

## Tunisia and the Mediterranean Region facing Security Challenges

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Since January 2011, the Mediterranean Region is subject to widespread political, social and economic unrests, hence security tumult and disorder. Movements for change, or the so-called “Arab Spring” first started in Tunisia, turning down several dictatorships that dominated the southern shore of the Mediterranean for more than five decades, which surprisingly and quickly collapsed. The democratization process started in Tunisia, in a region that had practically only known repression and political violence.

This reality complicated the smooth, peaceful and violence-free transition towards democracy. With the exception of Egypt and Tunisia which did not have to pay high costs for the fall of their dictators, Libya, Yemen and Syria have turned into swamps for extremism, violence and terrorism resulting of the absence or fragility of their states, which almost definitively killed any hope for the emergence of democracies in the short, mid and even long terms.

In addition to other challenges, violence and terrorism also threaten the emerging democracy in Tunisia, as they require imposing restrictions on freedoms, which due to the prevailing political culture that won't change before decades, would result in the failure and abortion of this experience.

Regardless of these developments, although Tunisia should be playing a much bigger role in view of its new situation, it will have to face with other countries of the region common security challenges, of which mainly terrorism and illegal migration, which can only be tackled with a joint and common action.

### **Rise of terrorism**

The war in Libya certainly constitutes the most developing and dangerous crisis known by this region since the Tunisian Revolution. Both events represent the most important political developments since independence, leading to more tensions throughout the region and putting at risk stability, in the short term at least, if not in the middle and long terms as well.

There is no doubt that the Libyan crisis made the security situation in the region much more fragile: porous border lines and inefficient security institutions incited terrorist groups to carry out their plans in this wide geographic area, with a large number of AQIM members joining the Libyan insurgents (thuwars) in the first phase, while few others sneaked into Tunisian territories to carry out adverse operations. AQIM

clearly wanted to take most profit of the situation to develop its terrorist activity in the Arab Maghreb region in general. Later in the second phase, after the establishment of what is known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Raqqa and the fall of Mosul, many terrorist groups started to adopt ISIS logo and to claim allegiance to this movement with an attempt to exploit its repulsive but strong reputation.

Experts are convinced that members of various terrorist groups, such as AQIM or ISIS, have recently started what is referred to as “an advanced and accelerated arming phase” as a consequence of the Libyan crisis resulting in very weak and almost absent State institutions and the dissemination of heavy weapons in the region. With this, AQIM, ISIS affiliated groups and Ansar Shari'aa engaged in a dangerous armament process in Libya, which is transforming them from being cross-border terrorist groups with easy movement and travel, into more stable and conventional war militias occupying large portions of countries, relying in this on their heavy weaponry. These groups which only had some explosives and light weapons such as machine guns, hold today various types of missiles and military equipment easily acquired in Libya from the former Libyan regime's ammunition depots, which constitutes the biggest threat to security in the region, and more particularly to security in Tunisia.

Algerian authorities expressed from the beginning their concerns about the expansion of terrorist groups in and around Libya, which may among others explain their general feelings about revolutions taking place in the region.

Concerns and warnings launched by some countries including Algeria about terrorist groups taking profit of the crisis in Libya to strengthen their activities in the region by smuggling weapons and arms out of Libya have become real today. Algeria believed that weapons would fall in the hands of AQIM and that the possible arm running to Al Qaeda's branch in the region would have security impacts on the Great Maghreb,

and on Tunisia and Algeria specifically, as they both share borders with Libya. There were also concerns about the multiplicity of terrorist groups and that AQMI was no more the only group taking profit of free movement and travel induced by the conflict in Libya.

There is no doubt that the impacts of the Libyan crisis on stability in North Africa are closely linked to the easy smuggling of weapons to neighboring countries as well as to the easy infiltration of terrorist groups from and into Libyan territories. It is therefore necessary to enhance security vigilance and cooperation to face the expansion of terrorist operations, which included even an attempt to control one portion of the Tunisian territory in the recent Ben Guerdane attack.

This constitutes a dangerous qualitative change. While AQMI's objective was to “implement an Islamist Imara in the desert”, the goal of ISIS is to occupy populated areas by breaking down the State control and destabilizing the region by all means to achieve that goal.

Regardless of the outcome of the crisis in Libya, instability in this country and in neighboring countries will continue for some time in the future. In Libya, state institutions have been dismantled, and tribes have become the strongest social connection, and it is likely that belligerents will continue to fight for power and for sources of strength, transforming Libya in a new Afghanistan or Iraq, although there are clear differences between the situation in Libya and the situation in other countries.

On the other hand, the expansion of the crisis to neighboring countries should be clearly considered and not neglected, especially that Libya's two western neighbors, Tunisia and Algeria which borders are much closer to Tripoli, do not share the same vision and perspective with regard to the conflict in Libya.

Tunisia has been trying to remain completely neutral with respect to the conflict's two parties, and this is not easy due to the extreme pressure it

has been subject to, even in indirect forms. The two parties are trying to gain support and be formally recognized as the Libyan people's legitimate representative, or at least have Tunisia not deal with the other party. Tunisia is also subject to the pressure of international powers which are trying to create balance in Libya and face the expansion of terrorist groups, mainly ISIS based in Syrte.

### **Increase of illegal migration**

Migration across the Mediterranean is an old-new phenomenon, as it now includes social categories that were not necessarily concerned (old people, women and children) while it only attracted young people in the past. Today we talk more about the migration of peoples and not only of marginalized social groups or ambitious youth. Migration is due to classical reasons, mainly repression, political troubles, absence of development, miserable conditions in the Arab and West African regions, faint democracies and difficulties to obtain visas, leading people to look for illegal forms to reach the other shore, at the risk of drowning or in the best case being rescued and held in custody centers before their evacuation back to their original countries.

Migration flows have resumed after the Arab Spring due to weak and sometimes even inexistent State authorities, as is the case in Libya. It is estimated that 50,000 immigrants arrived in Europe in 2015, including 30,000 using Italian coastlines, which reflects an increase of 250% in terms of illegal migration.

Immigrants use three corridors across the Mediterranean Sea: The Western corridor (between Morocco and Spain), the Central and the Eastern corridors. The European agency FRONTEX states that the western corridor is the only one protected. The number of (Arab and African) migrants increases with every political or economic unrest taking place in the Arab region. Statistics show that between 2000 and 2011 i.e. the period preceding the Arab Spring, nearly 20,000 people drowned in the Mediterranean, most of whom were Arabs

and Africans. South European countries face considerable challenges due to the huge flows of illegal migrants and refugees, especially Italy which receives every day an average of 500 migrants while the European Union in total received more than 170,000 illegal migrants in 2014. Thousands are still losing their lives trying to reach Europe, as this year only, more than 1,500 migrants and refugees perished in the sea; Libya constitutes the main gate for immigrants leaving for Europe.

The Mediterranean has become the most dangerous road in the World as described by UNHCR, where more than 3400 immigrants lost their lives in 2014 i.e. an average of one person drowning every 4 hours according to the Euro-Mediterranean Observatory for Human Rights and Migration. The new element in illegal migration is the advent of Syrians who are now trying to cross the sea between Libya and Italy for long monopolized by Maghrebi and African nationals. Statistics show that 2157 Syrian migrants lost their lives in the last four years since the beginning of the Syrian Revolution, while Turkish authorities arrested a large number of Syrians who could not stand refugee camps and tried to look for better living opportunities.

With this new element and the inflow of large numbers of Syrians seeking help, smuggling routes have been reinforced and vitalized; 8500 migrants arrived in Italy since the beginning of the year, with an average of 116 individuals every day, and one fourth of them are Syrians and Palestinians. Data also show that at some point there were 250,000 Syrian refugees in Egypt, many of whom tried to look for better opportunities and decided to take the risk of embarking to Europe, hundreds of them were killed.

The crisis of Syrian refugees shed the light on a problem that has been in this region for decades; illegal migration had existed well before the conflict in Syria and Arab Revolutions. There is confusion in some minds between the problem of refugees leaving their homes due to natural disasters

or crises, and migration induced by economic reasons, sometimes even by weather conditions or the human rights situation in some Mediterranean and African countries. Migration has for long been a thorny issue for south Mediterranean and European governments and was often used as a pressure card to extort the European Union. The Libyan Regime was the one that most extorted the EU and bargained Western political positions against security in the Mediterranean, as it stood along with the Tunisian Regime against illegal migration and gained support for doing this. Some believe that after the Tunisian Revolution, there were attempts to invade the Mediterranean with an avalanche of boats and illegal migrants to disseminate chaos in Europe and convey a political message to the West saying that the alternative to the previous regime holding full grasp on the situation would be chaos in the Mediterranean and a deluge of boats.

In the absence and weakness of the state due to political instability and the prevalence of gangs in Libya, trafficking networks increased and started to keep migration candidates in homes and hangars before expediting them on fully insecure and unsafe boats. Libya and Egypt have become transit centers for migrants from Sierra Leone and Central African countries, and migrants seemed to flee misfortunes and killings in Syria. Cards started to get confused, and the migration issue started to be used by human rights organizations to call for a EU military intervention to stop illegal migration. Italy was the first European country to be impacted being the closest to Tunisian borders. Figures today show that migration from Tunisia considerably dropped: hundreds of attempts have been thwarted since political partners engaged in a serious political dialogue, and also because the Tunisian Mediterranean borders have become much safer since EU border control equipment has been in use.

Migration from the southern to the northern shore show that the Arab Region and North Africa are still dangerous compared to the West, pushing

Maghrebis to line up to reach the other side of the Mediterranean. Most sea victims are Arab and African nationals, leading the EU to consider the share-distribution principle by which European countries share the load of applying migrants, along with security and economic measures to reduce sea tragedies and to protect EU countries against possible terrorist threats. In any case, the term “refugee” is now much more used by European officials than the term “migrant”, reflecting tragedies and wars marking the region, especially Libya; Europeans started to deal with illegal migrants’ boats as if they were all carrying refugees fleeing deadly conflicts.

EU countries are currently looking into about 260,000 applicants seeking residency in Europe, and are considering additional 20,000 still living outside the EU, but only those classified as refugees by the EU. However, after the terrorist attacks striking some European countries and serious threats targeting others, Western countries decided to mobilize army vessels and deal with migrants as if they were “terrorists” according to some human rights NGOs.

One main EU decision taken in May 2015 was made during a meeting held by migration specialists aimed at designing a security strategy to fight against networks sending thousands of migrants across the Mediterranean to Europe, and NATO offered to help. At the same time, EU officials are still looking for a UN mandate to chase human traffickers and destroy their boats. The EU is actually reluctant on whether to destroy traffickers’ boats or avoid military solutions due to their complex legal provisions, including legal proceedings against individuals involved in the operation of traffic boats, responsibility of their crews, fate of passengers once boats are destroyed, and critics of human rights NGOs which consider this measure to be very dangerous as traffickers will change their routes which will certainly increase the number of victims in the Mediterranean.



## Relative solutions

Many observers consider that the solution in designing migration policies needs to have multiple dimensions, taking in consideration individuals' dignity and human rights, regardless of their religion, ethnicity, color or political affiliation. Recent developments and the successive migrants' waves incited European countries to sit together to reflect on a joint policy to face illegal immigration and stop the inflow of migrants from poor countries. In this framework, it is important to think about assistance that needs to be given for development in countries exporting migrants and in countries of transit. Experts believe that Western countries bear the moral and historical responsibility towards poor countries in general and towards African countries in particular and should therefore work on their development and stability. Other observers however see that regardless of the assistance granted to migrants exporting countries, migration flows will not cease, due on the one hand to the large number of candidates, their poor economies, and the absence of basic development infrastructure which impedes employment opportunities and the availability of basic decent living conditions, and on the other because large portions of EU assistance will be diverted by corrupt regimes leaving little to the real people in need. Hundreds of thousands in these poor countries are victims of diseases due to the absence of medicine, shortage in the number of physicians, paramedics, hospitals and medicine, where more than 70% of the population has no access to electricity and 55% with no access to potable drinking water; some can't even go to elementary school due to the lack of teachers and facilities, while the situation for higher education is much worse.

Other solutions suggested to reduce migration include the close control of beaches and borders, but which proved to be inefficient mainly in countries where the security situation is chaotic such as Libya. Another option is the destruction of boats before loaded with migrants, which would

put innocent fishermen's boats at the risk of being taken for traffickers' barks in addition to the fact that shelling boats is prohibited by international laws which provide for the protection of fugitives from wars and repression and ban their forced repatriation to regions where their lives may be at risk if taken without the permission of the country's legitimate government or the preliminary approval of the UN Security Council. This applies to many countries knowing civil wars. Asking Europe to open up its borders and receive all migrants is simply illogical, as some European countries have been severely hit by terrorist attacks involving migrants, in addition to the still prevailing economic crisis, growing unemployment rates, and the pressure made by right-wing extremists on their governments to expel foreigners. Moreover, closing borders will further increase illegal migration.

In order to reduce illegal migration, which comes to the light from time to time whenever a boat drowns in the Mediterranean with hundreds migrants on board mostly from African countries, European Union leaders decided to multiply by three times funds designed for search rescue, the increase in the number of vessels and aircrafts monitoring the sea and look for ways to catch and destroy traffickers' boats before they carry migrants.

These measures may not be sufficient as long as "exporting" countries are not given enough support to provide jobs, improve their citizens' living conditions by providing them with power supply, drinking water and health coverage. Pressure must be put on their governments to better protect human rights, stop repressing, chasing, imprisoning and torturing opponents, adopt democratic methods in governance and fight against corruption which costs poor African peoples about 60 billion dollars Euros a year according to a UN Report. Additional efforts must be spent to put an end to devastating civil wars, which would restore hope among youth and incite them to stay home and not risk their lives.

As illegal migration mainly affects youth, the authorities need to reconsider their policies towards this age group by improving their conditions and taking in account their needs through the following measures:

- Focus on citizenship education in school programs to incite youth to be more attached to their homelands and not abandon them;
- Reinforce youth capacities to participate in the digital economy by providing them with some privileges such as online payment tools or basic computer equipment, and by ensuring a suitable legal environment for investment, which would discourage them from moving to other countries;
- Provide suitable facilities for education and training, and incentives for young people to create and engage in scientific research, such as special awards and subsidies;
- Fight against nepotism and patronage and promote equality and justice;
- Provide job opportunities with equal pay;
- Encourage youth to participate in public life and more specifically in politics.

### **Need to diversify security cooperation**

As Arab Springs have been shuffling with huge impacts on the Mediterranean Region, talks have resumed about the European-Maghrebi partnership project, for Europe is trying to restore its role in the region knowing that the U.S. attempted to play a much bigger role. From a European perspective, security constitutes a major concern that must be tackled.

For this reason, the European Union and Maghrebi countries now share a common political and security perspective stressing the domestic and external stability of the Maghreb Region. The nature of threats changed after the end of the cold war, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the fading of East-West hostilities that were prevailing since the end of the Second World War, and which were

using the Mediterranean Region to stock offensive and mass destruction weapons. Although this is now part of the past, the Mediterranean Region is still subject to the most stressful contradictions and dissensions.

Political cultures and types of governance differ between the western and eastern parts of the Mediterranean. The question is not the different types of government but whether these countries are ready to adopt the western democratic culture as the perfect model of governance and also their ability to efficiently implement western patterns.

While countries on the northern shore of the Mediterranean have for long adopted democracy in their political culture, countries on the south still make the exception as they first lack experience in terms of democratic practices, and most do not have the elementary ingredients to shift to democracy. The main partner in a “democratic” process is the State more than civil society oppressed by nature in southern countries, or the Umma (nation), the class, or the market, but in Arab countries on the southern shore of the Mediterranean, which embraced the French or British bureaucratic systems or the Soviet system’s approach, the State is still monopolized by the oppressive state concept.

Democratic transition in the context of Arab Springs requires the existence of civil societies capable of imposing their positions and of holding States accountable, including autonomous labor unions; however the old and new government systems in the South Mediterranean countries still fear too strong and efficient civil societies.

The European-Mediterranean partnership has picked security as a top priority, while the security cooperation aims at achieving the “world western security concept” led by the U.S. designed well before the Mediterranean partnership, and which may breach or even cancel the Arab regional security system.

European countries tried over the last two decades to reinforce security cooperation between Mediterranean countries; France and Malta first

submitted a draft Euro Mediterranean Security Charter that was rejected by Arab countries, then its name was changed to become the European-Mediterranean Charter. This project mainly offers a “Code of Conduct” that shall be observed by all members in the partnership.

The Charter rules should have included the commitment of Partnership members to peacefully settle conflicts, to reject violence and to adopt dialogue whenever disputes emerge. However, these rules did not offer any better definition of the “security self sufficiency” concept, which was generally approved in the Barcelona Declaration, as they did not determine the armament degree that would not be offensive.

Therefore, the European concept of security is based on the notion of security cooperation while maintaining the basic strategic unbalance between Arab countries on the one hand and others located in their region, which made some Arab countries reject the European notion of security as it does not serve Arab interests.

The European Union which considers the security issue to be vital for regional cooperation links it with the Peace Process launched in Madrid in 1991 in order to ensure an equal and global peace agreement between Arabs and Israelis.

Some analysts for long considered that the European initiative towards the Mediterranean, known as the Euromed Partnership, supports European interests enabling Europe to recover its position in the Middle East after being taken away by American interests. This project was offered to countries in the southern shore of the Mediterranean to partner with Europe as a key western player. The Euromed Partnership suggested a regional Mediterranean system that would provide the region with an economic/security umbrella and would reinforce its political and strategic positioning.

The Mediterranean project in fact overlaps with the Middle Eastern project, not to say that the two projects complement each other. The Peace

Process was initiated by the U.S. at the Madrid Conference after the defeat of Arabs in the second Gulf War and the collapse of the Regional Arab System. Americans started to heavily influence policy design in most Arab countries, while Europeans were more responsible for providing financial and technical assistance, reinforcing peace process based on Oslo Agreements and ensuring the continuation of dialogue about the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The Euromed Partnership could not eventually achieve its goals, neither in terms of changing the political situation in Arab countries nor in contributing to finding solutions to the Palestinian Issue or providing a safer space around the Mediterranean free of wars and conflicts. In spite of that, in view of the dangerous developments happening in the Arab World, there is urgent need for regional cooperation, as challenges faced by the region cannot be faced by countries individually.

This is the reason why voices started to emerge from within the European Union and beyond calling to revive the Euromed security charter by designing a new approach where all parties need to take lessons from the past and the present and work together to prevent and fight against terrorism through joint policies that would reinforce security, enhance social and economic conditions, and ensure efficiency.

In the meantime, the western basin's countries tried to develop a framework for dialogue, where the Arab-Israeli conflict would no more be at stake. This dialogue, referred to as 5+5, is flexible and unstructured, therefore enabling progress when dealing with hot issues without stress or embarrassment. The **5+5 Defense** launched in 2004 constitutes one of the most successful exchange frameworks, as it created suitable conditions for different parties to agree on the broad lines of a common strategy for the fight against terrorism and organized crime in the Mediterranean, agreed upon at the 5+5 Meeting held in Tunisia in December 2015. This dialogue mainly focused on three major issues: Maritime

control, the contribution of the armed forces in civil defense, and cooperation in the field of training and research in defense and strategic affairs. The 5+5 Dialogue represents a successful cooperation framework with regard to concrete outputs that have so far been achieved, such as the “Maritime Coordination Instrument” which aims at coordinating and harmonizing positions about political and military decisions, the “Coordination and Planning Center”, aiming at optimizing the efficiency of military equipment provided by Dialogue members to another member in case of emergency, in addition to other training and capacity building instruments.

Developing the 5+5 Dialogue and move it to a higher level of cooperation does not mean abandoning the European Southern Mediterranean partnership, the success of which remains the ultimate goal for all other aspects of cooperation. Especially since the primary aspect of this partnership is a bilateral format based on bilateral action plan in which security cooperation schemes occupies an important place and opens the door for a beneficial partnership in the fight against terrorism.

In addition, evoking the 5+5 dialogue does not mean overlooking the importance of other forms of bilateral cooperation that characterizes relations between the countries and serving, in a way or another the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in general. In this regard one can evoke the good example of the Tunisian German cooperation, which strengthens very strongly over the last five years covering all fields, including security cooperation and counter-terrorism with the German commitment to cooperate in the field of border control and protection of facilities and tourist institutions.

### **Recommendations about the definition of partnerships and types of cooperation**

There is no doubt that security challenges faced by Tunisia today, with regard to neighboring countries and its geopolitical context can be faced only through the intense cooperation with the region’s main players.

Cooperation options require political bravery, favoring national interests over partisan concerns and mainly getting away from demagogies.

#### **At the regional level**

Algeria must remain Tunisia’s first ally in its war against terrorism. Without a top level and intensive coordination with Algeria, it would not be possible to face the threats of terrorist groups positioned on the Tunisian-Algerian borderline. More specifically, Tunisian authorities should provide sufficient guarantees about their ability to make the best use of intelligence information provided by their Algerian counterparts.

On the other hand, Tunisia needs to look for consensual positions with Algeria about the Libyan crisis and not play solo with regard to the fighting going on in Libya.

#### **At the Mediterranean level**

The Euro-Mediterranean cooperation shall remain an irrevocable strategic choice in the different areas. Tunisia must work on expanding it and taking profit of all various tools and instruments, at the economic and commercial levels, or at the security and defense levels mainly through the 5+5 Dialogue Mechanism. Partnership offers the best space to debate on sensitive and pending issues such as migration and mobility.

#### **At the international level**

Tunisia must make the best use of its vital position and take profit of NATO’s Mediterranean Dialogue instruments, it should work on being an active partner to NATO which plays a key role in ensuring balance in the region, especially that NATO represents the only defense framework where European forces jointly work with American forces, and they are all Tunisia’s historic allies that would protect its security and stability.