



INVITATION

NO PROGRESS ON THE SOCIAL FRONT: Struggles over Social Justice in MENA



**TUNIS, 17 – 18
 MARCH / ZOOM**

Hotel Laico Tunis, Human Rights Square,
 1001 Av. Mohamed 5, Tunis 1001 / Online

Socioeconomic grievances were a main driver of the Arab uprisings in 2011 and of many mass protests in the region ever since. Yet, while the socioeconomic situation did not improve and even severely deteriorated in the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, past and recent changes in economic and social policies have not received much attention. If a debate about socioeconomic reforms takes place at all, it is dominated by rather technocratic perspectives. In contrast, we contend that socioeconomic policies are deeply political, embedded in domestic and international power relations, and likely to fuel societal conflicts.

The conference “No progress on the Social Front: “Struggles over Social Justice in the MENA” therefore brings together scholars, practitioners and activists from the region and beyond to discuss how domestic and external actors have dealt with the socioeconomic challenges since 2011. Which reforms have been pursued, which effects did reform policies have and which conflicts among political, economic and social stakeholders did they create? And what are the consequences of the ongoing struggles over social justice for political change in the MENA region?

Three panels, two keynote addresses by [Isabel Ortiz](#) (Director of the Global Social Justice Program at Joseph Stiglitz’s Initiative for Policy Dialogue of Columbia University) and [Gilbert Achcar](#) (SOAS, London) and a roundtable discussion will tackle these questions with a focus on:

- 1) the interplay of the domestic and the external level: IMF reforms in the region
- 2) social inequality and social activism: from 2011 to a post-Covid MENA
- 3) social justice and democratization: socioeconomic explanations for the political crisis in Tunisia

We would be delighted if you joined our conference either in presence in Tunis on 17 and 18 March 2022 in [Hotel Laico](#) or [register here for attendance](#) via Zoom.

If you wish to attend in person, please register with Samira.Ghazouani@fes.de until 16 March 2022.

The conference builds on the work of two research projects. You can find more information and publications on the projects’ websites.

- FES’ regional project **“Economic Policies for Social Justice”**
- Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF) and the University of Sfax: **“Struggles over Socioeconomic Reforms: Political Conflict and Social Contention in Egypt and Tunisia post 2011 in Interregional Comparison”**

PRIF and the University of Sfax gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Volkswagen Foundation for their research and the organization of this conference.



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University of Sfax
Université de Sfax



**FRIEDRICH
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PROGRAM

NO PROGRESS ON THE SOCIAL FRONT: STRUGGLES OVER SOCIAL JUSTICE IN MENA



Tunis, 17 – 18 March



English, French, Arabic



[Registration](#) for Zoom Attendance



[Hotel Laico Tunis](#), Human Rights
 Square, 1001 Av. Mohamed 5,
 Tunis 1001

Co-Funded by



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NO PROGRESS ON THE SOCIAL FRONT: STRUGGLES OVER SOCIAL JUSTICE IN MENA

THURSDAY, 17 MARCH 2022

🕒 09h00 | Welcome Coffee and Inscriptions

🕒 09h15 | Welcome and Introductions

- Irene Weipert-Fenner, PRIF
- Thomas Claes, FES

PART I: THE IMF AND SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS IN THE MENA REGION

In its engagements with governments in the post-2011 period, the IMF often proposed austerity policies, which either directly or indirectly had effects on social protection in the region and mostly contravened the social expectations of the people. FES produced three comparative studies on the social protection systems in Morocco, Tunisia and Jordan, comparing the impact of the different IMF agreements and their conditions on social spending and social protection in particular. We aim to formulate recommendations for civil society and governments to protect social spending in the framework of austerity and a difficult economic recovery post-COVID.

🕒 09h30 | Virtual Keynote Address: Global Austerity Alert: IMF Policy Advice During and After the COVID-19 Crisis

- Isabel Ortiz, Director of the Global Social Justice Program at Joseph Stiglitz's Initiative for Policy Dialogue of Columbia University

Panel Discussion

🕒 10h00 | Introduction into Case Studies: The Social Impact of IMF Policies in the MENA Region

- Salma Hussein, Research Manager, FES MENA

🕒 10h15 | Case Study Social Protection in Tunisia and the IMF

- Chafik Ben Rouine, Tunisian Economic Observatory

🕒 10h30 | Case Study Social Protection in Jordan and the IMF

- Laith Al Ajlouni, Independent Public Policy Consultant

🕒 10h45 | Case Study Social Protection in Morocco and the IMF

- Jamal Azouaoui, Independent Researcher

🕒 11h00 | Comments on the Case Studies

- Marie-Noelle Abi Yaghi/ Léa Yammine, Centre for Social Sciences Research & Action

🕒 11h15 | Open Discussion

- Anas El Hasnaoui, Project Coordinator, FES Morocco

🕒 12h00 | Comparison and Parallels to the Situation in Egypt

- Osama Diab, Independent Researcher

🕒 12h15 | End of Part I

🕒 12h30 | Lunch at Hotel Restaurant

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PART II: IMF PROGRAMS AND THEIR IMPLEMENTATION: A POLITICAL ECONOMY VIEW

Over the past decades, most states in the region have been regular clients of the IMF, who prescribed regular rounds of the same mix of liberalization, currency devaluation and privatization. Yet, which of these prescriptions were actually implemented? Which reforms caused contention and were consecutively modified or even reversed? How have implemented reforms impacted the countries in the region over the long-term? And when looking at the political economy of IMF reforms, which role did individual governments of creditor-countries and the IMF itself play in the negotiation and implementation phase?

Panel Discussion

- 🕒 **14h00 | Introduction**
 - Thomas Claes, Project Director FES MENA
- 🕒 **14h15 | Perpetual Periphery: International Financial Institutions in Tunisia**
 - Fadil Aliriza, Independent Researcher, Editor Meshkal.org
- 🕒 **14h30 | The implementation of contested IMF reforms in Egypt and Tunisia from a comparative political economy perspective**
 - Irene Weipert-Fenner, PRIF
- 🕒 **14h45 | The Rationale of External Actors in IMF Negotiations: Insights from Germany**
 - Stephan Roll, SWP
- 🕒 **15h00 | Gendered Impacts of IMF Programs in MENA**
 - Samah Krichah, Kvinna til Kvinna
- 🕒 **15h15 | Commentary and Insights into the Internal Logic of the IMF**
 - Bessma Momani, University of Waterloo (online intervention)
- 🕒 **15h30 | Open Discussion**
 - Moderation: Clara-Auguste Süß, PRIF
- 🕒 **16h00 | End of Part II**
 - Get-together and discussions over coffee and snacks

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FRIDAY, 18 MARCH 2022

Part III: Roundtable on Social and Economic Inequality in the MENA Region

As discussed in the first part of the conference, IMF reforms throughout the last decade have contributed to growing inequality in the MENA region. Piketty and colleagues even argue that the MENA is among the most unequal regions in the world. Yet, which form exactly does inequality take in the region and what are the reasons for its increase other than external actors? At the same time, we discuss to what extent inequality has also been a major driver of transformation: How has social activism addressed the unequal access to resources and services and how has this contention shaped political trajectories so far? What role could civil society play in the future here?

Panel Discussion

- 🕒 **09h00 | Welcome Coffee and Inscriptions**
- 🕒 **09h30 | Welcome to second day**
 - Irene Weipert-Fenner, PRIF
- 🕒 **09h45 | Opening Address: "What is at stake in the MENA inequality dispute? Assessments of inequality and interpretations of the Arab Upheaval"**
 - Gilbert Achcar, SOAS
- 🕒 **10h15 | Evolution of Social Assistance Programs in the Region pre and post Covid-Crisis – Are they here to stay?**
 - Marco Schäfer, Chief of Social Protection Section, UN ESCWA
- 🕒 **10h30 | The Role of Social Activism**
 - May Hammoud, Senior Program and Research Officer, Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND)
- 🕒 **10h45 | Commentary on Social Inequality and Social Contracts in MENA**
 - Markus Loewe, German Development Institute
- 🕒 **11h00 | Open Discussion**
 Moderation: Jonas Wolff, PRIF
- 🕒 **12h00 | End of Part III**
- 🕒 **12h15 | Lunch at Hotel Restaurant**



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Part IV: Social Justice and Democracy in Tunisia post 2021: Socioeconomic Explanations for a Constitutional Crisis

When mass protests toppled Ben Ali in 2011, one of the major rallying calls was “Work, freedom and national dignity”. Yet although socioeconomic grievances persistent in the country were widely known, they did not become the political priority for the consecutive governments. The growing frustration with the socioeconomic situation was further fueled by the massive economic fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic. Kais Saied’s power grab on 25 July 2021 built on this discontent and the resulting massive loss of legitimacy of parties and parliament. Against this background, the panel seeks to discuss how exactly the socioeconomic dimension contributed to the constitutional crisis of today. Which role did structural problems play, to what extent did actors matter and in how far are dysfunctional institutional settings, e.g. in the constitution, to blame? The panel brings together different conceptual and theoretical explanations as well as practitioners’ views on Tunisia’s ongoing multifaceted crises.

🕒 14h00 | **Setting the Scene: Neither material nor institutional inclusion of the lower strata: Tunisia’s incorporation crisis unfolding**

- Irene Weipert-Fenner & Jonas Wolff, PRIF

🕒 14h15 | **Moderated Panel Discussion**

👤 **Participants:**

- Alaa Talbi, Tunisian Forum for Social and Economic Rights, tbc
- Gilbert Achcar, SOAS London
- Bassem Karray, University of Sfax
- Hamadi Rdissi, Tunisian Observatory for Democratic Transition, tbc
- Markus Loewe, German Development Institute
- Olfa Lamoulou, International Alert Tunisia

🗣️ **Moderation: Imène Cherif, Program Coordinator, FES MENA**

🕒 15h30 | **Open Discussion**

🕒 16h00 | **End of Part IV**

Get-together of coffee and snacks