The political participation of the diaspora of the Middle East and North Africa before and after the Arab uprisings

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Abstract: *The role of the Arab diasporas in the political processes of their home countries has changed significantly since the 2011 uprisings. The article aims to analyse these changes and assess the impact that diasporas have had on the democratisation processes of the post-2011 transitions. It does so by looking at examples of both direct and indirect diasporas' participation in the politics of their home countries during and after the uprisings through mechanisms such as lobbying, campaigning, national dialogue initiatives, and voting in the parliamentary elections. The background to the social, economic and political contributions of the Arab diasporas before 2011 highlights the multiple identities of the diaspora communities abroad as well as the changes to their inclusion from disputed members of the regimes' opposition to a more active civil society. With the shifting social and political environment of the last decade, the examples demonstrate the important political role that diasporas could play in cooperation and bridge building, both locally and internationally. However, they also demonstrate the obstacles and severe limitations they face in their inclusion in the governments' transition to democratic governance. Transnational repression and a negative reception context are limiting factors affecting the ability of diasporas to fully participate as active citizens in both their host and home countries. As an important index for democratisation in the region, the conclusions drawn in the article could offer new perspectives on shaping and constructing regional politics and local regimes. These constitute pressing issues for the future and the evolution of democracy in the region, especially within the post-war reconstruction of countries such as Syria, Libya and Yemen, and the democratic transitions in Tunisia and Egypt.*

Key words: *democratisation; uprisings; Arab diaspora; elections; negotiations; political participation; inclusion; civil and political rights; human rights; Middle East and North Africa*

1 Introduction

Since the beginning of the twentieth century diasporas have become important political players for their home countries. Their roles in democracy-building processes have recently attracted the attention of researchers (Cohen 2001; Vertovec 2005; Dahre 2007; Rigoni 2013). The participation of diasporas from the Middle East and North Africa before

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the Arab uprisings of 2011, sometimes referred to as the 'Arab Spring', was essentially disputed. A significant number of emigrants were political exiles, whose actions took the form of opposition through demonstrations, the denunciation of the regime's crimes or legal action against the regime. The article seeks to establish the extent to which diaspora communities have influenced the Arab uprisings, and how the 2011 revolts in turn have changed the political participation of the diasporas in their home countries.

In order to do so, it is important to analyse not only the diasporas' influence in the political arena of their home country (and *vice versa*), but to also scrutinise the practices and tools through which they contest and reframe the very idea of sovereignty as well as their own identities. In order to formulate an answer to the main objective of the article, it is important to equally consider other questions. First: What are the opportunities for participation of the diasporas in political life? Second: What are the mechanisms and limitations of their participation? Third: What are the main interests of governments and the diasporas themselves for their inclusion and participation? In search for an answer to these questions, the article first covers the sociological, political and economic foundations of the political participation of the diasporas from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The second part of this research places earlier findings in a critical perspective by examining some factors that restrict the political participation of diaspora communities. Finally, the third part builds on these foundations in order to analyse the different ways in which they participate. These include both indirect and direct participation in political affairs.

Before delving into these questions, two preliminary remarks need to be addressed. A first remark concerns the terminology used. One could say that the meaning of the word 'diaspora' has dispersed itself, as the term is being used in many contexts. The article has opted for Dumont's definition of diaspora as 'a community of individuals living together on the same territory and having in common the conviction or belief or belonging, themselves or their families to another territory with which they maintain regular relations' (Rigoni 2013: 5). This definition encapsulates the multi-faceted character of the phenomenon 'diaspora' and hence leads to a second remark regarding the scope of this research. The focus of the article is on the political participation of diaspora communities and their contribution to processes of democracy building in their home country. Although the study of diasporas raises important questions in relation to identity, integration and political participation in the host country, and even to the old Westphalian notion of sovereignty itself, these questions are beyond the scope of this research.

2   Foundations of the political participation of the diasporas

The United Nations (UN) estimates the diaspora population from MENA countries to be around 20 million individuals, 5 per cent of the total population in the region (World Bank 2016). This constitutes 10 per cent of the total migrant population in the world. As Middle Eastern countries go through new processes of transition from authoritarian regimes after the Arab uprisings, the question arises as to what role this growing number of citizens abroad play in influencing the political processes in the

region. Examining the composition and origins of these communities will shed light on the social, political and economic foundations of the mutations of the participation of the diasporas in transitional processes in the MENA region after the Arab uprisings.

Figure 1: Governance status of selected Arab countries
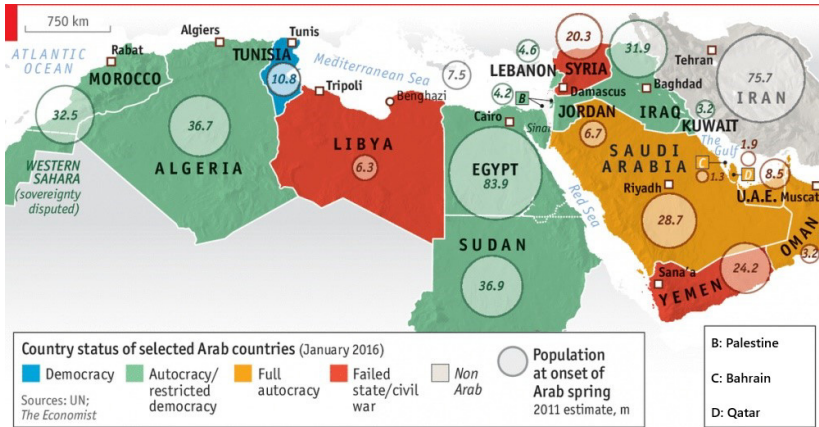

2.1 Social background to migration and political participation in the MENA region

Just over half of these migrants (53 per cent) remain in the region, especially in Gulf countries (IOM 2016), which are some of the wealthiest economies in the MENA region. The primary destinations of the other half of the migrant population from the MENA region are European countries (mainly for migrants from North Africa), Turkey and North America. The migrants' destinations, both in the Arab world and abroad, suggest that whether forced by conflicts or unemployment, migrants seek to settle in countries with social, political and economic stability. The numbers vary: The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) (2016) estimates that most migrants from the region come from Syria (21 per cent or 5 million); Egypt (14 per cent or 3,3 million); and Morocco (12 per cent or 2,9 million). These figures (see Figure 2) on the one hand show that it is not only conflict that has driven people to migrate but that it is a mix of political and economic factors. Furthermore, they draw a picture of a political and economic situation which is volatile throughout the MENA region, even in countries such as Morocco which are comparatively more stable and resilient on a political level. The variety of backgrounds, the reasons for emigration and migration routes pose a challenge to any research seeking to capture the uniqueness and specificity of the political role played by the diaspora in the Arab world (Dalacoura et al 2017). Therefore, the article focuses on overall trends as supported by existing case studies on specific diasporas. However, a further inquiry should be conducted into how diasporas are shaping the political transition of each country, especially in the post-war reconstruction of countries such as Syria, Libya and Yemen, and the democratic transitions in Tunisia and Egypt, among others. As their participation has long been disputed, the

changes occurring with the Arab uprisings constitute a potential major shift in the way in which diasporas not only are included in the political systems, but are also perceived within the contributions they provide.

Figure 2: Origins of migrants from the MENA Region (IOM 2016)
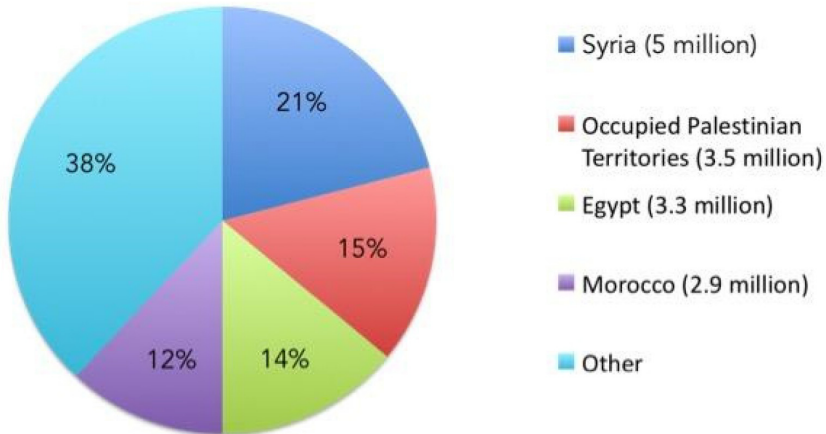
There have been several attempts at categorising and describing different types of diasporas according to their origins, the reasons for emigrating, or organisation (Sheffer 1993; Bruneau 1995; Cohen 1997). In the recent history of the MENA region, two main types of diasporas may be identified, namely, refugees and labour migrants, according to the economic and political factors surrounding their departure from their home countries.

On the one hand, since decolonisation many countries in the Arab world have undergone a history of conflicts which has created large diaspora communities settling all over the world. IOM figures show that at the end of 2015, 6 million refugees worldwide originated from MENA countries. Of these, refugees from Syria alone make up 30 per cent of the total number (IOM 2016), giving Syria a crucial space in the future of Middle Eastern politics. In Lebanon, the civil war (1975-1990) provoked new waves of emigration as some estimated 900 000 to 1 million Lebanese fled the country (Tabar 2011). These conflicts, therefore, created a community of expatriates who were forced to flee because of war or government repression. Moreover, the legal and social challenges faced by refugees in their host countries, including discrimination and stereotyping, often meant that they invested their energies in integrating in the new country while losing connections with their homelands.

On the other hand, economic imperatives created a different migrant community seeking employment abroad. Especially since the 1970s, the boom of oil production in the Gulf countries drove many people in neighbouring MENA countries to look for employment in the area. This trend found a parallel in new government policies in North African countries, such as Tunisia and Morocco, which forced people to look for

employment abroad and send remittances home in order to support the often-receding economies (Baldwin-Edwards 2005). In the case of Tunisia, bilateral agreements with European countries such as France (1963), Germany (1965), Belgium (1969) and The Netherlands (1971) regulated the flow of migrants to Europe and, with it, the inward flow of capital from remittances and relief from the local unemployment rates. The Fourth Plan of Bourguiba in the 1970s envisioned an annual planned emigration of around 60 000 labourers (Natter 2015). These migrants were closely monitored by the government to ensure the maintenance of economic – but not political – ties. The Office for Tunisians Abroad (OTE), launched in 1988, was an example of a government tool to encourage the diasporas' economic investment in the country by facilitating them. Similarly, initiatives by the European Union (EU), such as the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), have in recent years been developed to promote democratic governance and regional and international cooperation through economic and political reforms aimed at strengthening regional institutions.

While migrants from North West Africa (Algeria, Libya, Tunisia and Morocco) have traditionally settled in European countries, both because of their proximity and because of their colonial histories and ties, Egyptians have largely moved to oil-producing countries such as Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries or Iraq. These so-called 'labour diasporas', therefore, have a role in strengthening both the economic and social foundations of their position and involvement in their home countries and in the wider region. Cohen (1997: xii), for example, describes the position of Lebanese in West Africa and the Americas as 'prototypical cases of ethnic entrepreneurship that has been invigorated by the formation of diasporas'. On a social level, the IOM hints at the role they play in improving education (2018), including training as highly-skilled labour.

2.2   Going beyond the economic contributions of the diasporas

On an economic level, the communities maintaining links with their countries of origin have been the sources of significant remittances. In the case of Lebanon, remittances constitute 14,10 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP), making it one of the top 20 countries in the world receiving these remittances (Credit Libanais 2017). In the Maghreb, Morocco receives remittances equalling 6,8 per cent of the GDP (World Bank 2016b). Interestingly, Egypt has since 2010 appeared in the top 10 countries receiving remittances with a rising US $12 (now $16) million (IOM 2018: 31). In some cases such remittances are a significant source of income for families at home and of financial stability for the country, as they are considered more stable than other financial flows. Such economic contributions provided by the diaspora community help to legitimise their requests for participation in the political processes in order to express their vision, difficulties and needs.

This has led to more positive views on the importance of and contribution brought by diaspora communities. A recent World Bank report highlighted how the diasporas in the Middle East can be 'critical to fostering regional integration, entrepreneurship and economic growth'. The World Bank further suggested that 'governments and international development organisations must do more to strengthen their connections and partnership with the diaspora' (World Bank 2016a). However, these

views only pay attention to the economic role of the diasporas and, as such, miss an important element of their identity and involvement. Therefore, it is important that such recommendations always add political inclusion and civil rights. On the other hand, the influence of Gulf countries in post-uprising politics takes on a new light if contrasted with their economic role in the region. In fact, Saudi Arabia lists as one of the top three remittance-sending countries, with an amount of US $38,79 billion. Kuwait and Qatar follow on the list of the top 10 (IOM 2018: 32). In this context, governments' inclusion (or exclusion) of citizens abroad in the political processes, such as by giving them voting rights in elections, becomes key in shaping how the transitional process will evolve.

2.3 Political significance of diaspora communities before and after the Arab Spring

On a political level, the Arab diaspora before the uprisings was partly composed of political opponents to the existing, authoritarian regimes. Even though they faced significant challenges, as will be explained by the next part, some political opponents continued their campaigns against the regimes from abroad and partly contributed to the democratic transitions stimulated by the Arab uprisings. In the case of Egypt, the uprising informed members of the diaspora with new tools of re-engagement in the political process. However, it also brought the new right to vote from abroad and the right to engage in the first elections in 2012 (Pages-El Karoui 2015; part 4.4.3 below).

Beaugrand and Geisser (2016: 2) highlight three major ways in which the diaspora communities played a relevant role in the uprising, by engaging in what they called 'distance politics' and mobilisation. First, they created a new space of activism from a distance, which meant the engagement of citizens abroad. Second, while governments' authoritarian rule had forced politically-active individuals to flee, regime falls encouraged many to return. Finally, the involvement and participation of diaspora communities helped to trigger the public debate on their civil and political rights to free speech and participation which, in some cases, resulted in legal changes.

A survey conducted by the World Bank (2016a: 16) investigated the effects the Arab Spring had on the willingness of diasporas to return to their home countries. The results reported that only one quarter of respondents believed that the uprisings stimulated an interest in the diasporas to return. Moreover, those willing to return, just under half of the respondents, stated that it would be for the purpose of opening their own businesses or for direct investments (World Bank 2016a). Although no questions about politics were asked, the answers suggest that those who did in fact return were persons who had been engaged in politics even before the uprisings and therefore were members of the opposition groups to the former regimes. Their new inclusion in the official democratic process, however, does not answer the question of inclusion of the less active sections of the population abroad. As Syria and Egypt appear in the top 20 migrant-producing countries in the world (IOM 2018: 19), the question as to their role in politics becomes critical, on the one hand, for the post-war reconstruction and transitional justice and, on the other, the post-revolution transition. In Syria, 65 per cent of the population is considered displaced (UNHCR 2018), which further adds complexity and

urgency to the question of their inclusion in transition. Recent studies on Syrians' engagement in Europe have shown, for example, that the diaspora is both being shaped by developments in the conflict in Syria, while at the same time providing an opportunity for peace, mediation and reconstruction (Ragab & Katbeh 2017). Similarly, the study on Tunisians in Germany sees their role in cooperation as 'bridge-builders' (Ragab et al 2013: 23) because of their proximity and understanding of both contexts.

Democratic participation is based on universal suffrage and, hence, the participation of all citizens in the management of public affairs. On a theoretical level, being abroad should not exclude citizens. The question of who is included, and simultaneously excluded, from participation in the political process is essential to understanding the type of democratic system being created. Doubts over the legitimacy of the participation of diasporas are pushed by the question of allegiance, which is the basis of the perceptions and trust in citizens living in a foreign country. The concept of diasporas having multiple allegiances to more than one nation is complemented by questions as to the motivation for their desire to be included in the system, especially in cases of economic investments and financial or political interests. In the case of post-Saddam Iraq, Shain and Ahram (2003: 661) discuss how diasporas had to 'withstand a withering test of loyalty' because of their links to America's 'harbouring imperial intentions'. Both democracy and political participation are eluding when it comes to defining these terms. Academic answers to the questions of 'what is democracy' and 'what constitutes political participation' are manifold (Van Deth 2016; Van Reybrouck 2013). However, this article does not aim to provide an answer to these questions, their fundamental character notwithstanding. Rather, it uses a classical notion of political participation, that is, the participation of state citizens in the management of public affairs through universal suffrage. Nevertheless, the social, economic and political bases of how diasporas are perceived and included or excluded from the political process are an important departure point for the reconceptualisation of their role and significance. The article will further trace their participation in transition as well as through the successes of the electoral processes or other avenues of engagement, such as lobbying and national dialogue.

3   Limits and perspectives of diasporas' political participation

The uprisings of 2011 and the ripples that reverberated through the Arab world in the subsequent years changed the political role of several diaspora communities. Revolutionary voices from abroad, ongoing financial remittances to the home state and the inclusion of the migrant population in the electoral process could mean a positive contribution to democracy building of the diaspora population. On the other hand, there are also limits to the abilities of diasporas to drive the process of democratisation. This part sheds light on these limits.

3.1   Transnational repression

The observation that diaspora populations enjoy more civil rights, such as freedom of speech, than their compatriots at home, requires some nuance. Beaugrand and Geisser (2016) argue appropriately that diaspora populations can speak out more easily against repressive regimes. At the

same time, however, authoritarian regimes can manage to keep their nationals abroad in check. The case of Syria demonstrates that diaspora communities can be silenced through 'transnational repression' (Moss 2016). Transnational repression can either manifest itself in an indirect way or directly target expatriates.

First, authoritarian regimes might target dissident voices abroad indirectly by collectively punishing friends and family members at home (Alexopoulos 2008; Heckathorn, 1988; Khawaja 1993; Moore 1978). Amnesty International has documented personal stories from all over the world in which family members of Syrian expatriates suffered harm. Mamoun Jandali, a doctor living in Homs, and his wife, Linah Doubri, were beaten and maltreated after their son had participated in a protest in the United States (Amnesty International 2011). Sondos Suleiman, a Syrian woman living in Germany, saw all her family connections severed as her family in Syria was threatened due to her online activism (Amnesty International 2011).

Second, emigrants opposing the regime can equally be targeted in a direct way (Moss 2016). Embassy officials can survey protests and threaten those who speak out against the regime. According to the Association to Support the Syrian People (*Asociacion de Apoyo al Pueblo Sirio*), staff members of the Syrian embassy in Madrid took photographs of Syrians participating in peaceful protests in front of the embassy (Amnesty International 2011). Ahed al Hindi, a former political prisoner residing in the United States, even stated that during a protest in front of the Syrian embassy in Washington on 15 March 2011 an embassy official left the embassy building and walked straight up to him, saying: 'Ahed, let me take your picture'. The identification by embassy staff renders a return home impossible, as it was likely to lead to the arrest and punishment of blacklisted dissidents. However, this is not the only way in which embassy staff can take part in transnational repression. They can also complicate the lives of expatriates by hindering necessary administrative procedures. Imad Mouhalhel, for example, declared that the Syrian embassy in Spain refused to assist him with his visa application.

Finally, regime informers might very well be part of the diaspora community. Syrian community organisations abroad might have ties with the regime. A Syrian woman living in Ottawa, Canada, testified about a local Syrian organisation that went from door to door. The organisation encouraged fellow-Syrians to attend pro-Assad assemblies and intimidated those who participated in anti-regime protests (Amnesty International 2011). This spreads mistrust among the emigrants, as speaking out against the wrong national might result in endangering oneself or one's relatives.

The events of 2011 weakened the regime apparatus of 'transnational repression'. The protests across the Arab world have led to what Khan (2012) has described as a 'Diaspora Spring'. From the beginning of 2011 onwards, expatriate communities started to mobilise and became rapidly involved in home-state politics (Jörum 2015; Moss 2016). In other words, the uprisings were not always organised from abroad. Sometimes diaspora communities only decided to step in after protests at home had become widespread. The reason for this decision is clear-cut: The fear of pacing relatives at home in jeopardy could no longer act as a deterrent for expatriates, as their loved ones put themselves at risk by taking to the streets (Moss 2016).

In spite of these changes, some forms of transnational repression continued after the outbreak of the popular revolts across the MENA region. The stories mentioned previously exemplify that the repressive arm of Bashar al Assad's regime stretches well beyond Syrian borders. Both in the Americas and Europe, embassy officials played a role in surveilling diaspora communities. On numerous occasions embassy personnel filmed, intimidated and harassed Syrian activists. Because of the actions of their relatives abroad, people in Syria are being questioned and threatened by security forces. This indicates that, even though expatriates may enjoy civil rights in the receiving state, they might be hindered to exercise them by the home-state regime.

3.2   Negative reception context

In the second place, not only the home-state regime can determine whether expatriates speak out about injustice. Another factor, which Beaugrand and Geisser (2016) refer to as the 'negative reception context', equally plays a role in silencing the voice of diaspora populations. The attacks of 9/11 have had profound repercussions for Arab communities in the occident (Khan 2012; Moss 2016). Slama and Heiss (2011) write that '[a]n examination of Arab diasporas in the post-9/11 world almost inevitably directs one's attention to the global war on terror that has targeted Arab migrants and their offspring in particular'. This once more becomes clear in the controversial attempt of United States President Trump to impose a so-called 'Muslim ban'.

In this 'context of negative reception', Arab expatriates might rather focus on the integration process, rather than profiling themselves as critical citizens (Beaugrand and Geisser 2016). Expatriates might even opt for complete assimilation. In the hypothesis of assimilation, one could even question whether the term 'diaspora' remains appropriate, as assimilation implies a complete rupture with the former identity. Yet, it is precisely a common identity that constitutes one of the key characteristics of a diaspora community. Cohen (2001) states that 'a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time and based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history and the belief in a common fate' is one of the common features of diasporas. It is not surprising that the integration policies of the host state also plays a role in this regard, since some states, such as France, have adopted a policy of assimilation whereas others might favour plurality (Müller-Funk 2016).

Furthermore, authorities of the host state might facilitate transnational repression (Moss 2016). The home-state regime might depict any criticism as stemming from Islamic extremists or terrorists (Khan 2012). For example, after the Casablanca bombings of 2003, the Moroccan monarchy used the terrorist attacks as an opportunity to frame the Islamic opposition party *Hizb Al-Adala Wa At-Tanmia* (Justice and Development Party) as a threat (Wegner 2011). Turkish President Erdogan has made a similar move by vowing 'to continue pursuing terrorists abroad' when talking about opposition members within the Gülen movement. He also declared that France is 'abetting terrorists' by receiving the *quwwat suriya ad-dimuqratiya* (Syrian Democratic Forces), a military coalition opposing the Assad regime, in the Élysée. Portraying any dissenting voices as a security threat can open up cooperation between concerned Western authorities and home-state security forces. Consequently, not only the integration

policies of the host state, but also the relationship between the host and home state come into play.

3.3 Regime type and the right to vote

Instead of repressing its diaspora population, a regime may decide to extend the right to vote to expatriates. Yet, the inclusion in the electoral process does not necessarily indicate a positive contribution to democracy building by the diaspora population. Even though the participation in the electoral process might hint at an expansion of rights and democracy, the rationale of the regime to extend the voting right to expatriates must be scrutinised critically. In this examination, Brand (2014a) has correctly argued that the regime type plays a key role. In spite of the events of 2011, no Arab country initiated a genuine process of transition, Tunisia arguably being the sole exception. Most regimes, with Lebanon and Tunisia being the contentious exceptions, are characterised as authoritarian. The motive for an authoritarian regime to extend the right to vote to expatriates may not be inspired by democratic aspirations. The concession of the right to vote to expatriates may be explained as a move to legitimise the regime (Brand 2014a). Additionally, by including them in the voting process, the regime can extend its control over the diaspora community.

In addition, the inclusion of the diaspora community in the electoral process does not necessarily foster political change. Inspired by the 2011 movements, Tunisia changed its electoral law. As explained in part 4.4.1 below, expatriates have received the right to vote, and 18 out of 217 seats of the constituent assembly and parliament were allocated to Tunisians abroad. In the 2011 election of the constituent assembly, the diaspora vote proved to be even more conservative than the vote of their compatriots at home. While in total the Ennahdha Party won 37,04 per cent of the total number of votes, Ennahdha received 8 out of 18 of the 'diaspora parliamentary seats'. Thus, roughly 44,4 per cent of the diaspora voters favoured the conservative Ennahdha. Thus, it becomes clear that the inclusion of the diaspora community in the electoral process does not imply a process of democratisation. In spite of their inclusion in the electoral process, expatriates remain 'more subjects than citizens' (Brand 2013), 'subjects' that might be less progressive than their compatriots at home.

Another determining obstacle to democratisation efforts of the diaspora are the characteristics of the diaspora group itself (Müller-Funk 2016). How are diaspora communities organised among themselves in host states and what are their ties to the home state politics? Internal division within diaspora communities might reflect political rifts in the home country. Internal strife and differing political allegiances hinder the diasporas to speak out with one voice. The peace talks concerning the ongoing civil war in Syria exemplify this. For instance, on 20 November 2017, a mere two days before the planned meeting of the High Negotiations Committee in Riyadh to form representatives for the upcoming Geneva Peace Talks, the General Coordinator of the High Negotiations Committee (HNC) resigned along with ten other members. Baeza and Pinto (2016) argue that 'the political mobilisation of diasporic groups unleashes a kaleidoscopic reconfiguration of their internal differences and divisions into new tracings of their boundaries'. In addition, it should be noted that regimes might reinforce divisions within diaspora communities to hinder the formation

of a unified, critical voice abroad. The next part will analyse the electoral processes and other ways through which diasporas have participated in the political processes of their home countries since the start of the uprisings.

4 Forms of diaspora participation

The 2011 uprisings erupted in countries that had witnessed years of oppressive rule, in which governments often tried to build a facade of democratic governance to conceal the severe restrictions on civil and political rights. Tunisia, which sparked the wave of uprisings across the region, had been ruled by Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali for 22 years (1989-2011). Similarly, Egypt had been under the rule of Mohammed Husni Mubarak for 30 years (1981-2011); Libya under the regime of Muammar Al-Qaddafi for 42 years (1969-2011); while Yemen was ruled by Ali Abdullah Saleh for 33 years (1978-2011). Syria remains under the control of the Al-Assad family, with Bashar Al-Assad, who in 2000 succeeded his father's 29-year rule. By the end of 2010 the dissatisfaction about the ruling elites linked to economic and social factors led a large section of citizens to support the uprisings against these regimes. This part analyses how the diasporas of these countries contributed to this enormous change through both direct and indirect means, such as lobbying for inclusion in the electoral system, leading negotiations and campaigning online from abroad. In this way, diasporas played a significant role in the democratisation processes initiated since 2011.

4.1 Indirect diaspora participation

Indirect forms of diaspora participation in the uprisings against repressive regimes consisted of social media activism; protests in the diasporas' host countries; lobbying to influence the policies of foreign countries to support the revolutions; and participating in national dialogue and political negotiations. A significant role the diasporas adopted was to advocate from their host countries. As part 2 elaborated, many members of the diaspora were not able to criticise the regimes of their home countries before the upheavals of 2011. Transnational repression was carried out by intelligence agents, who 'conducted surveillance through informant networks, threatened dissidents, forced them into exile, held their relatives hostage at home, and in some cases harmed dissidents directly' (Moss 2016: 493). Therefore, diasporas were not able to advocate or support any revolt actions against these regimes out of fear of what impact this would have on family members.

The uprisings of 2011 were exceptional as they allowed some diaspora members to break their silence. It became easier for diasporas to support the uprisings as their relatives in their home countries put themselves at risk by clamouring the slogan 'The people want to overthrow the regime'. Diasporas organised protests in many host countries, advocating a revolution and showing the world that they sought to build democratic states with equal citizenship rights and freedom for all. It should be noted that this was one way in which to influence the host countries' policies in accepting and supporting the revolutionary waves against existing Arab regimes. A major method used by diasporas to break the silence was through cyber activism.

4.2   Diasporas' cyber activism

Social media helped protesters to organise meetings and exchange information about gathering locations in order to quickly and easily move from one place to another as they were targeted by the regimes. However, during the first days of the revolts, some regimes blocked social media outlets, such as Facebook and Twitter, in addition to imposing heavy censorship on the internet. 'On March 3 almost all internet service throughout Libya went down. Many phone systems suffered disruptions, and communication from Tripoli to East Libya was cut off entirely' (Eriksson et al 2013: 28). Also, governments hacked some blogs and Facebook pages and changed activists' passwords.

The diasporas contributed to supporting the Arab uprisings from abroad by drawing the world's attention to the movements in their home countries through their cyber activism. Those living abroad stayed active on social media to lead the movements and ensure mobilisation on the ground in their home country. Malik (2014: 197) concluded in her research:

> After a thorough examination of scholarly research, individual narratives, news articles, videos, and social media users themselves, this paper finds that social networking played an integral role in the Arab Spring revolutions. It was utilised by both local citizens and people abroad to stay connected and learn information.

Active participation through social media allowed more efficient and faster dissemination of information. Diaspora communities had easier access to a more reliable internet connection, which assisted in continuing advocacy and spreading more information about the revolts, particularly during the absence of those in the home countries due to the regime's censorship.

4.3   Participation in national dialogue, political negotiations and lobbying

Apart from cyber activism, diasporas also found a way to participate politically through negotiations, lobbying and fora of national dialogue. As a result of the Arab uprisings, the diasporas had the opportunity to play an influential role as they found a more open sphere for political participation. Consequently, a section of the diasporas returned from exile to participate in national dialogue or to run for elections in their home countries, such as in the cases of Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya. Others continued the struggle to overturn the authoritarian regimes, including by lobbying for their case abroad and taking part in political negotiations with the regimes themselves, such as in the case of Syria. The cases of the most prominent countries to witness the uprisings will be examined, namely, Tunisia, Syria, Yemen and Egypt.

4.3.1   Tunisia

The diasporas that were active from abroad could safely participate in the political processes of their home countries from their countries of exile. Members of the Tunisian diaspora returned home after the start of the uprisings, including figures of the Islamist party, Ennahdha, which had been banned in 1989 during the rule of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. As in the case of other opposition figures, the party had faced oppression, arrests,

military trials and exile by the previous authoritarian regime. After Ben Ali had been ousted, the leader of Ennahda, Rachid Ghannouchi, returned to Tunisia after 22 years in exile. Ennahda obtained official recognition and started operating on 1 March 2011.

The Tunisian diasporas participated in the national action that was aimed at organising and facilitating democratic transition in Tunisia through the Higher Authority for Realisation of the Objectives of the Revolution, Political Reform and Democratic Transition, which included different spectrums of the society: political parties; syndicates; associations; activists; and public figures. As will be outlined, diaspora members played pivotal roles in post-2011 Tunisia.

4.3.2   Syria

Since the beginning of the uprisings in Syria, parts of the Syrian population experienced lethal oppression. In many countries the numbers of Syrians abroad have since then increased significantly, particularly in countries neighbouring Syria. As mentioned above, the IOM has found that most migrants from the region come from Syria. The Syrian diasporas struggled to contribute to political dialogue and negotiations as well as international lobbying and advocacy for the Syrian revolts against the regime. The revolutionary impulse, however, resulted in further efforts and aspirations to build a democratic government devoid of oppression. Syrians that more recently fled, along with those already in diaspora, attempted to enhance the opposition forces from abroad, and coordinate the movement in their homeland.

The Syrian opposition abroad formed different coalitions. Different meetings were convened in order to strengthen unity and improve organisation. In political dialogue and negotiations, coordination took place between different groups to delegate representatives and form an opposition. The National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces was formed shortly after the uprisings against Assad's regime started. This Coalition included a wide range of opposition factions and was founded in Doha, Qatar, in November 2012. This National Coalition was recognised by many countries as being representative of the Syrian people. In December 2015 the High Negotiations Committee was founded in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, which acted as an umbrella body to represent the Syrian opposition in the planned Geneva peace talks in 2016. The opposition coalition has worked on lobbying to influence foreign countries' policies on the Syrian Revolution and their stance towards Assad. Despite the attempts of these opposition groups to form a united coalition against the Syrian regime, internal divisions and fractions proliferated among them due to differing points of view.

4.3.3   Yemen

Shortly after the Gulf Cooperation Council Initiative Agreement was reached in November 2011, some members of the Yemeni diaspora returned to the country in order to contribute to the democratic transition process. The agreement sought to ensure a peaceful transition by dividing power equally between the regime and the opposition. Furthermore, the agreement provided the resignation of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had ruled Yemen for 33 years. One form of this political involvement was

through the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) in 2013, which included all parties and lasted for about nine months in Sana'a, the capital of Yemen. For instance, the southern political figure, Ahmed Bin Fareed Al-Suraimah, who had been in exile since the Yemeni civil conflict between the northern and southern parts in 1994, returned to Yemen in 2013 and participated in the conference. He later withdrew due to contrasting points of view regarding the national dialogue process, in particular the 'Southern issue', as he believed the NDC did not meet the Southerners' demands. Similarly, the former Prime Minister of the Unification in 1990, Haider Abu Bakr Al-Attas, returned from exile after having fled the country in 1994 due to the conflict with Saleh's regime. He is currently politically active within the presidential advisory.

Another form of political participation of the Yemeni diaspora after the Arab uprisings is the formation of coalitions and the proposal of political negotiation initiatives in their host countries. Prominent political figures held meetings to discuss and initiate actions on critical national political issues. To some extent, this helped in converging views. For example, the former President of Southern Yemen during 1980-1986, Ali Nasser Mohammed, who is still in exile, regularly meets with Yemeni political figures. He has previously proposed political settlement initiatives to end the conflict in Yemen based on the shifting situation on the ground. At present, the majority of Yemeni political figures are in exile due to the ongoing conflict since March 2015, and many of these are not able to return home as there is no safe sphere for political participation. Even the President of the state, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, is out of the country. Various political meetings and peace negotiations are taking place abroad between the conflicting parties to seek the establishment of a political settlement and conflict resolution. Generally, the Yemeni diaspora remains active despite their struggle to engage in political processes since the start of the revolution in 2011. Many of its members returned to Yemen after former President Saleh had been ousted in 2012, but since 2015 more people have been exiled and remain out of the country as the conflict persists.

4.3.4   Egypt

During the Arab uprisings, and particularly during the revolt against Mubarak's regime in late 2010, the Egyptian diaspora supported the revolt through organised protests in host countries. Despite the regime's strategy of blocking social media outlets to repress dissent and any form of mobilising, the diaspora used social media to amplify the voice of the Egyptian people and to spread it worldwide. Some were inspired by the revolution to return to their home country and contribute to the democratic transition and the new social and political arena after the ousting of former President Mubarak. Wael Ghunim, the administrator of the 'We Are All Khaled Said' Facebook group, left his employment as regional marketing director for Google in Dubai in order to participate in the 25 January protest. Canadian-Egyptian writer and university professor, May Telmissany, tells a similar story, recounting how '[a]fter the revolution, I wanted to go back home and participate in the struggle against the dictatorship' (Pagès-El Karoui 2015). The Egyptian opposition leader, Mohammed El-Baradei, also returned to Egypt and joined the anti-government protests.

Both during and after the 2011 movements, the Egyptian diaspora worked on establishing associations and organisations in the political and economic development realm of their home countries. 'In France, numerous associations were created in the wake of the revolution (the Committee for Solidarity with the Struggle of the Egyptian People, the Association of the 25 January Youth, the Tahrir Square Movement, etc' (Nada 2013: 176). Similar occurrences also took place in the United States (Nada 2013: 176):

> The Egyptian American Rule of Law Association (EARLA) invested itself in the promotion of the rule of law in Egypt; the American-Egyptian Strategic Alliance (AESA) aimed to influence political relations between the United States and Egypt in order to encourage security, stability and mutual prosperity in both countries and promote democratic values; a group of entrepreneurs launched NEGMA (Networking, Entrepreneurship, Growth, Mobilisation and Action) at a conference in March 2012 at MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), with the goal of connecting Egyptian businessmen with their expatriate counterparts.

However, the political environment discouraged diasporas from returning to their country, and many decided to leave the country for the second time due to frustration and political oppression. In particular, supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood sought refuge abroad as many leaders and members of the group faced harassment, arrests and sentences shortly after the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood president, Mohammed Morsi, by the Egyptian Army under Abdelfattah El-Sisi, who is currently Egypt's President. In September 2013 the military regime banned the Muslim Brotherhood Organisation. Morsi, the Supreme Leader of the Muslim Brotherhood Organisation, Mohammed Badie and other party members are on trial.

4.4   An overview of diasporas' direct political participation

Besides a certain behavioural change in indirect political participation, the 2011 uprisings also brought about changes to the types of direct engagement of the diasporas. Therefore, this section aims to revisit the forms of direct political participation among Arab emigrant communities and their effectiveness by examining the changes in MENA government policies towards diaspora inclusion in the political system in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings. It will revisit government policies towards political participation of diaspora communities and how these policies were influenced as a result of the 'reform processes' that took place after 2011. As the examples show, the diasporas were not significant game changers, however powerful they may be, since their 'inclusion' was often constructed by the new regime as a façade in order to derive a seemingly broader, yet artificial legitimacy.

Emigrants' political participation can take different forms, manifested by financial support to political parties; lobbying and affecting public policies; conflict support; or sustaining post-conflict reconstruction (Vertovec 2005: 8-9). However, the most direct relation with the origin state remains participating in the electoral process, namely, by voting. Granting the right to vote to diasporas remains widely controversial, and can create complex political and legal implications. However, in the context of state building, or countries undergoing transitional periods, granting the right to vote to diasporas can stimulate a 'commitment to

democracy-building' (Francis 2015: 23). Thus, many countries around the world have been enacting laws allowing the inclusion of diasporas in the electoral process (Francis 2015: 23). Several electoral laws have been amended in order to create an opportunity for diasporas to vote.

4.4.1   Tunisia

After the Jasmine Revolution in 2011 Tunisia granted the right to vote to expatriates in the parliamentary elections, and the new electoral law allocated 18 seats to Tunisians abroad (Jaulin 2016: 7). This inspired similar changes in other Arab countries. For the first time in Lebanon, the foreign ministry opened the door for external voters to participate in the 2018 parliamentary elections (*Daily Star* 2017). Syria held widely-controversial elections that were targeting expatriates. Lastly, Turkey has also campaigned over diasporas in previous elections (Koinova 2017). Ennahda won 89 out of 217 seats in the Constituent Assembly in Tunisia's first democratic elections. A member of the diaspora became Tunisia's first democratically-elected President. After Ben Ali had banned the Congress for the Republic Party in 2002, its founder and president, Moncef Marzouki, moved to France to continue his political struggle. Marzouki returned to Tunisia in 2011 and would remain the country's President until 2014. These actors from the diaspora contributed to the enhancement of democracy-building efforts in the country.

In the first instance, this step resembles a natural process of what the Arab uprisings aspired for: more inclusion and broader political participation. However, a deeper analysis is required in order to uncover hidden motives and to truly assess the legitimacy that is produced through elections. Brand (2014) discusses the symbolism behind reaching for the external votes of citizens abroad, by highlighting the surrounding circumstances of such a move. She first addresses how Tunisia turned to external voting in order to 'secure a plurality of seats in the constituent assembly' (Brand 2014b) in opposition to the Islamist Ennahdha party. However, this idea is debatable, as the Ennahdha party only won eight out of 18 seats in the parliamentary election of 2014 (National Democratic Institute 2015). Instead, the *troika* parties (Ennahda, CPR and Ettakatol) together won 15 of the 18 seats. In Libya, external voting was banned for people who live in Egypt or Tunisia under the pretence that 'these communities were close enough to return home to vote' (Brand 2014b). However, Brand explains the other possibility in which 'their proximity also made them most likely hosts of supporters of the toppled Gaddafi regime' (Brand 2014b). In both cases, diaspora voters became new targets of local and regional politics.

4.4.2   Syria

The Syrian case is another example of how regimes – while re-inventing themselves – turn to external voices for their political agendas. The 2014 elections in Syria proceeded to give the world the impression that Syria is still politically functioning. However, external voting was not meant to legitimise the regime's position, but rather was 'inextricably linked to the ongoing regional and extra-regional power struggle' (Brand 2014b). These regional and extra-regional implications are also recognisable in the Turkish authoritarian model. Koinova (2017) explains that turning to

external voting is 'no longer [a] purely domestic political matter, but a part of Turkey's increasingly contentious foreign relations'.

4.4.3   *Egypt*

In the Egyptian context, the right to vote for diasporas had been banned under Mubarak's rule, but was amended immediately after the uprisings in the elections of 2012, 2014 and 2018, eventually allowing diasporas to vote in presidential elections. In both the elections of 2012 and 2014, the Egyptian government encouraged diasporas to participate through targeted internet websites and media campaigns. In 2014 the turnout remained low, reaching 355 000 from an original 7 million Egyptians living abroad (Zohry 2012). Yet, Egypt

> holds the record for the most OCV (out-of-country voting) votes since the revolution. Members of the Egyptian diaspora participated in the 2011 parliamentary elections, the 2012 Shura Council elections, the constitutional referenda in December 2012 and January 2014, and the presidential elections in 2012 and 2014 (Koinova 2017).

Müller-Funk (2016: 366) argues that Egypt has a history of restricting the political rights of expatriates as it 'extended external voting rights after a wave of massive campaigning in 2011'. This argument opposes the idea that the turn to external voting was initially incorporated in the politics of the new regimes. Nevertheless, the 'romantic' rhetoric that the Egyptian government used to collect external voices confirms that there has been a continuous role in the politicisation of diasporas. Brand (2014b) argues that 'authoritarian states in North Africa aim at cultivating emigrant loyalty through external voting rather than expanding meaningful political participation'. A response to the argument of Boccagni et al (2015: 3) is that there are moves through which states 'want to selectively and strategically manage what immigrants can and cannot do' by inventing new forms of relations.

4.5   External voting as a method of legitimising new regimes

The escalating events in the MENA in 2011 added new layers of analysis regarding the institutionalisation of democracy in the region. Thereafter, the notion of 'democratisation process' and its functionality was contested in the public discourse. This has led to critical re-examinations of the political and institutional structures of Arab regimes. These dynamics have been studied and debated through multiple discourses, such as neo-institutionalisation, transitional studies, legal and political studies, and so forth. However, little attention has been given from a 'diasporic' perspective.

The political participation of diasporas that diffuses the traditional meaning of the state in its physical sense may be considered a significant method of assessment to the political and structural changes in modern politics, particularly in light of the need to do 'a rethinking of democracy as operation within and across borders' as suggested by Underhill (2016: 25). However, the incorporation of diaspora participation challenged the democratisation process and the reform initiatives proposed by the Arab regimes after the 2011 uprisings. Moreover, it portrayed new reflections to the understanding of democratisation in the absence of substantial procedures that are needed to promote equality, inclusion and broader

political participation. Additionally, it presents new political and power actors that could play a role in shaping the new political system and affecting social and political change. Seen from another perspective of evaluation, the inclusion of expatriates and emigrants in the electoral process may be used to assess attempts by the new regimes to exploit diaspora communities as new targets in order to present themselves in a 'democratic manner', thus creating a broader sense of legitimisation by allowing for broader political participation.

Interestingly, the Arab context is adhering to these remarks and questions, witnessing different elements that can make this discussion richer. For example, Arab emigrants are great in number, especially if one looks at the case of Egypt with 'one of the largest emigrants populations worldwide' (Müller-Funk 2016: 353). Their participation can lead to changes in turnout. In addition, social and political mobilisation towards the uprisings has been witnessed in different countries, where emigrants were included in the electoral process. This suggests that the diaspora should not be excluded in the assessment of the transitional and democratisation processes (Underhill 2016: 26, 30).

Dahre follows the engagement of diaspora communities to their 'origin' institutions by examining different phases of academic studies representing this relation. He suggests that studies in the 1920s and 1930s focused 'on how migrants adopted themselves to a new environment or were socially excluded' (Dahre 2007: 8). Later studies, particularly in the last decade, emphasised how emigrants maintained a continuous attachment to institutions that 'are not linked to the state in which they now are living' (Dahre 2007: 8). However, whether the first or the latter, diasporas continuously find themselves at a crossroads: to remain in the country of origin or in the host country. This duality, which leads to multiple interests and views, can 'shape their engagement and participation in social and political change' (Underhill 2016: 26). Additionally, diaspora communities, as Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin (2002) explain, 'exercise a distinct form of cultural power in order to maintain themselves'. The need for self-maintenance and their aspirations may be manifested in constructive political acts. Such acts can contribute to creating an aspired 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991). For example, Egyptian emigrants' engagement becomes a practice to concretise what the ideal Egypt would and should look like after years of dictatorship and authoritarianism.

In the historical run, diasporas played a 'significant part in the development of nation building in poor countries and in ones which have undergone major transformations' (Vertovec 2005: 7). They 'powerfully embody broader trends in the changing nature of nation-state' ((Vertovec 2005: 10). It is therefore fair to acknowledge that diasporas are powerful actors and significant role players in the international political arena. Amin (2010: 12) suggests that their nature as a 'constructive, nonviolent force for democratic change should not be underestimated'. The importance of their political engagement is not only seen as an insurance for exercising their political and civil rights, but it gives a broader addition to the democratisation process in general. Rigone claims that this participation contributes to de-constructing any stereotypes, promoting peace and dialogue, and, most importantly, it makes people 'eager to promote in their countries of origin the values they consider positive in their country of

residence' (Rigoni 2013: 6). In this sense, diaspora communities could be regarded as 'bridges between their homes and residence which could help the "state-building processes"' (Amin 2010: 12).

Given this overview, is it correct to say that the means of direct political participation in Arab countries share similar characteristics? If this is true, then one has to question the governments' institutional structures that reproduce common behaviour. The change lies in amending the structure that leads to reproducing the same institutional behaviour. The change is not limited to the idea of demanding change and organising civil movements, but also entails follow-up procedures that include raising mass public awareness and address the roots of the problems that hinder liberties in a specific country. The argument is that voting as a form of direct political participation is not sufficient and does not guarantee achieving a public democratic choice. The idea of participation is to include all people in the election process, but the conduct of the voting process under controlled premises renders the idea of participation itself meaningless. Therefore, the participation by people itself is moulded into a tool to endorse the façade of legitimacy of undemocratic regimes.

5   Conclusion

Diasporas are entwined in the history of the MENA region. In fact, the very word 'diaspora' originally described events that took place in the region during the Classical Antiquity, such as the Assyrian captivity, the Babylonian exile and the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by the Romans, which scattered the Jewish people. The return of one diaspora in the wake of World War II subsequently created another, namely, the Palestinian diaspora. Throughout the rest of the twentieth century, many more from the MENA region would leave their homes in order to settle abroad, due to either economic reasons, conflict or political repression. The multiplicity of reasons, routes and consequences of migration demonstrates that there is no single model for the diasporas' involvement in the political processes of a country. Yet, as Dalacoura et al (2017) highlight, it is important to analyse their role within the 'global identities' they shape and are shaped by in the attempt to clarify the extent of their political agency. This article has focused on overall trends as supported by existing case studies on specific diasporas. This allows some, albeit provisional, conclusions to be made.

The participation of diasporas is an important index of the evolution of the democratisation of the Arab world. However, the experiences following the Arab uprisings do not allow definitive conclusions to be drawn. First of all, starting from 2011, diasporas have shown an increased willingness and motivation to stand up against repressive regimes. They stood up against national or transnational oppression. The diasporic rallies and protests and the active social media participation presented a significant boost for these revolts. The Tunisian example seems to be exceptional compared to the other states that witnessed any form of uprising as it was the only one to go through all processes of elections, national dialogue inclusion, and the ongoing transitional justice process. Meanwhile, at least some part of the exiled diaspora had the opportunity to practise their political rights in their home country and even to participate in the process of transitional justice. Nevertheless, for other Arab countries experiencing uprisings,

efforts are still underway due to the ongoing civil war or the defiance of authoritarian regimes and the dire situation in countries such as Syria, Yemen, and Libya. Some diasporas of these countries are struggling to amplify the revolutionaries' voices and trying to come to terms with the events that took place in their home countries.

The Arab movements unleashed in 2011 aimed to change the political behaviour of MENA governments towards their people. The fall of some regimes threatened the existence of other regimes, which forced these regimes to initiate a process of democratisation in order to confront potential civil movements. One of these 'democratisation processes' is re-introducing external voting in elections, supposedly aimed at broader participation, and re-affirming sovereignty. In general, the inclusion of emigrant populations in the electoral processes in their home countries contributes to the democratisation of the elections process, as it means opening the door for dissenting voices in the diaspora to participate in democratic state practice. This is especially relevant when it comes at a time in which diaspora communities are aware of the power they exert in mobilising and influencing public discourse, for example by raising awareness of human rights violations and democratic deficits in their home countries.

Even though in a globalised world diasporas could play an important political role, they also face several obstacles. First, although at least a part of the diaspora broke the silence after the 2011 movements in the MENA region, transnational repression persists and silences people abroad. Second, emigrants from the MENA region often find themselves in a context of negative reception, which prevents them from becoming active citizens. Third, the inclusion of diaspora communities in the voting process does not necessarily foster political change. The inclusion might either be an attempt by the regime to create a democratic façade, as was the case in Syria, or to give expression to a more conservative voice, as in the case of Tunisia. Lastly, internal division within the diaspora impedes a firm, unified opposition from abroad. An objective evaluation of this participation will make it possible to draw the right lessons from the mutation of the diasporas' participation in order to perfect the modes of this participation. Diasporas could offer new perspectives on shaping and constructing domestic politics and local regimes. Further inquiry should be conducted on how diasporas are shaping the political transition of each country, especially within the post-war reconstruction of countries such as Syria, Libya and Yemen, and the democratic transitions in Tunisia and Egypt, among others. As their participation has long been disputed, the changes occurring during the Arab uprisings potentially constitute a major shift in the way in which diasporas not only are included in the political systems, but are also perceived by the contributions they provide. These constitute pressing issues for the future and the evolution of democracy in the region.

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