

TRANSFORMATION IN TUNISIA: THE FIRST FIVE YEARS

Tunis, 4 November 2016

report
from the Dialogue Workshop



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Dialogue Workshop “*Tunisia’s Transformation: The First Five Years*” is part of a Working Package, led by the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA). It has been organised under the EuroMeSCo umbrella, in co-ordination with the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed). The workshop took place in Tunis, on 4th November 2016, and was hosted by the Center for Mediterranean and International Studies (CEMI). A total of 27 participants from academia, think tanks, civil society organisations and diplomatic missions participated. The event was chaired by Wolfgang Mühlberger, Senior Research Fellow EU-MENA at FIIA.

In line with the four basic themes of the research project (governance/domestic politics, economy, religion/political Islam, and security/jihadism), it consisted of four topical sessions, each being a chapter of the forthcoming Joint Policy Study. The authors presented their initial findings with the purpose of discussing them in the following Q&A.



In the first session, Emmanuel Cohen-Hadria (IEMed) presented his findings on domestic politics, and how wide-spread lack of trust is impacting the political transition. The second session with Dr. Isabel Schäfer, from the German Development Institute (DIE), represented in absentia by the chair, analysed the macro-economic situation, as well as its implications for the labour market, including youth unemployment. The third session by Dr. Cengiz Günay and Sherin Gharib, both researchers at the Austrian Institute for International Affairs (OIIP), tackled the evolving role of the Islamist party En-Nahda. In the fourth session, Dr. Stefano Torelli from the Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), shed light on Tunisia's jihadist scene, highlighting structural challenges within the Tunisian state in facing the militant groups.

Note: This Dialogue Workshop report focusses on the debates following the presentations, since the latter will be published (in detail) in the Joint Policy Study. Accordingly, the thematic presentations are limited to concise summaries of the presented findings.

DETAILS OF THE FOUR SESSIONS

First thematic session: governance, domestic politics and distrust

In the first presentation, Emmanuel Cohen-Hadria pondered the trajectory of the political transition, and related questions, from the vantage point of trust, or rather lack thereof, in political actors. Analysing prevailing Tunisian discourses on the transition as well as other indicators such as surveys, he assessed a deep-seated malaise in Tunisia's body politic that he related to socio-political features of the transition such as the political representation crisis, the shortcomings of the transitional justice process and the prevalence of corruption.

Feedback from other researchers and stakeholders

It was generally agreed upon that the economic situation significantly deteriorated since the Tunisian transition started in late 2010, corresponding to a resurgence and amplification of some of the ingredients that triggered the

upheaval. Certain social and political aspects of the transition, such as TJ/transitional justice or the media landscape, also remain incomplete or unsatisfactory, and stark regional disparities continue to prevail, remaining systematically unaddressed. Across the population, the perception of a negative situation and a lack of change for the better, is also being assigned to the transition itself, increasing the levels of distrust in the new political representatives.

The role of perceptions was also highlighted, when it comes to expectations related to the performance and governance quality of the state, or the question of age of elected representatives, referring, for instance, to President Es-Sebssi. In that context it was mentioned, that the culture of following a sheikh, i.e. a respected, elderly authority, is still vibrant in many Tunisian quarters. This performance can be measured with regards to the institutional and the political transition per se, yet the economic dimension of the transition has become a dominant evaluation element of expected change. On the other hand, there is a lack of empirical evidence with regards to the root causes of the author's hypothesis about the societal malaise and the origins of the lack of trust. To what extent is the problem ascribed to an institutional transition perceived as incomplete, and to what extent can the problem be attributed to political parties, i.e. their activities?

A comment was made about persistent clientelistic networks, including their potentially and effectively detrimental impact effect on reform efforts at various levels. A first hand-observer of parliamentary debates pointed to the fact that in the plenary sessions virtually no solutions are proposed by the MPs to address the mix of challenges. A recent survey by CIDOB's Sahwa project pins down the general malaise among the youth, of which a significant percentage higher than 50% intends to migrate, in order to seek for alternative opportunities, and escape from lacking perspectives and unemployment.

Second thematic session: economy and unemployment

The second contribution by Dr. Isabel Schäfer scrutinized the interlinkages and correlations between what could be considered an economic crisis, demography and unemployment, analysing potentially adverse effects on the

ongoing democratic transformation. As the government's ability and willingness to carry out reforms is of particular importance for relaunching the Tunisian economy, the author also explored the reasons for its obvious reluctance. Since the perceptions about economic well-being, income redistribution, and corruption, are of primary political relevance, this presentation touched on an element of the Tunisian transition that carries a highly disruptive potential.

Feedback from other researchers and stakeholders

A structural mismatch between the profiles on offer and the demand inside the job market emerged as a main feature of Tunisia's unemployment problem. In the discussion on methods to counter unemployment, different views emerged from the participants: while some favoured an increase of vocational training (to be offered by the state), in order to better meet the demand, others expressed their preference for improving the investment climate in general, or to favour decentralization, or regional development initiatives. In practice, however, these approaches could be considered as complementary elements of a multi-throng approach. A relevant point was made by hinting at the low reputation that vocational training, and related jobs, were enjoying in Tunisian society, paralleled by very high levels of tertiary education degrees. Another issue was raised by referring to the generally low, and decreasing, quality of education standards in general, further increasing the gap between job offer and demand.

The debate also highlighted ongoing socio-economic fragmentation of the country, based on regions with highly varying economic development levels, speeds and dynamics. The main problem related to the transition is that "post-revolutionary" governments have not tackled this issue in a systematic manner. The importance of the informal sector was mentioned, sometimes being in competition with legal private sector companies, draining state (tax) revenue in considerable ways. Also, criticism was directed against state institutions such as the 'employment office', for working inefficiently, and hence not helping effectively to reduce the number of unemployed.

Another essential problem was raised by a participant who mentioned the lacking absorption capacity of state institutions, due to the low skills of civil servants. Even though international financial support has not only been requested but also extensively granted, a structural challenge is still posed by the difficulty to practically implement programs based on these lacking capacities and capabilities. Two participating researchers, who just had been carrying out field-work in Tunisia's South, pointed to the following dilemma: on the one hand, state-owned companies are often the only ones offering jobs. Hence, creating a general attitude of relying "on the state" for economic opportunities. On the other hand, access to those coveted positions is perceived as non-transparent at best, if not actually depended on highly corrupt civil servants. The same researchers also stressed, that job creation via the public sector is often a mere short-term solution.

Third thematic session: political Islam and the evolving En-Nahda party

This presentation highlighted the role of political Islam in Tunisia, by covering a topic at the convergence of recently acquired freedom of expression, including for political movements, and the remodeling of the religious landscape since 2011. Dr. Cengiz Günay and Sherin Gharib, proposed an analysis of the newly legalised political entity, the En-Nahda party. Their major argument is that En-Nahda has transformed into a "system's party", and thus is struggling to remain a credible agent of revolutionary change, as expected by many of its supporters. Effectively, as the party's leadership proves ready for concessions, the party base and voters expect a more assertive stance in terms of Islamisation of politics and society. The authors' analysis took stock of the evolution of this Islamist movement at a critical juncture, fraught with the risk of disappointing a significant part of its post-revolutionary constituency, potentially driving some younger elements into the less compromising camp of faith-based fundamentalism or, worse, outright radicalism.

Feedback from other researchers and stakeholders

In line with the methodological approach of the authors, the discussion started from the question to which extent En-Nahda has been "integrated" or "included" into the political system, somehow assuming limited agency of the political

movement, and resting on the assumption that a sort of “hegemonic” political system persists, or reemerged.

A second, more theoretical debate turned around terminology, such as ‘radical’ (Islamism), political Islam and, in view of En-Nahda’s latest policy steps (in 2016), its rebranding as a “post-Islamist” political group. The explanation provided by the authors for this decision referred to analogies in the European context (e.g. New Labour), i.e. the adaptation of political movements to economic circumstances, such as globalisation. In his intervention, the chair also referred to potential practical implications of En-Nahda’s repositioning, in terms of loss of appeal amongst its constituency, a sense of disappointment with its strategy by traditionalists, or the risk of outright opting for hardline factions, such as the legal fringe of fundamentalist Salafist parties.

Linked to both questions, the theoretical considerations and the practical consequences, a Tunisian scholar pointed the general problem that (empirical) data was lacking regarding the socio-economic background of En-Nahda voters. Another participant underscored the wide spectrum of ideological currents within En-Nahda itself. In light of this, it might be premature to simply acknowledge the shedding of the Islamist identity of En-Nahda, which still has to prove its liberal, democratic, and post-ideological credentials. Effectively, as Tunisian academics and experts on Islamism pointed out, En-Nahda’s reaction in case of political loss is unclear, as well as the fundamental question of how its understanding of (Islamic) justice differs from more radical thinkers such as Sayyid Qutb (author’s note: one of the founders of radical, violent Islamism).

Finally, it was concluded that irrespective of En-Nahda’s rebranding efforts in 2016, disappointment with the political movement has been huge, carrying a number of potentially destabilising implications.

Fourth thematic session: the jihadist scene in Tunisia post-2011

Dr. Stefano Torelli proposed in depth-look at the jihadist scene in Tunisia, in order to appreciate its homegrown elements, international connections as well

as trans-border issues with neighbouring countries such as Algeria and Libya. Arguably the most problematic development of the Tunisian transition since late 2010, violent faith-based extremism has transformed into a structural threat for the Tunisian state. Islamist jihadism not only led to the renewal of the state of emergency, it also produced a wealth of volunteers, heading for conflict theaters in Syria and Libya – but also targeting foreign civilians and national security forces on their home turf. The potential return, en masse, of these foreign fighters from extraterritorial conflict areas represents nothing less than a strategic risk for the stability of the country. In light of these developments, the author proposed a number of counter-terrorism measures, while also highlighting the institutional issues blocking an effective tackling of the problem.

Feedback from other researchers and stakeholders

A first point raised in the discussion was the observation of a new trend that corresponds to individual (Islamist/jihadist) radicalisation, beyond the more “classical” method through networks, like the setting up of cells. Further in the discussion, the author underscored that individual radicalisation corresponds to a hallmark of Tunisia's jihadist scene.

A second issue related to the question of En-Nahda functioning as a potential de-radicalising agent, or rather, pre-empting and thereby reducing the radicalisation phenomenon. In that context, it was highlighted that En-Nahda had tried to engage in dialogue with fundamentalist (i.e. Salafist) and even openly violent groups, such as Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia (AST). However, among the critiques of political Islam and of En-Nahda in particular, this led to an increase of accusations of “blurring the lines”. In that sense, the presenter contended, the declared intention of En-Nahda to separate religious, i.e. ideological discourse, from political activities, had been a major decision, with a variety of possible ramifications and implications.

According to one of the participants, En-Nahda's declaration regarding the separation their activities, however, requires closer, critical scrutiny, also due to the long tradition of *taqiyya* (concealment) acquired by the Islamist movement.

In fact, the religious activities, mainly *da'wa* (predication), continue to be controlled by an organisation under control of the En-Nahda party. Due to the identity of the Islamist movement, an organic separation between religious and political activities of En-Nahda would not be genuine, and hence is not practiced.





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