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Abstract

How does international donor aid or "civil society assistance" impact political change in authoritarian states? Applying existing theories of civil society, democratization and authoritarianism, this study draws attention to a particular branch of international donor aid that extensively implements political programs for youth in Jordan's civil society. The main finding of this study is that international donors provide some opportunities for political change but overall reinforce the political status quo. The findings emphasize the theoretical argument that international aid can strengthen authoritarian rule. By conducting semi-structured interviews with Jordanian experts and youth who have observed the impact of international donors on the ground, this research increases understanding of the impact of international donor aid on political change in authoritarian contexts.

Keywords: International donor aid, civil society aid, youth policies, democratization, authoritarianism.

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Introduction

In 2021, the European Union (EU) spent 1.5 billion euros to support civil society and democratization outside of the EU (EC, 2021). Similarly, USAID, the biggest provider of international aid from the United States (U.S.), has a budget of 2.6 billion dollars in 2023 to promote civil society and democracy abroad (USAID, 2022). This aid also framed as "democracy promotion" and "civil society assistance" became popular in the second half of the 20th century when social movements such as in Eastern Europe toppled non-democratic regimes through the power of collective action. The idea emerged that a strong civil society is a key element for democratic consolidation in existing democracies and for democratic transformations elsewhere (Yom, 2005: 15). Today, democracy promotion is still widespread and has become a significant part of the foreign policies of democratic states such as the U.S., Germany and the Netherlands. Consequently, a big international donor enterprise has emerged in states where authoritarianism has prevailed for years (Yom, 2005; Schuetze, 2019; Van Hüllen, 2015).

The presence of "democracy promotors" (Schuetze, 2019) in authoritarian contexts is puzzling since academics emphasize that authoritarian states have limited incentives to democratize and often adopt certain civil society strategies to secure regime stability (Robinson, 1998; Wiktorowicz, 2000; Lewis, 2013). For example, it has been argued that authoritarian states often grant civil society actors relative freedom to operate while dictating when, where and how civic action is allowed. Thereby the state enhances its social control over society (Wiktorowicz, 2000). In addition, democracy promotion is a highly contested phenomenon and has been characterized as fundamentally ideological in nature, as a form of dominance through foreign policy, and as a reinforcing factor of authoritarian rule (Schuetze, 2019: 13-15).

Based on these theories, the study aims to increase understanding of the effects of international donor aid on political change in authoritarian regimes. It draws attention to a branch of international donor aid that targets the youth population of authoritarian states. In the past two decades, youth generations in the Middle East and North Africa became a main target of civil society assistance, such as in Tunisia and Morocco (Huber, 2017). Reasons for this development are a growing "youth 'bulge'" in the region and the geopolitical threats that were associated with youth's large-scale "exclusion from the political, social, and economic spheres" (Huber, 2017: 112). The inclusion of youth into U.S. and E.U. foreign policy increased in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, where cross-country movements demanded political change in a variety of states (Huber, 2017).

The study examines the specific case of Jordan, where international donors also started to target the political participation of Jordan's youth generation that comprises no less than 63% of the population (UNICEF, 2022). As for 2014, there were already over forty organizations working on youth's civic engagement in Jordan (UNFPA, 2015: 53-64). The donors set up projects, workshops and trainings for youth covering topics such as democracy, political participation and youth empowerment. The USAID, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation are examples of such organizations that are addressed in this study.

Jordan is known as a strictly authoritarian regime in which civil society is heavily repressed (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Since Jordan has not experienced any significant democratization in the past decades and is a frequent target of "civil society aid", it is a highly relevant case to examine the behaviors and affects of international donors. This specific question can be placed in the broader academic debate on the effect of international donors on political change in authoritarian states. By examining if and how international donors improve youth's political inclusion, this study aims to address the broader research question: "What are

the effects of international donor aid on political change in authoritarian regimes?". The study seeks to answer this question by examining the specific branch of 'youth aid' and placing it in a broader theoretical framework that connects civil society, democratization, authoritarianism and international donor aid. Methodologically, the study adopts a micro-level approach by conducting 8 semi-structured interviews with Jordanian civil society experts and youth that were engaged in youth-targeted international donor projects. This way, the study aims to identify the challenges and opportunities that civil society actors face in dealing with international donors in an authoritarian state such as Jordan.

Theoretical framework

Civil society, Democracy and Democratization

The concept of civil society dates back as far as the Enlightenment, and it became an essential element of political discourse again in the second half of the 20th[th] century (Seligman, 1992: 2-5). The political function of civil society, as an arena for political debate and people's collective political demands, became associated with both democratic consolidation and democratization (Mercer, 2002). This "renewed interest in civil society" in the second half of the 20th century within political thought (Seligman, 1992: 2), generated two broad theories of civil society both of which were the result of different political contexts (Foley & Edwards, 1996: 42). The first theory is based on the post-WWII experience of civil society in established democracies, while the second theory is based on the experiences of bottom-up democratic transformations in the 1980s and '90s as for example in Eastern Europe (Foley & Edwards, 1996: 39).

According to the first theory, civil society and democracy are intrinsically linked. The theory argues that civil society is an essential condition for democratic rule and representative governance (Linz & Stepan, 1996: 7; Diamond, 1994: 7). In established democracies, civil society interacts with the state on a mutual and interactive level (Foley & Edwards, 1996: 40). Civil society in established democracies came to be considered a social space in which individuals, groups and diverse types of organizations try to pursue collective interests in interaction or cooperation with the state (Linz & Stepan, 1996: 7). These actors can include non-governmental organizations (NGOs), grass root social movements such as political activists, labor unions or other forms of organizations whose goals vary widely (Carothers and Barndt, 1999: 19-20). For example, civil society institutions such as the European Student's Union which was founded in 1982 aims "to represent, defend and strengthen students' educational, democratic and political and social rights" (ESU, 2022). The democratic state is

held accountable and expected to incorporate collective interests voiced through such institutions and associations. A strong civil society that monitors the state and restricts its power is a necessary part of democratic functioning because the power is essentially in the hands of citizens (Diamond, 1994: 7; Foley & Edwards, 1996: 40). Any government decision, discourse or development "is subject to public disputation, compromise and agreement" (Keane, 1998: 8). In this way, "civil society underpins an effective and streamlined state, ensuring legitimacy, accountability and transparency" (Mercer, 2005: 7).

The second theory does not perceive civil society as an inherent part of democratic states but emphasizes its potential to drive democratic transformation where democracy is absent (Foley & Edwards, 1996: 39). In other words, the theory encompasses "the idea of civil society as in *opposition* to the state" (Diamond, 1994: 7). In this view, civil society is a space in which citizens can produce ideas about "political alternatives" as well as how to collectively achieve those (Linz & Stepan, 1996: 18). The argument is that people can mobilize and organize themselves, for example through grass root activist networks or protest movements to demand democracy in non-democratic regimes. For example, grass root organizations such as activist networks engage in processes of "civic engagement" to "generate power and influence decisions of established institutions" (Checkoway & Aldana, 2013: 1895).

Collective action has proven to be a powerful tool for people to demand and achieve democracy, such as in Eastern Europe (Diamond, 1994: 4-5). One important example of such development is the case of Poland, where a strong mobilization of civil society in the 1970s paved the way for the establishment of a parliamentary democracy (Bernhard, 1993: 315-317). Following the suppression of a worker's strikes in 1976 by the Polish communist government, workers established the Worker's Defense Committee (KOR). This committee incited an increase in public organization and association and consequently the "liberation of the public space in Poland" (Bernhard, 1993: 315). The Polish state came to legally acknowledge

collective action in the public sphere, which was an important condition for the emergence of social movements such as Solidarity in the 1980's (Bernhard, 1993: 316). Years later, the Solidarity-led opposition movement managed to demand democratic elections and form a coalition government (Bernhard, 1993: 316). The Polish case is a good example to explain the power of collective action and civil society to drive bottom-up democratization.

From the first theory, we learn that civil society generates collective interest and controls state power, which is an essential element of democratic functioning. From the second theory, we learn that civil society through collective action has proved itself to be a powerful space for opposition against non-democratic regimes.

Nevertheless, these theories of civil society, democracy and democratization do not explain the persistence of authoritarian states in which social movements have been challenging the status quo for decades such as in Jordan (Yom, 2014) or Egypt (Clarke, 2011). Therefore, the democratic function as well as the transformative power of civil society is not straightforward, and questions remain on the contexts and circumstances that enable civil society actors to achieve political or democratic change (Diamond, 1994). For example, Yom (2005: 14) rejects the idea that a strong civil society under all circumstances can "generate democratic regime change" and believes that this assumption is false in the context of most contemporary authoritarian states. The next section will therefore focus on the contested transformative power of civil society in contemporary authoritarian states.

Civil Society and Political Change in Authoritarian States

To address the puzzle of civil society in persistent authoritarian regimes, it is necessary to analyze the function of civil society from a different point of view. Possibly, civil society is an inherent part of authoritarian persistence and regime stability, as opposed from a driver of democratic transition. This idea is further explored by Wiktorowicz (2000), who argues that

civil society is an instrument of control for repressive regimes. The argument is as follows: the authoritarian state needs strategies to secure its stability and persistence, especially in the wake of social pressure from civil society groups and the international community to adopt more democratic ways of governance. By giving civil society limited spaces to operate and mobilize, the state prevents popular uprising and thus decay of regime stability. When civil society groups, especially those concerned with political change and democratization, are forced to mobilize in visible and registered organizations, "the state enhances its social control" (Wiktorowicz, 2000: 48).

Even though the authoritarian state has a lot of control over civil society, the possibilities for civil society actors, such as activists, to achieve political change in a restricted and controlled environment is discussed by multiple scholars. For example, Ho (2007: 189) argues that political activists are inclined to "adopt a non-confrontational strategy" that does not threaten the regime. In other words, civil society actors can promote political change through less visible or more acceptable forms of activism. Not by going to the streets to protest, but by developing social structures that can produce counter-discourses vis-à-vis the state and build a base for opposition. Ho (2007) argues that in contemporary authoritarian China, social movements and political activists can contribute to more gradual processes of political change within restricting and monitored environments. In a similar fashion, Lewis (2013) argues that civil society actors can achieve political change in authoritarian states when they "combine a level of autonomous organization with the production of counter-discourses that question the imposed social imaginary of the state and open up the possibility of alternative political futures" (p. 337).

These approaches teach us that civil society may not always function directly as a driver of rapid democratic transformation but can contribute to gradual democratic progress by

adopting less "aggressive" approaches and tuning in with the norms of the authoritarian state.

International Donors and Political Change in Authoritarian States

A substantial element of civil societies in authoritarian regimes is the engagement of international aid donors like the United States and the European Union: the mid-1990s has witnessed an increase in democratization efforts by international donors in non-democratic countries, also framed as "civil society assistance" (Carothers & Ottaway, 2000: 6). For international organizations and democratic states, democratization became a mission in the aftermath of the Cold War. This mission was fueled by the believe that a "vibrant" civil society, build on democratic values such as freedom of speech or plurality of opinion, would lead to democratic culture and eventually to the establishment of democratic states (Carothers & Ottaway, 2000: 4). International actors mostly engaged in democracy promotion through NGOs. Because of their (perceived) political independence they were considered the "adversary" of the "bureaucratic, authoritarian state". (Tvedt, 2006: 678-79). The idea of democracy promotion has been met with criticism by scholars who question its effectiveness in enabling political change in authoritarian regimes.

International donor aid directed at civil society is said to (negatively) affect democratization and political change in a variety of ways. First, international donor aid is said to hamper political change when it is focused merely on NGOs. For example, Mercer (2002) argues that those who benefit from aid are often urban middle-class elites, while those who engage in less organized but often more local forms of activism have less access to financial aid (Mercer, 2002: 14-15). This can lead to the marginalization of already politically marginalized groups, such as rural communities living far away from urban political centers in which the NGOs operate (Mercer, 2002). Second, Schuetze (2019: 98-99) argues that international donors shift the responsibility for democratization toward civil society actors

instead of addressing and acknowledging the repressive behavior of the authoritarian regime. Within NGOs, they develop capacity-building programs for politically marginalized groups. The capacity-building projects serve to 'train' marginalized group to become "democracy promoters" before political change can happen (Schuetze, 2019: 102). In this view, "strengthening" civil society becomes a bigger priority than holding the authoritarian state accountable for a lack of democracy (Schuetze, 2019). Hüllen (2015: 1) agrees that international donor aid is not sufficient in promoting political change. She states that widespread international democracy promotion had nothing to do with the toppling of some authoritarian regimes during the 2011 uprisings in a variety of North African and Middle Eastern states. In fact, the states that actively cooperated with international donors were the ones that withstood the forces of political change. This finding is in line with Schuetze's (2019) view that international donor aid strengthens authoritarian rule.

As mentioned, the study will further examine the following question: how does international donor aid, directed at civil society, affect political change in authoritarian regimes? It adopts a micro-level approach and documents the views of experts and youth who engage with international donors on a regular basis or did so in the past. The study has a broad expectation based on the theory above, which is that international donor aid is not likely to have a positive effect on political change in authoritarian regimes. The literature points out that civil society actors in authoritarian regimes are heavily restricted and thereby forced to accommodate to the norms of the state. It is expected that international donors also must accommodate to these norms, since any provocation of unrest or resistance to the regime would not be welcomed. The theory also pointed out that authoritarian states use control over civil society to secure regime stability and persistence. It is likely that international donors are also subject to state interests and control since they are part of civil society. Their presence and relative freedom to promote democracy, which is granted by the state, can serve to legitimize

the state. In addition, none of the assessed literature provided proof that international donor aid enabled significant democratic change.

Research design

Case selection

The case that is analyzed to answer the research question is the case of Jordan. The study examines the impact of international donor aid on political change in the light of political NGOs and projects for youth aimed at enhancing young people's political participation and engagement. It does so by conducting 8 semi-structured interviews with experts in the political and civil society field as well as youth who participated in the political NGOs and programs financed by international donors.

The choice to focus on youth's engagement in civil society in Jordan is as follows. Many studies emerged on youth's political and civic engagement underpinning waves of protest (also called the Arab Spring) in a variety of North African and Middle Eastern countries such as Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Palestine and Jordan where they all took on different forms and intensity (Hoffman & Jamal, 2012; Al-Momani, 2011; Halaseh, 2012). Activism in Jordan was mainly executed by the Hirak movement, a youth-led tribal movement that demanded political reform by peaceful protesting (Yom, 2014). The Arab spring is not the only reason that young people are often the focus of attention in Jordan's civil society. It has also been determined by simple demographics: over two-thirds of the population (63%) is under the age of 30 (UNICEF, 2022). The focus on youth is a regional trend, as is pointed out by Hübers (2017) who argues that the United States and Europe viewed the growing youth population in the region as a reason for targeted civil society assistance. They believed that youth's "exclusion from the political, social, and economic spheres" would amplify geopolitical threats such as war and unrest (Huber, 2017: 112).

In the case of Jordan, one study mentions over forty organizations that work on youth's political and civic participation in 2014 (UNFPA, 2015: 53-64). This number significantly increased since the last decade "witnessed several transformations in the youth sector" such as

the installment of 190 nationwide youth centers by the Ministry of Youth (UNESCO, 2019: 78). Furthermore, one study identified an additional 20 (mostly foreign) organizations that work on the civic engagement of youth. This number does not include the variety of initiatives these organizations, embassies and governments launched (UNESCO, 2019: 87-88).

As is pointed out by the study, the political programs for youth are widespread in Jordan's civil society and play a big part in the political context as well. In the words of one respondent (Activist, 32), civil society is "flooding" with youth projects. International financing is mainly done by big European and U.S. donors. The aid organizations raised by the respondents include German organizations such as the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), the Friedrich-Naumann-Foundation (FNF), the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD), the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) and American aid organizations established under the umbrella of USAID such as the National Democratic Institute (NDI) that cover a wide variety of political schools and programs for youth. The German and Dutch organizations mainly operate through NGOs which are sometimes in close relation to the government. The NIMD, for example, is a localized organization that is strongly subject to government regulation. The USAID funds political programs for youth in collaboration with the Ministry of Youth and the Ministry of Education, for example within universities. Because of this wide variety in similar youth programs, the result section elaborates on the type of program that is being addressed.

In short, the question how international donor aid affects political change in authoritarian regimes, is answered in the context of foreign aid directed at "youth cultivation" and youth's political participation. The study aims to discover the attitudes of experts and youth toward the regime's youth strategies, toward the international donor organizations that support these strategies, and the perceived impact of such acts on political change. Political change in this case means an increase in the ability of youth to engage in democratic processes.

Method and data collection

The research design is based on a single-case study. The question that this study aims to answer requires a research method useful for a small-scale study on the experiences and the attitudes of respondents toward a certain phenomenon, international donor aid.

To answer the research question, the study is based on 8 semi-structured interviews with respondents who have worked close with international donors and experts in the civil society 'youth' field. Selection criteria therefore include professional occupation or experience with international donors in such NGOs and projects. Expertise on youth's general political situation was also an important selection criterion. In addition, age was an important criterion since the respondents had to be knowledgeable on the youth society or part of it themselves. The age criteria for respondents was therefore 18-30 years, with exceptions since expertise was considered more important than age. The sample is also based on diversity in terms of geographics. Respondents resided in different governorates including Al-Karak, Amman, Aqaba, Mafraq and Tafilah. A complete list of respondents can be found in Appendix 1.

Online and semi-structured interviews are the preferred method to answer the research question. Online interviewing is "useful in small-scale studies on sensitive topics" and enables the interviewer to "reach geographically dispersed interviewees" (Halperin & Heath, 2020: 311). The study makes use of semi-structured interviews because this type of interviewing combines broad questions "to obtain factual information" and interview-specific questions "to probe deeper into people's experiences" (Halperin & Heath, 2017: 313). This is important because the study addresses a general phenomenon (international donor aid) by documenting the firsthand experiences and expertise of respondents in relation to international donors.

Operationalization of data

The data is organized in two categories, "challenges" and "opportunities", that respondents associate with international donors. These categories refer to the impact of international donor

aid on political change in the context of young people's political participation and therefore relate strongly to the research question. As mentioned, political change refers to the increased ability of youth to engage in democratic processes, such as producing counter-discourses vis-à-vis the state and enhance their political participation.

"Challenges" can include those related to government attitudes and practices toward youth, international donor interference in this area, and the impact of political programs for youth. In short, "challenges" refer to the circumstances, related to international donor organizations, which discouraged or limited youth to conduct effective and meaningful political participation. It can also refer to the inefficiency of certain programs.

"Opportunities" refer to ways in which the international donors helped achieve political change in a way that was deemed effective and meaningful by the respondents. This category refers to the circumstances, spaces and openings in civil society that enabled some sort of political change despite challenges. Specific areas of interest are covered in Figure 1 and 2.

Figure 1 *Areas of interest categorized in challenges.*

Figure 2 *Areas of interest categorized in opportunities.*

Findings

In the following section, the main findings are presented and divided into two broad themes. The first theme is "opportunities" and the second is "challenges". The findings will be sub-divided under these two themes. The sub-sections generally consist of an explanation for the finding, citing evidence and a brief interpretation of the evidence. Findings are further discussed in the conclusion.

Opportunities

Creating spaces for political party life

Political party life in Jordan has been at an all-time low in the past decades. This is due to the security hand that keeps citizens from engaging in any party related activity (Rafayah, 2022). Political activists, party members and journalists are harassed by security forces at a regular basis (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Among other ambiguous laws, the Cybercrime law that was introduced in 2015 is used by authorities to heavily suppress citizen's right to express their political opinion and organize in online spheres (Samaro & Sayadi, 2019). However, the security hand on young people and political activists seems to have loosened since the Royal Committee to Modernize the Political System (RCMPS) was established in 2021. Relative freedoms have been granted to political party work. The Royal Committee also stressed the importance of including young people in the renewed political party life. This change in the government's attitude was expressed by multiple respondents. One respondent stated that since 2021, Jordan is facing a changing approach of the state: "They are getting youth more involved in political party life and democratic movements. They can raise their voice in some spaces, not all. […] One recommendation of the Royal Committee is to let youth engage more in political life" (Political activist, age 32).

Opinions about the lasting impact and credibility of the government's changing attitude and RCMPS varied. However, most respondents agreed that political parties play an

increasingly bigger role in Jordan's political landscape. Not yet in the Parliament, but in the NGO sector. One respondent (Program manager, age 23) emphasized that the King Abdullah II gave clear orders to the security organizations not to put pressure on the people and organizations that engage with political parties. He added that it is still too early to say "how much power will be allowed for the parties to take".

In recent years, members of parties started to engage with international donors, in particular political training programs financed by donors. This became clear from multiple conversations, including with one of the respondents (age 45) who was the secretary of the Zamzam party (now the National Coalition party). The two organizations that play the biggest role in this development are the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD) and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS). These organizations also organize many youth projects. The programs train party members in developing policy papers, creating social media campaigns, structuring a political party and operating in the wake of elections. NIMD and KAS work with political party members (not with the parties themselves) and prioritize trainings for youth like Jordan's school of Politics (by NIMD) and Young Voices in Political Parties (by KAS).

The respondent (Party member, age 45) stated about these organizations: "I see that these are very helpful for [young people] to change their minds about participating in parties. They make the people's mentality accepting of these". Another respondent (Program attendant, 20, #1) emphasized that NGOs became a safe space for young people to interact with political parties after the Royal Committees recommendations. He said that the NGOs are an excellent place for Jordanian youth to get more involved in political parties. This is because NGOs are more accessible than political parties, especially since young people are less afraid to engage with NGOs in terms of security.

He said: "They are afraid […] but there is a green light for the political life and I believe this will remain".

Not only did the NGOs provide space for young people to interact with political parties, but it was also found that they give party members the opportunity to recruit new youth members. One respondent (Political activist, age 30) recruited new party members in the political programs at NIMD: "[…] I was not there for the training, I was there for the connections. We are starting a party and I want to meet new young people who are interested". The respondent said that political programs are particularly helpful to access people from more remote areas since their selection criteria are often diverse.

In summary, the respondents seemed hopeful of the new role and relative freedoms of political parties since the establishment of the Royal Committee. Nevertheless, they acknowledged that the results of the Royal Committee regarding the political party law will become clear in the coming decade. In the meantime, political programs within NGOs financed by international donors proved to be a useful tool for politically active young people to interact with party members and the other way around. Having a space for parties to attract youth members within these programs is a significant opportunity since a revival of political party life in Jordan would mean a small opening for civic participation and political change in a heavily restricted political environment.

Expanding civic space and political participation

A second finding was that young people see political programs as an opportunity to learn more about politics, develop a political orientation, interact with people from different communities and exchange ideas. In a few cases, the political programs served as an interim step for participating in political parties, local committees or other political functions.

First, respondents were positive about the political programs because they believed that the programs covered politics in a way that is not covered by the school curriculum in Jordan. One of the respondents (Program attendant, 20, #2) mentioned how she wished that the school curriculum prepared youth for participating in politics. She attributed this problem to the fear that exists among teachers to address politics. Another respondent (Program attendant, 28) also stated that "[…] the school curricula does not fully cover the political aspect and that's why I think these programs give young people a chance to know more". The respondent believed that participants can freely develop a political orientation, particularly outside of tribal relationships and family influence.

Second, a recurring topic was that the programs brought young people from diverse backgrounds together, giving them a space to elaborate on important Jordanian issues such as identity. For example, one of the respondents (Program attendant, age 20, #1) said: "People from different cities and villages can know each other now. […] With these programs, tribes started to get to know each other, girls started to know boys, and most important Jordanians started to see Palestinians". Another respondent (Civil society activist, age 28) said: "In these programs we learn from other experiences. We learn something about Tafilah, Ma'an and Aqaba. […] When you sit with your colleagues and make friendships with them, this teaches you a lot".

Third, political programs sometimes served as an interim step for participants to participate in politics. For example, a respondent (Political activist, age 32) said that NIMD had a total of four graduates in the Royal Committee. (It is however noteworthy to mention that the RCMPS was not elected.) Furthermore, two colleagues of his from the program are currently members of local councils. Moreover, another respondent (Program trainer, 23) mentioned that his friends participated in a USAID program training young people to be in

local councils, and that they had won the elections. However, he remarked that the local councils do not play a crucial role in governance.

In short, the study found that young people valued the political programs because they had the opportunity to meet people from all over the country to discuss societal issues and learn from other experiences. The programs appealed to a sense of community. It was also found that sometimes the political programs served as an interim step toward political participation. However, it must be acknowledged that it is unclear whether the political programs were an essential factor for some youth to attain a political function.

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Challenges

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Depoliticizing political work

A central theme that was found by the study is that the political programs for youth depoliticized political work. In other words, the programs shifted attention from the wider political context toward more shallow forms of political participation such as engaging in dialogue, workshops and trainings about political concepts. The political programs for youth built on and reinforced the state's provision about its willingness to let young people engage freely in political life. The RCMPS was not the first of its kind and therefore the outcomes for political change are unclear. According to multiple respondents, it will take time to see the results work out on the ground.

The political trainings and programs for youth started to become more widespread in the period after the Arab Spring when the government found that they needed to deal with the frustrations of the younger generation. With the financial support of international donors, the NGO sector "boomed" and became dominated by political programs aiming to engage youth in the political and civic life (Interview with Program manager, age 23). Among respondents there was considerable doubt about the intention of (different factions within) the government

and the international donors to engage youth in politics and address their problems. One of the respondents (Political activist, age 32) stated:

> "Before 2021 [before the RCMPS], everything was just a fake spending of money on democracy and political engagement for youth. […] All of this I think it's fake. You train, train, train these youth without pushing them to the playground. All the time they sit behind the line to see the game, but they couldn't cross the line and have their role".

The same idea was expressed by a second respondent (Program manager, age 23), who believed that the political programs for youth served to give the younger generation a false impression that they could engage in a more democratic political life. He said that the committees and initiatives for youth are "part of a bigger situation" and that the initiatives served to make youth "spend their energy and anger". He explained: "You make them close to the government, organize a lot of meetings and make them feel like they are really engaged in the situation. But if we take a good look, we find them out of the image totally, just moving behind."

These sentiments are based on the observation that the political programs tend to be detached from Jordan's political problems, do not address the political situation and therefore cannot contribute to change. For example, the FES regularly launches the Young Leaders Program which gives young people workshops about political participation, social democracy, economy, and leadership skills. When participants are selected for the follow-up or advanced program, they learn how to draft policy papers and how to start advocacy campaigns (Interview with Program attendant, age 20, #2). However, the study found that these programs do not have a direct influence on decision making because they are detached from the political sphere. It was expressed by multiple respondents that young people's participation in these NGOs is at the expense of meaningful political engagement. These respondents believed that the political

programs withhold young people from impactful political organization such as political party work and other forms of activism.

One respondent (Journalist, age 24) gave an example of how the projects are detached from politics. She rejected the programs because they are "not a real civic space" and only look political from the outside. She said that the programs, such as by the FNF, FES, and USAID have remarkably similar contents. They all cover the same topics such as women's and youth's empowerment, political reform, leading change and a comprehensive Jordanian identity. The respondent believed that the programs, through their generality, created more taboos on political problems and gave participants no input or space to challenge the role of the government. For example, USAID launched a project in Jordanian universities, Ana Ushārik (I Participate), in cooperation with the Ministry of Education. The project is about democracy and active citizenship. During the program, participants discuss papers published by His Majesty King Abdullah II and are introduced to the outcomes of the Royal Committee (Interview with program attendant, 20, #2). The respondent (Journalist, age 24) remarked: "Instead of criticizing and reviewing, [the donors] are organizing a political school in cooperation with the Ministry [of Education] to praise the political system. This is affecting the democratic situation".

A second respondent (Program manager, age 23) likewise believed that USAID's political programs have an adverse effect on the general political situation. This is because they only reinforced and legitimized the status quo. He believed that USAID "[s]upports the fractions of the government that does not want parties and democratization" since he saw no practical results or changes after the programs. A third respondent (Political activist, age 30) also highlighted the inability of most programs to engage youth in critically addressing the political situation. This also had to do with the general political and security situation: "You

get a person to teach people political activism and he is worried of putting a post on Facebook about the government. You can't teach that, it's not a thing."

In short, the study found that the political programs for youth often did not have practical outcomes for democratization, political change and the political participation of youth. According to some respondents, the involvement of donors had a negative effect on political change and the general political situation. This was because the state's narrative of democratization was reinforced without critical assessment by the donors. Some respondents believed that the involvement of donors served as a distraction method, a false display of democracy or a reinforcement of the political status quo. For example, the USAID was found to emphasize the leading role of the government and the RCMPS in Jordan's political reform process. This outcome is important because it emphasizes that international aid can be negatively associated with political change.

Repetition

The second challenge that was found by the study is also connected to the problem of depoliticization and the inability of the programs to engage youth in the political sphere on a larger scale. Often, young people sought participation in the programs because of the material and financial benefits. The programs proved counterproductive when this was the main incentive for young people to participate. The main problem was that young people kept seeking participation in different programs instead of engaging in political work after graduating from them. Four participants addressed this problem.

The study found that political programs by international donors are appealing to young people because they are often characterized by a "luxurious style". Participants are invited into hotels with good facilities and without expenses (Journalist, age 24). According to other respondents, this is among the main reasons that young people participate in the programs. One

of the respondents (Political activist, age 30) explained the problem with the following anecdote:

> "The first time I went with NIMD we went to this hotel called [*name*]. It's a good hotel […] So we went there and [the participants] were upset because the food quality was not up to standard. They said, "FNF only takes us to Hilton!". […] I started to know that they don't come for the training or the knowledge, they come for the hotels and money."

It was found that participants received spending money and transportation fees, which made participating in the political programs an earning model for some young people. To provide an example, one of the respondents (Political activist, age 32) stated that the civil society sphere is "flooded" with political programs for youth. He said: "The donors are giving fees for transportation and per diems for participants who found that it's a very useful way to earn money: just sit and say "I am a youth activist" […] without making an actual impact".

Considering Jordan's economic circumstances and high unemployment rate among young people, it is only logical that young people take the opportunity to earn money through participating in political programs. According to one of the respondents (Program manager, age 23) young people who did not have a job have started to depend on the transportation fees that come with the programs. In other words, participating in programs became a substitute for a job to some young people.

The financial benefits and poor monitoring of the programs makes them prone to repetition, a challenge which was addressed by multiple respondents. For example, one of the program attendants (age 20, #2) recalled how her colleagues at the FES participated in all the youth programs that were available in this particular organization. Afterwards, they would sign up for programs at other institutes which had comparable topics and political workshops. She believed that the programs became a "routine" for many people who did

not take an interest in the political contents. She said, "[i]f they had a clear goal, they would not end up joining the same organizations and taking the same workshops. What's the point of that?". However, she also believed that the organizations themselves are responsible for monitoring who participates in the programs.

Another respondent (Political activist, age 30) recalled how during his first political program with NIMD, the trainer asked the group of participants how many times they had joined the program before. The majority of the forty participants was there for the fourth time. The trainer used the expression "training tourism" to describe the situation. The respondent added, "[t]his is what Jordanians do. They look for trainings, they go to attend, they get 20 or 50 or 70 JDs for transportation although most of them lie and stay in Amman." Another respondent (Program manager, age 23) identified the same problem and said he knew someone who joined twelve different programs. He identified another problem, which was that some people after joining many programs would not go to visit parties or political organizations: "You will find them becoming a trainer, teaching the things they learned to another group. You'll just see recycling".

In short, the study found that the financial benefits and luxurious style of the political programs makes participation exceedingly popular among young people. This is an important finding because it demonstrates that international donor aid often serves other (non-political) needs of target groups. The NGOs and project's engage participants in a loop of dialogue, capacity-building, trainings and workshops with limited practical or political outcomes. For many of them, taking political trainings and workshops have become a routine that pays for life expenses. Consequently, the projects have no political significance outside of the programs. Since most of the programs have been going on since 2015, this problem raises further questions about the ability or willingness of international donors to bring about political change and democratization. This finding also emphasizes the

challenge of depoliticization. The programs create an image that young people engage in the political sphere and "democratic" process at a large scale because they participate in such projects. The international donors are reinforcing this image instead of actually supporting youth to achieve political change through collective action.

Distrust and ideology

A third challenge that the study found is that the international donors who finance political programs for youth are subject to varying levels of distrust. In particular, programs for youth financed by the United States were considered untrustworthy among respondents. This mainly had to do with them bringing their own political agendas for Jordan and the region.

The distrust toward the U.S. sponsored programs was expressed by most respondents. One of the respondents (Program attendant, 20, #1) who was supportive of international donors in general, stated that political activities financed by the USAID or other U.S. institutions were very unpopular among youth. This was mainly because of general anti-American and anti-Israeli sentiments. He stated that in general, it is not considered a good thing to be part of these organizations. A second respondent (Journalist, age 24) said that there are multiple campaigns within the universities to boycott American projects. She believed that anything U.S. related was "skeptical" because of their support for the occupation of Palestine, their military interference in the region at large and the dependency of Jordan on USAID. By means of an example, a huge fund from the U.S. Embassy was granted to a particular university in Jordan. With the fund, a local student club was replaced by an American corner with a pre-determined agenda from the Embassy. Talking about certain political topics became prohibited.

A third respondent (Program attendant, age 28) was skeptical about the U.S. agenda in organizing political programs for youth. She believed that the U.S. and other governments were donating to influence Jordan's political developments: "They bring their agenda, such as the

American agenda to protect the occupation". A similar sentiment was expressed by a fourth respondent (Political activist, age 32) who believed that the international donors directed financial aid to Jordan to secure their political agendas. He stated:

> "Sometimes, I just feel deep inside of me, that the donors must believe that the outcome is negative. That the whole project is just getting worse and worse in terms of deliverables. So why continue the donations? It's a very critical question. In my believe, many of these donors just inject the money into Jordan to […] make the state change its mind on the Palestinian issue, the normalization with Israel. Once they stop the funding, we will have an economical crash. So, if we would want the funds, we should change our mind about issues 1, 2, and 3".

A fifth respondent noted how he did not trust American donors at all. He said: "I feel like they support the agenda of those that do not want parties and real democracy in Jordan. […] We should have the control over democratization, it should come through us" (Program manager, 23).

In terms of ideological interference, there were some concerns among respondents. In general, the international donors from Europe and the United States have a liberal ideology. For example, the Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNF) is a liberal organization. This was sometimes considered a problem by respondents, especially when it came to young target groups. One respondent (Political activist, 30) stated the following:

> "The FNF is a full liberal organization. I do not mind that, but then throughout a few years, [participants] are taught from the age of 16, 17 or 18 that liberalism is the right way to go. Of course, they are going to become a liberal. […]. This is the problem; they create the political views".

Another example of a liberal organization is the FES, which was found to have close ties with the Social Democratic Party in Jordan and supports this party throughout its youth programs (Program attendant, 20, #1). Another respondent (Program attendant, 20, #2) believed FES left the political orientation of participants open. However, she noted about some peers that "[i]f they are affiliated with a foundation that is more on social democracy, you suddenly find them considering themselves part of that party or ideology. […] It is not based on logic or education".
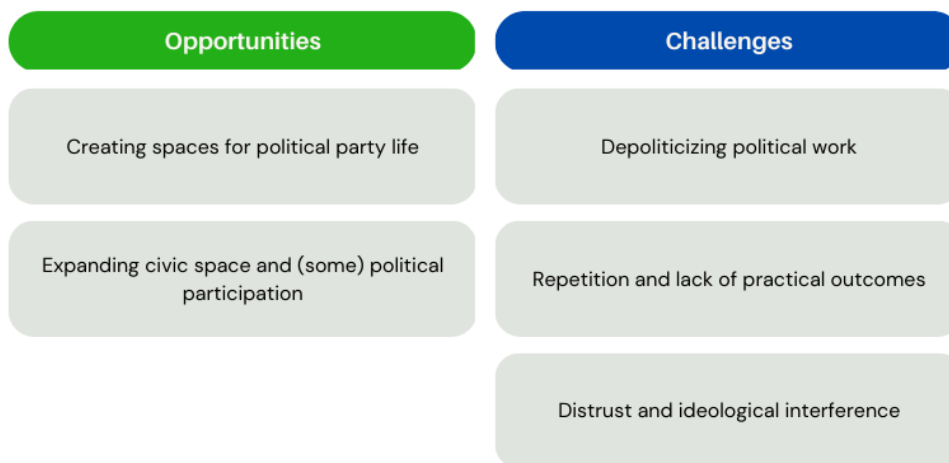
In short, it was found that there exists a considerable distrust toward international donors. Sometimes, European donors promoted a particular political or ideological agenda in the programs and did not always leave participant's political orientation open. In the case of U.S. sponsored programs, the distrust was higher. Respondents believed that the U.S. donors did not finance youth projects to achieve political change. Instead, they believed that the aid served to secure the U.S. political agenda in the region. In this view, international donor aid does not bring about political change or democratization because this is not the donor's priority. This problem particularly occurs when the donors act on behalf of foreign interests instead of the political needs of civil society actors.

Conclusion

Discussion

This study aimed to answer the question, how does international donor aid affect political change in authoritarian states? The study drew attention to a political trend in Jordan in which international donors finance and organize political educational projects for youth, mainly through NGOs. These projects revolved around capacity building, democracy, civic engagement, political parties and political participation. The findings (summarized in figure 3) provided more clarity as to how international donors could affect political change in a heavily restricted political environment.

Figure 3. *Findings categorized in challenges and opportunities.*

Opportunities	Challenges
Creating spaces for political party life	Depoliticizing political work
Expanding civic space and (some) political participation	Repetition and lack of practical outcomes
	Distrust and ideological interference

The study identified two opportunities, which indicate a positive relationship between international donor aid and political change. The theoretical debate on civil society in authoritarian regimes highlighted that sometimes, civil society actors can achieve political change in restricting political environments. They do so by adopting strategies that accommodate to the norms of the authoritarian regime. In other words, when protesting or other "confrontational" forms of civic action are dangerous, actors choose to less aggressive ways to counter the state. In the case of Jordan, political party members sought engagement with young

people through NGOs that were financed by international donors. Since the environment for political parties has been hostile in the past decades because of strict security regulations, the NGOs and youth projects proved a valuable space for the integration of young people into political party life. Because of the existing social structures created by international donors, civil society actors could act on a change in the regime's attitude and meet young people that were hesitant to join parties. It is however important to acknowledge that political parties do not have a significant role in the Parliament and political party life is still in a premature phase.

The second opportunity was the expansion of civic space and providing opportunities for young people's political participation. Existing literature emphasized that civic space, where people can freely exchange ideas about societal and political problems, is an important condition for democratization and political change. Citizens can take collective action, voice their interests in the public sphere and sometimes even take control over state power when democracy is absent. It was found that respondents valued the civic space that was created by international donors through youth projects. This was because they believed it was powerful to sit down with colleagues from all over the country to discuss important societal issues that were of national importance. In particular, the projects provided an opportunity for political education that respondents found was missing from the Jordanian school curriculum.

In short, the presence of international donors in Jordan contributed to the expansion of civic space for political party activity and young people's civic engagement, which could be an important base for political action when the security situation improves. However, thus far the projects did not drive any significant changes in youth's political behavior and therefore did not significantly support political change. The reasons for this became clearer by identifying the challenges.

The study identified three challenges which indicated a negative correlation between international donor aid and political change in authoritarian regimes. These are important

findings to understand the co-existence of authoritarian rule with a vibrant civil society and the impact of international donors on political change. It was found that the political trainings for youth were widespread, but that they did not have any actual political implications for youth such as decision-making, policy-making or increased participation in political institutions. Instead, they "depoliticized" political participation and were extremely repetitive and theoretical. Furthermore, many youths participated in the programs for financial reasons. As a result, there was a considerable distrust toward international donors, their impact, and intentions.

The results provided evidence that international donors did not contribute to political change but reinforced the political status quo. As existing theory emphasized, the authoritarian state enhances its social control over society by regulating when, where and in what ways civil society actors can engage in civic action. In the case of Jordan, it is most likely that the state allows international donors to finance widespread projects for youth to contain youth mobilization in the aftermath of the Arab spring and following protests. It is also likely that the state wants to incorporate these 'unpolitical' yet political youth projects to create an image of democratization to the donor states. It is difficult to make an argument about the intentions of the state as a whole because of its complexity, but a history of futile democratization efforts naturally serve as a benchmark for this analysis.

As several respondents stated, the state creates an image of democratization and civic freedom, and the donors are reinforcing this image. In the case of USAID, the state's narrative of democratization was legitimized as participants were encouraged to read and analyze the policy papers of His Majesty King Abdullah II and were introduced to the outcomes of the Royal Committee. It was notable that the role of the regime as a source of repression in the past decades was not critically assessed by any of the international donors. This is also because the European organizations were often subject to close government monitoring and the U.S.

projects were often conduced in collaboration with ministries and other public institutions. The lack of critical assessment of the regime, in combination with the capacity-building projects for young people, shift the responsibility for democratization toward civil society. It should be mentioned that this finding is fully in line of Schuetze's (2019) assessment of international donor aid and authoritarianism in Jordan.

If the state's promise of a new political chapter in which the new generation can engage freely in political life is credible, the efforts of international donors may yield some positive results. This is because they provide a space for political education and awareness that may not be as present in other sectors. On the other hand, if political change proves futile in the next decade, international donors should drastically transform or stop their efforts not to legitimize false provisions and support the state's democratization narratives. Either way, international donors should not interfere in any political processes to suit their own political agenda's or impose a certain ideology. However, European and U.S. donors in Jordan seem to have only broadened the scope of their political initiatives.

Limitations and future research

This study contributes to a broader understanding of civil society aid in authoritarian regimes by analyzing a specific branch of international donor aid that targets the political participation of young people in Jordan. The findings and outcomes associated with this kind of aid are important because they do not only question the effectiveness of international donor aid in authoritarian regimes, but they also emphasize how "civil society assistance" can reinforce the political status quo. It shows that there should be a more urgent discussion on the implications of democracy promotion on authoritarian rule. That is to say, if the intention is to enhance the political situation and support citizens in their quest for political freedom.

This study had some limitations. For instance, the findings were partly based on the personal experiences of experts and young people with international donors. Even though the findings were based on general patterns found in these accounts, the results were naturally subject to a degree of bias. Other limitations were the scope of the analysis that only addressed a number of prominent organizations. To avoid bias and increase the scope of analysis, future research could take on a more discourse-oriented approach to study the relationship between international aid, authoritarianism, and political change. For example, future research could focus on a comprehensive and textual analysis of project documents by international donors to determine the extend to which they reinforce regime official narratives. Such analysis could shed further light on the reinforcing role that international donors play in authoritarian states and how to structurally tackle this problem.

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Appendix 1.

The respondents include the following persons:

- A former secretary of a political party with extensive experience in training programs for political parties and international donors (age 35);

- A researcher, activist and program manager with expertise in politics, youth programs and political parties (age 23);

- A journalist and activist with expertise in politics, the civil society field and international donors (age 24);

- A student who is a frequent attendant of political programs organized by the government as well as by international donors (age 20, #1);

- A student who has participated in multiple political programs for youth within internationally financed NGOs (age 20, #2);

- A political activist, researcher and NGO professional with experience in protest movements, international donors and the civil society field (age 32);

- A political activist, former leader of a protest movement, and political party founder with experience with international donors and political programs for youth (age 30);

- A civil society activist who was a program assistant and frequent attendant of youth programs (age 28).