active for the right to work. You cannot wait for it. There are people who have been waiting for 17 years.'[13]

Finally, unemployment is connected to another major issue: development, especially in the marginalised southern regions and the interior parts of Tunisia. Before the revolution in 2010, 90 per cent of new jobs and enterprises were created in the coastal governorates of Tunis, Bizerte, Nabeul, Sousse, Monastir and Sfax (Boughzala and Hamdi 2014, 6). Resource extraction (phosphate and oil) along with agriculture have been the primary sources of employment in Tunisia's *hinterland*, yet the majority of profits from these sectors continue to be channelled into the centres of economic prosperity until today. Although successive governments have made attempts since the 1960s to overcome the regional divide by promoting education and infrastructure, this declared aim has never been achieved. The interior regions fail to attract private and foreign direct investment and even public funds flow to centres of prosperity to a large extent. Improvements in education in the marginalised regions have not led to job creation, but rather to a greater awareness of persisting inequality (Hibou 2015; Vatthauer and Weipert-Fenner 2017). This fact is directly reflected in the activism of unemployed graduates in Tunisia, especially since 2011.

Growing stronger, remaining weak: UDC's internal development since 2011

After the toppling of the Ben Ali regime, UDC's membership has today swelled to 16,000 (of a population of 10 million), with between 2,000 and 3,000 active members.[14] The organisation has also developed internal democratic procedures. In 2013, an executive board was elected with founding member and long-term UDC leader Salam al-Ayari officially becoming the general secretary. Mobilisation increased in spite of the UDC's very limited resources. According to the Facebook posts, there were 30 protest events in 2012, 42 in 2013, 56 in 2014 and a sharp increase to 80 in the first half of 2015 alone. Yet, these numbers appear relatively small compared to protest event numbers of the unemployed outside of the UDC. For instance, in the governorate of Gafsa, where the majority of protests are staged by the autonomous unemployed, the Tunisian NGO *Forum Tunisien des Droits Économiques et Sociaux* (FTDES) counted 386 events between March 2014 and June 2015.[15]

New resources such as social media, which have been freely accessible since 2011, have been used to establish networks and promote communication among them. Rather than investing time and money into creating

websites or printed publications, the UDC mostly uses Facebook to share information about its activities. Both the national and the local and regional offices publish declarations and open letters, post videos and share links among one another. This organisational professionalisation has been achieved with very limited financial resources and is based on volunteer work. It succeeded in attracting media attention for the general secretary, who has become the UDC's well-known public face. Apart from this, however, UDC activists perceive public attention as relatively low, particularly for single protest events.[16] This is also reflected in the claims made: based on the Facebook data set, the demand for employment and a critique of recruitment procedures were the most important issues raised through UDC mobilisation (see below). Yet from 2014 on, the share of activities driven by solidarity with unheard protests increased, with two thirds of solidarity protests being staged in 2015,[17] placing even greater pressure on an organisation with very limited resources. Also, the forms of activism have developed in a way that reflects a need to draw more attention: sit-ins and demonstrations were the major form of mobilisation after 2011 but, from 2014 onwards, the growing number of hunger strikes underlines the fact that unemployed graduates see few other means of creating pressure on the government other than through their own lives and health.[18] The UDC also has not gained access to any material resources from the state. Tunisian politicians have never resorted to the strategy of providing it with state resources in order to placate the situation and eventually co-opt the organisation.[19] Consequently, the UDC has never had much to offer and cannot claim any political victories, which have fostered the image of weakness.

Based on its Facebook posts, a closer look at the demands raised by the UDC in other forms of collective action uncovers three major issues: (1) the call for employment (38 per cent), (2) the reform of recruitment procedures (27 per cent) and (3) a critique of state responses to protests (24 per cent). These exhibit a large degree of overlap with general issues related to unemployment. Furthermore, they help translate the grievances held by most unemployed into political demands that can be channelled into the political discourse and could imbue the movement with additional strength for achieving its aims. During the interviews, the educational system was also heavily criticised for not properly preparing students for the job market, instead churning out ever more university graduates without a real prospect for decent employment afterwards.[20] Yet, this topic has not played a role in any actual UDC activities, which might be due to the low degree of public resonance it enjoys, particularly among non-graduates.

Regarding the first topic, the demand for employment covers the call for personal employment raised on the local level as well as a general call for job creation. Local activism by the UDC, which is mainly conducted independently of the national office, often follows the same logic: activists stage

protests and (increasingly) hunger strikes for their own employment and as a last hope for addressing their personal grievances.[21] The national leadership, however, has criticised successive governments for creating unproductive jobs and distributing them to protest actors simply to alleviate the situation rather than recruiting the best people for sustainable jobs.[22] This demand is often connected to the topic of regional development in Tunisia's marginalised interior. As the UDC has been present in these regions from the beginning, this would, in principle, provide grounds for co-operation with other unemployed at the local level which could turn into a powerful pillar of the organisation. Given this connection of employment and regional development, the dividing line between the UDC and independent unemployed protesters seems even more surprising and calls for further explanation.

Second, non-transparent procedures for creating lists of job prospects or new employees and their recurrent manipulation has sparked protest actions. For the UDC, the *concours* system – annual recruitment exams that are meant to identify the most qualified candidates – is the major point of critique. Meritocracy is promised but not implemented; as such, one regular demand is to make these procedures more transparent, such as by integrating a UDC member within the supervisory board of these exams. In spite of some specificities of the *concours* system, corrupt recruitment has also recurrently triggered large-scale unemployed protests without any organisational structures, such as the 2008 Gafsa revolt or the latest major wave of protests from January 2016, starting in Kasserine, and spilling over to other marginalised regions as well as to the capital Tunis.[23]

The third major point raised in UDC activism is the perception that all governments since 2011 have exhibited the same behaviour towards unemployed protesters: neglect and eventual repression. This category mostly increased starting at the end of 2013.[24] Shortly after the revolution, there was, in fact, some political willingness to integrate the UDC. Immediately after the fall of the Ben Ali regime, the UDC became part of the extended Higher Commission for the Fulfillment of Revolutionary Goals, Political Reform, and Democratic Transition, an interim body that managed the early stage of the political transformation process. Yet, political participation would end here. The UDC was not represented in the National Constituent Assembly nor included in the National Dialogue which helped bring the political transition to its successful conclusion and which was fostered by four civil society organisations, including the trade union federation UGTT (Antonakis-Nashif 2016, 138). The Social Dialogue between the UGTT and the employers' association UTICA took place without the presence of the UDC as well. On the regional level, negotiations between governors occasionally take place on an ad-hoc basis, lacking an institutionalised form, and are regularly cancelled or delayed by state actors.

The lack of inclusion and recognition as a negotiation partner has increasingly led to protests by the UDC. The same applies to protests against repression, mainly in the form of the legal prosecution of UDC activists. In interviews, activists claimed that political discourse and mainstream media have sidelined socio-economic claims since the revolution. Instead, the focus had been on the transition to a democratic regime, i.e. on the election and work of the National Constituent Assembly (2011–2014) as well as on the increasing polarisation between the Islamist Party al-Nahda and Nidaa Tunis. As this polarisation turned violent through politically motivated assassinations against left-wing politicians in 2013, and even more so after terrorist attacks in 2015, security questions have assumed greater prominence within public discourse. This eventually resulted in the criminalisation of social movements in general, particularly in Tunisia's marginalised regions. They are portrayed as fuelling disorder and chaos and paving the way for terrorism.[25] This delegitimizing mainstream discourse has contributed to a general fatigue with protests and strikes, which has negatively affected public resonance for unemployed protesters.

In sum, expansion and professionalisation characterised the UDC's post-2011 development. Yet resources remain scarce, political victories few and the size and number of protests of the UDC small compared to autonomous protests. While this might present an impression of weakness to the unemployed outside of the UDC, at the same time, the actual content of protests and their dynamics – i.e. an increase in the number of protests due to the loss of patience with the new political system – shows the strong degree of overlap among all unemployed. In some areas such as reforms to recruitment procedures, unemployed grievances were also translated into political demands. The idea of rallying together to be stronger as a unified actor would appear almost inevitable to the outside observer. Yet, even local UDC activism remains fragmented and isolated from other unemployed protests. This becomes evident when considering the relationships with societal and political actors in the next section.

Politicised or running from politics? UDC's relation with social and political actors

The perception that the UDC is affiliated to politics, held by many unemployed outside of the union, did not emerge out of the blue. The very idea of founding a graduate unemployed organisation was born within the students' union (*Union générale des étudiants de Tunisie* – UGET), and the first UDC activists had all been active UGET members. This accounts for the UDC's high level of organisational skills from the outset, beyond the fact that university graduates generally possess relatively high organisational skills as it is.[26] Not only did UGET provide a pool of previously mobilised individuals willing to join the

UDC after graduation, it also contributed a network of people who had established mutual trust during years of joint activism. The UDC was also able to build on prior experiences with claim-making and draw from a common framework for interpreting the political, social and economic situation of Tunisia. This framework or political orientation, however, has traditionally been leftist (cf. Moore 1965, 175). Today, this agenda includes pronounced criticism of neoliberal policies, especially privatisation and the role of international financial institutions.

The same holds for the trade union federation *Union générale tunisienne du travail* (UGTT), historically an ally of the UGET. Drawing on its legacy of the fight for independence from France, and because of its high, nation-wide organisational capacities, the UGTT retained an important role as a collective actor representing the Tunisian working class, even during the dictatorship – although its leadership was regarded as co-opted by the Ben Ali regime (Beinin 2016, 103; Netterstrøm 2016, 384, 488, 393). Local cadres, in particular, remained impervious to political interference, which led to the perception of the UGTT as the sole organisation in which dissent could be voiced. The trade union federation was an umbrella organisation for various sorts of socio-economic and political claims and provided support and shelter for both the UGET and the UDC (Yousfi 2015, 56–57). The alliance of UGTT, UGET and UDC has served as a natural career of activism through different stages of life in which the UDC represented the bridge from student activism to labour activism.[27]

After 2011, cracks began forming in what once appeared to be a firm political block with which UDC was associated. After the revolution, the UGTT expanded its political role, both as a broker of the National Dialogue and as the official representative of social demands within the Social Dialogue. The tripartite negotiations between the UGTT, the employers' association (*Union tunisienne de l'industrie, du commerce et de l'artisanat* – UTICA) and the government increased the power of the trade union federation, and potentially that of its allies. On the other hand, as Chabanet (2012, 44) noted for the case of France, this form of social dialogue has limited the influence of other organisations and movements and made them dependent on the trade unions. In Tunisia as well, this dependence was increasingly perceived as exploitation by the trade union: UDC activists felt they were being used for creating additional pressure when needed and as soon as the UGTT sat at the negotiation table with political actors, workers' interests, such as the salary gains, were all that mattered and the needs of the unemployed ignored.[28] To some extent, this has been the result of a competition for shares of the state budget, with UGTT firmly rooted in the public sector and the UDC rallying for state employment. But conflict potential between UDC and the UGTT is even broader: the UGTT has adopted an ambivalent view on disruptive unemployed protests due to what it regards as negative side effects on workers: for instance,

when protests block phosphate mining activities in the Gafsa basin or the transportation of phosphate, phosphate processing in Gabes and Sfax is negatively affected, harming workers' interests as well.[29] This negative attitude towards unemployed protests is not directly targeted at the UDC. Local UDC protests usually enjoy at least solidarity from UGTT, in part because they do not employ disruptive techniques that negatively affect workers. UGTT provides space for UDC activism, e.g. when offering rooms in trade union buildings for hunger strikes. The UGTT also publicly expresses solidarity with UDC protests that are ignored by the mainstream media.[30] But by contributing to the negative public opinion of protests, they render it more difficult for the UDC to gain support for their public protests or to win the trust of independent unemployed protesters who see the UGTT as an adversary to their cause, at least at the regional and national level.[31]

The alliance of the leftist societal forces has seen its ups and downs in terms of cohesion. Relations with its other close ally, the student union UGET, have also suffered since the opening of opportunity structures for activism. UDC activists complained about the growing arrogance of UGET and its decreasing willingness to co-operate. The unemployed activists occasionally felt as though UGET was not in need of co-operation partners anymore.[32] This supports the general observation in Tunisia that the removal of the common enemy, the Ben Ali regime, decreased pressure on these organisations to co-operate. Since 2011, mobilisation against the Nahda-led government, especially during the summer 2013 after the assassinations of left-wing politicians, constituted reason to rally together once again. As soon as the general crisis was over, the alliance weakened and diverging interests drove left-wing allies away from one another.[33] In sum, the assessment that the UDC continues to be part of a larger alliance of leftist organisations seems fair. Concurrently, however, the UDC leadership is well aware of conflicting interests and tries to retain its autonomy, especially from the powerful trade union federation.

The fear of being instrumentalized is even more widespread in regard to political actors, despite the rapid development of the political landscape in post-Ben Ali Tunisia. New parties formed and old parties re-formed (cf. Boubekeur 2016), while left-wing parties that represented potential co-operation partners for the UDC could act freely and form an alliance, the Popular Front. As the UDC constitutes part of the leftist, secular camp, it is clearly associated with the left-wing party alliance 'Popular Front' (*jabha shaabiyya*) led by Hamma Hammami, which generally supports the cause of the UDC and regularly expresses solidarity with its activities.[34] Yet, the alliance remains weak, holding only 15 of the 217 parliamentary seats, and it has also willingly refrained from joining any cabinet as a junior coalition partner. UDC activists, in turn, recurrently feel instrumentalized by the Popular Front, seeing themselves as being used to provide local support

and mobilise the anger of the unemployed youth (Antonakis-Nashif 2016, 139). Still, the UDC has few political alternatives in seeking allies, as is evident when considering the major political forces that have come to dominate the political scene of Tunisia. This landscape is marked by two cleavages: Islamist versus secular forces, on the one hand, and a classic right-left wing cleavage on the other. Along the first cleavage between Islamists and secular forces, which has polarised the country and nearly led to a similar blockade as experienced in Egypt, UDC sees itself clearly as anti-Islamist. This opinion is shared by the Nahda party that – at least at the national level – regards the UDC as part of the secular-leftist camp and, as such, as an unsuitable co-operation partner for resolving the issue of unemployment.[35] The counterweight to al-Nahda that emerged in the years of political transformation, Nidaa Tunis, has become the major anti-Islamist force. At the same time, it comprises many former regime elites and is mostly regarded as business-friendly, in particular to old crony networks. The few left-wing forces that joined Nidaa Tunis did not have any impact on economic policies (Boubekeur 2016, 121–122). Consequently, Nidaa Tunis lies to the right of the right-left cleavage. This also holds true for al-Nahda, which favours free-market economics with a limited role of the state in its political outlook (Kienle 2015, 7).[36]

Actors harbouring right-wing, business-oriented political preferences or preferences for Islamism might not perceive of the UDC as their first choice – though such preferences were generally absent among the independent unemployed protesters. This is remarkable in regards to Islamism: among the autonomous protesters, Islamists did not play any role at all, as observed through the field research conducted and explicitly stated by unemployed activists in interviews. Given the fact that the UDC is actually part of a political camp that also shares many important aspects with the unemployed protesters outside any formal organisation, without political alternatives at hand, it seems all the more astonishing that the latter do not desire even loose co-operation with the UDC. The actual reason for this, as I argue in the next section, lies in the general form of protest that governments have fostered over the years, giving benefits to autonomous, 'non-political' and purely 'social' protests.

The effects of state responses: rewards for fragmentation

So far, the article has considered factors relating to the mobilisation of the unemployed themselves in order to identify why the only organisation in this field, the UDC, has remained isolated from the majority of fragmented unemployed protests. A closer look at the effects on mobilisation resulting from state responses to unemployed protests helps to clarify how the dynamics of contentious politics have shaped the rationale of unemployed

protesters. As Beatrice Hibou described in relation to the Gafsa mining basin, there is a striking continuity of how state actors, particularly national governments, reacted to unemployed protests before and after the process of democratisation started. She points out that the general response is to ignore and neglect socio-economic problems and even protests as long as possible (Hibou 2015, 339). The situation can shift and be perceived as intolerable when protesters attract public attention: either because of their sheer numbers, particularly when spontaneous diffusion leads to simultaneous protests and regional or national waves of protest (such as the January protests in 2016[37]). Attention can also be garnered by disruptive techniques that cause annoyance for the broader public, such as by blocking roads or railways. Another strategy is to stage hunger strikes, though activists usually only manage to gain attention after a few weeks, at the minimum. In such cases, governments begin to offer concessions by promising development projects, which, in most cases, never materialise, or, more tangibly, by engaging in dialogue.

Observations from the field highlight the arbitrary nature of these dialogues, with tiny groups of local activists gaining the opportunity to speak with members of the national cabinet.[38] It is not at all clear why a specific group is granted access to decision-makers while others are excluded. This arbitrary, ad-hoc integration is limited to small groups with very specific demands, mostly employment for members of that specific group of protesters beyond any economic or developmental strategy. Employment does not appear to be a right but is rather granted top-down, underlining the great power asymmetry in these kinds of negotiations. The selection of negotiation partners can also be regarded as a divide-and-rule strategy that increases competition among different groups while also rewarding fragmented protests that shy away from broader demands or forms of organisations that could be considered 'political'. Whether this is a conscious decision or an appeasement strategy shaped by path dependency is hard to tell; yet the effect is clear: the only ones who get access to decision-makers and, in some cases, actually achieve their final goal – state employment – are those who do not build alliances with other local unemployed groups or the UDC. In this sense, national and regional political leaders set the incentive structure for the unemployed in such a way that rewards fragmentation and punishes building alliances and organisations.[39]

The paradoxical observation is that, while trying to present themselves as 'non-political' and abide by the old logic of contentious politics, unemployed activists explicitly touch upon political issues in their critique of clientelist networks and the corruption involved in job distribution. Jobs are still regarded as being distributed either to existing clients (i.e. family, clan members) or in exchange for money. Yet, instead of criticising this way of top-down employment, in the interviews, the unemployed stated that protests were the only

resource they had to trade in an exchange relationship that they see as their sole access to employment.

Prior to the revolution, repression in the form of violent crack-downs by security forces was the ultimate instrument used against protesters that the regime perceived as a threat. This would seem to be the underlying meaning of 'political' protest: an event with organised actors that can unify various groups, including those with a particular political agenda, and eventually build an alliance against the regime. Yet repression is not an option available to current governments, at least in the form of wide-spread physical violence. Many UDC activists expressed a feeling of increased repression, yet by legal means in the form of the arrest and prosecution of protesters.[40] However, this implies that ignoring and granting concessions are the only options left from the old repertoire of state responses when dealing with unemployed protests. New governments appear to be resorting to just these practices, creating a vicious cycle that instigates more and more protests. They all focus on state employment beyond any public debate about the role the state should have in the economy or about potential private sector reforms to create decent working conditions.

The dynamics of contentious politics have already led to a tremendous increase in expenditures since 2011 and have placed a huge burden on the limited state budget.[41] International financial institutions are increasingly pushing for a reduction of public sector employees. But in contrast to the era of the dictatorship, Hamza Meddeb has shown that the possibilities of distributing jobs in the private sector also shrank in the post-2011 era (2015). Under Ben Ali, businessmen were 'responsive' to demands for job creation (on the level of individual cases), as they depended on political good will. 'Give and take' was their motto, and the ruling party RCD was the network through which this relationship was managed. With the dissolution of the party, no other network has taken its place to mediate between private entrepreneurs and the jobless. Not even al-Nahda, as a fairly well-organized political actor, has been able to do so (Meddeb 2015, 351–353).

As this interplay of protests and state responses traces its roots to the times of the dictatorship, it becomes clear why being 'politicized' is a major obstacle in the eyes of the protesters. The label jeopardises their chances of success and may even increase the risk of repression. This is deeply rooted in the mindset of activists, and in that of the UDC. At the local level, they generally abide by the script described here, demanding access to state actors such as the governor or a minister in order to request employment.

Conclusion

In its search for reasons as to why the UDC was incapable of becoming a key actor for the mobilised unemployed, the article commenced by providing an

introduction to the broader social meaning of unemployment, particularly for university graduates. Second, it looked into UDC's activism since 2011, proposing that the organisation's major demands share a similar understanding of unemployment with the general framing of the grievance: a rebellion against waithood, frustration with corruption and clientelism that block access to the major goal of state employment and a general lack of development in the country's interior regions. In exploring how the autonomous unemployed activists reject the UDC on the grounds that it is too weak and politicised, the article also placed other developments of UDC mobilisation under scrutiny. The analysis shows a mixed picture in terms of strength and weakness: on the one hand, the UDC expanded in membership, geographical outreach and protest activities while also professionalising internal and external communication as well as internal democratic procedures. At the same time, however, it remained small compared to autonomous unemployed protesters, which often go unheard by state actors. Tensions exist between the national leadership, which pushes for a broader political agenda, and local offices, whose activities resemble isolated protests outside of any formal organisation with a sole focus on personal employment.

Third, the article assessed the UDC's relationships with societal and political actors, more profoundly investigating the accusation by the autonomous protesters of the organisation being 'politicized'. An analysis of the relationship between the UDC and its main societal allies – the leftist student union and the trade union federation UGTT – reveals tensions and a constant attempt by the UDC to retain a high degree of autonomy; the same holds true for its relationship with political parties. In general, the UDC strives to retain its autonomy due to a fear of being instrumentalized. Despite such attempts, independent protesters perceive the UDC as being politicised, and co-operation as a threat to their interests. In the last section, I argue that this may be explained by the incentive structure set by successive governments which rewards non-political protests (in regard to demands and co-operation partners). Government responses over the decades had the sole aim of sedating protests, at least for the short term, by granting concessions at the individual level and on an ad-hoc basis as a reward for 'non-political' protests. Any serious co-operation with organised actors was met with repression and/or neglect. As long as the successive governments continue to grant employment to this specific form of unemployed protest, co-operation with the UDC for broader and sustainable change will appear a risky gamble that poor people, particularly the unemployed in the marginalised interior regions, will likely shy away from.

However, this analysis also suggests a few specific steps to escape the spiral of escalating protests. Merely asking for patience, as successive governments have done since 2011, is not a realistic response for those rebelling against the on-going wait for their lives to begin. A start could be pursuing initial reforms

in the way that jobs are distributed: transparency and accountability within recruitment procedures would make job distribution according to political considerations much more difficult. It would also avoid protests against (allegedly) corrupt recruitment procedures which erupt regardless of whether they were corrupt in a specific case or not. The most important move would be integrating unemployed organisations, in an institutionalised manner, within broader social dialogues and negotiations about developmental strategies at a local, regional and national level; this could be linked to on-going reforms aimed at decentralisation in Tunisia. Incentives should be provided for the unemployed to organise, accumulate interests and demands and articulate them through one or more organisations. These could offer the possibility of participating in the distribution of resources, such as unemployment benefits or state-sponsored jobs, as part of a broader developmental agenda, particularly for marginalised interior regions. Integrating the UDC by keeping consultative or decision-making forums open to new organisations could foster positive development towards rallying together rather than heightening fragmentation. This does, however, demand the political will to cede some power when integrating more actors within deliberation processes and to truly depart from the structures and logics of behaviour inherited from Ben Ali's authoritarian regime.

Considering the continuity in state responses to unemployed protests in spite of Tunisia's relatively successful democratisation, as uncovered by this article, comparisons with other unemployed organisations in the region would prove a promising next step for further exploring social mobilisation of the most pressing socio-economic grievance in the region. Youth unemployment rates in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are the highest in the world, with a rate of nearly 25 per cent that is twice as high as the world average (12.5 per cent). Those most affected are individuals with higher levels of education (ILO 2015). Apart from Tunisia, only Algeria and Morocco have witnessed the development of major movements of the unemployed. In other countries in the MENA region, the unemployed have not come together to mobilise yet, not even in countries with similarly high unemployment rates among university graduates such as Egypt or Jordan (cf. Mottaghi 2014).[42] The two other cases of unemployed mobilisation exhibit interesting patterns of contentious politics which also underline the importance of state responses to the unemployed. In Morocco, a number of unemployed organisations have evolved since the 1990s, most of which have been co-opted by the state. Protests solely focus on the topic of labour, and as a reward for refraining from politics, the state grants jobs to these unemployed organisations who then internally distribute jobs to their most active members (Emperador Badimon 2013). In Algeria, a national organisation for the unemployed was founded in 2011 in the wake of the regional wave of uprisings. It remained critical of the government's efforts to buy off

discontent, a stance for which it has faced heavy repression (Roberts 2015, 164, 178). Unemployed mobilisation in marginalised regions in southern Algeria gained nation-wide attention in 2013, yet has to date remained a peripheral phenomenon (Belakhdar 2015). With the Tunisian example in mind, the protests in Algeria seem to represent the seeds of broader unemployed mobilisation, similar to what Tunisia witnessed in 2008, eventually helping to ignite and spread mass protests in 2010/2011 (Allal 2013). However, the Tunisian case also warns us of the ambiguities inherent to democratisation processes: apart from possibly leading to further fragmentation rather than co-operation, it also stands as a reminder of the continuity in the political practices of actors and institutions which persist beyond a regime change. The observations made in the Tunisian case also relate to debates on the role of socioeconomic grievances in political transformation processes. As was prominently discussed in transitology literature in the 1980s, leaving aside broader questions of social redistribution while re-drawing the political system was argued to be the best solution for creating a stable political order. Elites from the old regime would be more willing to cooperate and support the new order if their vested interests were left untouched (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986, 27). Indeed, in the Tunisian case, socioeconomic structures have remained unchanged after the fall of Ben Ali – for the time being. Yet, this will most probably not be the end of the story, especially if we consider other world regions: the 'leftist turn' in Latin America, for instance, occurred roughly one decade after the political transformations of the long 1980s. Of course, this turn manifested in different paths through which the social question was brought up once more and it led to widely varying degrees of social redistribution – yet all in the framework of democratic regimes (cf. Luna and Filgueira 2009; Silva and Rossi 2018). As Tunisia is currently the only democracy in the Arab world, it is likely that, in the mid to long-term, we will observe new waves and forms of socioeconomic contention with substantial political impacts and that will greatly differ from socioeconomic mobilisation in other parts of the MENA region.

Notes

1. A protest is regarded here as 'socioeconomic' when the protesters' main demands are socioeconomic in nature. According to Weipert-Fenner and Wolff (2015, 5–6), these demands relate to productive activities (access to land, subsidies, credits and taxes), basic social services (public services, health, education, water, transport and price/tariff subsidies), income (wages, pensions and work) and worker rights (such as the right to organise and employment standards).
2. For more information on methodology, advantages and challenges of the database, see Vatthauer and Weipert-Fenner (2017, 9).

3. This becomes visible in the fourth wave of the Arab Barometer, in which 59 per cent of respondents said that democracy was bad for the economy – in contrast to only 24 per cent in 2011.
4. For instance, during the Gafsa mining revolt of 2008, autonomous unemployed protesters co-operated with the Union of Unemployed Graduates (being studied here), the Tunisian trade union federation (UGTT), opposition parties and NGOs (see Gobe 2010; Allal 2010).
5. Interview with Salam al-Ayari, unofficial leader of the UDC since its foundation and elected general secretary since 2013; Tunis, March 2015.
6. Interview with Salam al-Ayari, Tunis, March 2015.
7. Interviews conducted in the Gafsa mining basin (Oum Larayes, Redeyef) in November 2016.
8. I follow Erica Simmons (2016), who argues that one key to understanding the dynamics of contentious politics is not the severity of grievances as such but rather their social meaning.
9. Around 30 interviews were conducted in Gabes, Gafsa, Oum Larayes, Redeyef, Sfax and Tunis in November 2014, March 2015 and October and November 2016. Additional participant observation and focus groups were possible during the World Social Forum in Tunis in March 2015.
10. Data from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), accessed at http://data.lesechos.fr/pays-indicateur/tunisie/taux-de-chomage.html.
11. *Institut national de la statistique* (INS). http://www.ins.nat.tn/indexfr.php.
12. A similar concept of unemployment among activists is found in Morocco, see Emperador Badimon (2013).
13. Tunis, March 2015.
14. Interview with Salam al-Ayari, Tunis, March 2015. These numbers seem plausible as the event data set showed activities in every governorate. If only 100 people were active in the UDC in each governorate, then 2,000 active members can be regarded as a realistic estimate. Yet, these numbers need to be treated with caution to some extent as it is impossible to verify this information with an additional source. Furthermore, membership is highly fluctuating, as new university graduates regularly join the ranks of the UDC while newly recruited individuals most often leave the organisation.
15. See the monthly reports at www.ftdes.net. The FTDES analyses media coverage of protests and also collects its own data via its regional offices. While this data cannot of course be directly compared to the numbers of events collected in Facebook posts, the discrepancy corresponds to empirical observations and expert opinions on unemployed protests in Tunisia.
16. Interviews with UDC activists, Tunis, March 2015.
17. According to the Facebook database, 22 out of 33 solidarity events took place during the first six months of 2015.
18. In the first six months of 2015, UDC activists staged seven hunger strikes, a sharp increase from just two in 2014.
19. In the cases of Ireland (Chabanet and Faniel 2012, 10) and Argentina (Delmata 2004, 9–11), for instance, state subsidies were administered by unemployed organisations themselves. In Morocco, the state allows unemployed graduate organisations to submit lists with members as proposed new recruits for the public sector and civil service. In exchange, the organisations organise unemployed protests in a ritualised manner that do not question the legitimacy of the regime (Emperador Badimon 2013).

20. Interview with Salam Ayari, and group interviews, Tunis, March 2015.
21. Interview with UDC activist on hunger strike, March 2015, Tunis, and the leader of the UDC in Redeyef, October 2016. See also Antonakis-Nashif 2016, 137.
22. Interview with Salam Ayari, group interview with activists in the national office, March 2015, Tunis.
23. The trigger in 2016 was the tragic death of Ridha Yahyaoui in Kasserine, who had been listed in 2015 but was removed from the list a year later. Protesting against this injustice, he climbed a utility pole and was electrocuted. His death sparked nation-wide protests between 17–29 January 2016.
24. According to the Facebook database, three-fourths of all protests against repression since September 2011 occurred between 2014 and June 2015, and 22 out of 33 solidarity events took place during the first six months of 2015.
25. One example was President Beji Qaid Essebsi's immediate reaction to the Sousse terrorist attack (Marzouki 2015). See also: https://nawaat.org/portail/2016/01/30/la-criminalisation-des-mouvements-sociaux-est-de-retour/, http://nawaat.org/portail/2015/04/12/linterminable-lutte-sociale-entre-la-prison-et-la-mort/. http://nawaat.org/portail/2017/04/05/radicalisation-et-mouvements-sociaux-meme-contexte-differents-combats/.
26. Studies of unemployment movements in Europe suggest a positive correlation between the level of education and political activism (Lahusen 2013, 9).
27. Group interview with UDC activists, Tunis, March 2015.
28. Interview Salam al-Ayari, Tunis, March 2015; Group interview with UDC activists, Tunis, March 2015, October 2016.
29. Furthermore, UGTT representatives criticised that unemployed protests often lead to concessions that grant jobs to individuals who are neither justified in terms of economic need nor personal capabilities. Interview with a member of the UGTT executive board, Tunis, November 2014.
30. Group interview with UDC activists, Tunis, March 2015.
31. The local level of trade unionists usually sympathise with unemployed protests and risk conflict with the upper echelons of the federation, interviews with local UGTT leaders in Redeyef and Oum Larayes, October 2016. See also Yousfi 2015; Vatthauer and Weipert-Fenner 2017).
32. Group interview with UDC activists, Tunis, March 2015.
33. Occasionally, UGET and UDC find a joint cause to rally around, for instance against the ban of former student union activists from being hired in the public and civil sector, which was enacted under the Ben Ali regime and has remained in force after the revolution. http://directinfo.webmanagercenter.com/2016/04/13/tunisie-luget-et-ludc-vont-entamer-des-protestations-regionales/.
34. Hamma Hammami, interview, Tunis, March 2015.
35. Interview with al-Nahda student union leader, Tunis, March 2015.
36. The policies that successive governments – always dominated either by al-Nahda or Nidaa Tunis – have actually implemented, however, demonstrate a mix of *étatist* and liberal policies that do not correspond to the positions of the parties expressed in their programmes or interviews (cf. Kienle 2015, 25). This is partially explained in the next section.
37. https://nawaat.org/portail/2016/01/25/cartographie-de-la-contestation-le-mouvement-social-continue/.
38. Interviews with independent unemployed activists, Redeyef, Oum Larayes, November 2016.

39. One large-scale example of this logic of contentious politics was the distribution of 5,000 jobs after the mass uprising of January 2016 that started in Kasserine. Jobs simply created to appease protests were distributed to unemployed outside any formal organisation. https://www.leconomistemaghrebin.com/2016/01/20/kasserine-recrutement-5000-chomeurs-creation-projets/.; https://nawaat.org/portail/2016/01/22/after-kasserine-protests-break-out-in-16-governorates/.

40. Interviews with UDC activists, October 2016, Tunis. This was also found in claims from the analysis of UDC Facebook posts.

41. State expenditure for public sector wages increased from 6 billion Tunisian Dinar (ca. 3 billion Euros) to 13.2 billion dinar (5.3 billion Euros) in 2016 (Muasher, Pierini, and Aliriza 2016, 8).

42. This corresponds well to global patterns of the emergence of unemployed mobilisation (e.g., Chabanet and Faniel 2012; Giugni 2008; Reiss and Perry 2011). From a social movement perspective, this also makes perfect sense, as grievances alone cannot explain mobilisation. They become relevant in the context of their social meaning (Simmons 2016), embedded in frameworks of collective action (Benford and Snow 2000), contextualised in social networks and the perception of political opportunities and threats (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001).

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