



## **EURODEFENSE-ESPAÑA**

### **EARLY WARNING**

#### **TUNISIA**

March 12, 2016

After the revolution five years ago, Tunisia has experienced a political development that could be considered as a model for democratic evolution in many countries where the uprisings started in 2011.

However, the spread of protests since mid-January 2016 reveals the depth of its unresolved and festering socioeconomic crisis and exposes how little has changed in the power structures of Tunisia. The public opinion considers that almost nothing has been transformed after Ben Ali was ousted. If we attempt to define the present situation we can witness that despair runs deeply in all layers of Tunisian society. And the outlook for changes is bleak because the prospects for economic growth will not exceed 1% of the GNP according to the National Bank of Tunisia<sup>1</sup>. This means that as in many other countries of the region political stability runs in parallel with economic growth.

The underlying reasons for disenchantment are:

- Tunisian protests take shape around similar crisis for jobs and better life conditions and echo demands –word for word- made 5 years ago.
- More than 60% of graduates are unable to find work.
- Youth unemployment reaches 37% according to OECD. This is a fertile ground for Islamists and extremists forces.
- The interior regions from which revolution started continue to be marginalised.
- Income from tourism, once an important source of revenue (7.4% of GNP), has dramatically dwindled after the terrorist attacks of 2015 and deprived many Tunisians of a source of revenue.
- Unreformed security forces continue to abuse their powers under cover of fighting terrorism.
- Corruption remains widespread.

Public opinion realizes that the old political order has returned after the 2014 elections: The President of the Republic was member of former administrations and there is a fight for power that prevents good governance. The leading party Nidaa Tounes has split and only the help of Ennhada Islamists allows the functioning of the secular government issued from the compromise of 2014 between the two parties. This is a

token of a very unstable political situation that might last until local elections scheduled at the end of this year that Ennhada expects to win. If this happens it could be the return of Islamism to the economic and political scenario. It can be said that Tunisians have become skeptical –not to say fed up- with democracy and the ability of the political establishment to rescue the country after the fall of dictatorship.

#### THE EU NEGATIVE ROLE

The European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument granted Tunisia the partner status in 2012 as a way to expand the current free trade agreements and increase the financial support in return for progress on political, governance and economic reforms. Already in 1995 the EU-Tunisian Association Agreement was signed with the same aim. But in both cases there is no evidence of how free trade has allowed an increase of Tunisia's economic and social wealth. On the contrary the failure of the Tunisian model could be a result of the liberalization that followed the 1995 Agreement. There has been not a significant positive impact on productivity, employment or manufacturing growth and the EU programs have been considered by the International Monetary Fund as privileges granted to “crony capitalism” since they have reached only big companies, mainly dominated by foreign capital.

Therefore EU support for local civil society has been perceived by many Tunisians as an attempt by Europeans to establish cultural hegemony, Western values and Western style of governance on a population that now is hostile to those ideas and views them as foreign for an Arab country.

#### THE TUNISIA EXTERNAL THREAT

The security crisis in neighboring countries is also affecting Tunisia internal political stability. The Libyan civil war, the power vacuums in the Algerian mountains has enabled terrorist attacks on Tunisian soil that target the fundamentals of its economy. The encroachment of Daesh in the Sirte region and other areas of Libyan territory is dangerous for Tunisia.

One of the lines of action of Daesh in its expansion strategy is to commission the adequate fighters to carry out destabilizing terrorist operations and try to achieve the control of territory in their countries of origin. So it did in Libya and is doing now in Tunisia.

Indeed, Daesh is making efforts to consolidate in Libya, and reach the South of the country. It is clear that in view of the increasing number of Daesh middle rank commanders (Egyptians, Tunisians, Sudanese and Algerian), who are coming to Sirte looking for a safer place to continue planning their activities in the medium and long term, Libya will become the next base for Daesh, once expelled from Iraq and Syria. No doubt that the next move in its expansive domino game will be Tunisia as shown by the terrorist attack that has occurred some days ago in the Tunisian-Libyan frontier.

The Ansar al Shariah group, that has pledged allegiance to Daesh and is considered by the Government as a terrorist organization, is also a very real threat to the political order and civil society because it is becoming a movement that attracts more and more people disenchanted with: the outcome of the 2011 revolution, the EU diplomacy towards Tunisia and the government failure. This growing Salafist Jihadist movement, with connections to other transnational jihadist groups, calls for the establishment of an Islamic state and refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of the present state institutions that they consider as alien to the people given the unfulfilled promises to deliver changes demanded by the persons who started the uprising five years ago.

Unfortunately the Tunisian government, unable to meet the demands of its population, finds itself before a predicament since it has no real capacity to defend itself against the destabilizing capacity of Daesh. Moreover, Tunisia has provided many fighters to that group in Syria and Iraq (estimated between 5000 and 6000). Once they return as hardened fighters they might become the Daesh's "fifth column" inside the country.

#### A POSSIBLE WAY TO HELP TUNISIA

The Tunisian government cannot wait much longer to deliver thus giving excuses for terrorist attacks recurrent every now and then and avoiding radicalisation leading to Islamist and Salafist options. Ordinary citizens and the young ones need to quickly feel the difference by shown tangible things like: to address the environmental challenges; to stop water shortages; to prevent desertification in rural areas; to create a selective waste collection in urban area; to give children in elementary school a tablet to everyone, with proper teaching. These measures will help to mobilize many people and get a better distribution of income.

Nevertheless, there is a lack of means to carry out these simple tasks. Therefore the Tunisian government needs to receive help from Europe if we want to avoid a new radical Islamism at its door. Many pledges and promises have been made in return for democratic reforms but public opinion does not believe any longer in good words.

There is now a financial challenge for the EU in Tunisia to help its government to solve the economic problems. It can be estimated to 6-9 billion the amount needed over a 3 year period. This pledge should be invested in people oriented projects to support the Tunisian transformation before it is too late and the country falls to the chaos spreading in the North African region.

Besides, the EU should pressure the Tunisian Government for greater respect for human rights and review the financial aid model that, so far, has not yielded the desired results in the fight against unemployment. Member states individually, should make every effort to provide material and military support, to strengthen the actions being undertaken by the Tunisian Government to combat Daesh's threat coming mainly through its border with Libya.