

THE “14 JANUARY REVOLUTION” IN TUNISIA AND TURKISH-TUNISIAN RELATIONS

It has already been more than a year since the first protests of the Arab Spring sparked a historic series of events, which continue to this day. The people of Tunisia, being the trigger of the Arab Spring, expressed their desire for a better future, deep democracy, respect for fundamental rights and freedoms and a more prosperous life in dignity – for themselves and the future generations. Turkey has been on the side of the Tunisian people all along the “14 January Revolution of Dignity and Freedom” and given full support for democracy... Turkey supported, from the beginning, the movement of social change and democratic transformation initiated in Tunisia and spread in the Arab world, and sided with the people in the region, and will continue to do so.

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The Revolution in Tunisia, on the one hand, has fostered the development and strengthening of the Turkish-Tunisian relations, and, on the other, it enhanced the existing positive image of Turkey in Tunisia as a democratic country with a multi-dimensional foreign policy and a growing economy.

After the “14 January Revolution of Dignity and Freedom” in Tunisia, genuine and impressive progress has been made. The National Constituent Assembly (NCA) elections were held on 23 October 2011 in a democratic and peaceful environment, with a high level of participation. Tunisia’s first democratically elected government was finally put in place in December 2011 after weeks of negotiations between the three coalition partners, all representing different political ideologies. Ennahdha came first in the 23 October election, winning 89 seats in the 217-seat NCA, with the CPR coming second with 29 seats and Ettakatol coming fourth with 20 seats. On 12 December, the leader of the center-left CPR Moncef Marzouki, 66, a former political prisoner and exile, was elected as President. He appointed Hamadi Jebali, the Secretary General of Ennahdha, 62, another former political dissident and exile, as the Head of Government. Ettakatol’s leader, Mustapha Ben Jaafar, 71, a leading opponent of the former regime, has been elected as the Speaker of the NCA, another role with limited direct political power.

A provisional mini-constitution was adopted by the NCA on 10 December after heated debates between the coalition partners and the opposition parties: it gives political power mostly to the head of government (the prime minister) – notably, the power to appoint ministers and other senior officials and to direct government policy. The head of state –the president– oversees the government and calls it to account when necessary; directs foreign policy in agreement with the prime minister; and, as commander-in-chief of the armed forces, appoints or dismisses senior officers, but, again, only in consultation with the prime minister.

The army, up to this point, has been content to provide the stability needed to get on with the task of organizing elections, and it is unlikely to play a greater role during the transition period unless there is a severe deterioration in the security situation and a breakdown in political consensus.

It is obvious that the political situation in Tunisia is still in a transitional phase. Parliamentary and presidential elections are due to be held in 2012 but they may be postponed if the newly elected National Constituent Assembly decides it needs more time to draft a new constitution. Head of Government Jebali announced during his recent visit to Brussels at the end of January 2012 that the interim government intends to hold presidential elections in 18 months.

So, it is clear that the process of democratization will be long; there are various stages and there will be important tests along the way. However, it is also certain that strong democratic forces have been unleashed and citizens have been empowered.

The economic development of Tunisia remains highly important for the success of the transition period.. The government forecasts that the budget deficit will rise to at least six percent of GDP in 2012, from an estimated 4.5 percent in 2011, as it increases spending to cover a sharp rise in the public sector wage bill and to fund measures to develop the regions and create 75,000 jobs. The official unemployment rate rose from 14 percent to 18 percent in 2011. In addition, the possibility of a break-up of the Euro zone has increased. Such a break-up could also have an impact on the Tunisian economy as Tunisia relies heavily on the EU for trade, tourism, and remittances.

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In this context, being a source of inspiration as a perceived success story in terms of its democratic, economic, and social reform experience and having strong historical, cultural, and social ties with Tunisia, Turkey has supported Tunisia before and during the revolution as well as in the post-revolution period. The signing of the Free Trade Agreement with Tunisia before the "Arab Spring" is a relevant indicator of the Turkish support prior to the revolution. In parallel, there is institutionalized cooperation between Turkey and Tunisia, and mechanisms for dialogue and follow-up: the 1989 agreement established the "Intergovernmental Standing Committee" headed by the Foreign Ministers of the two countries. A consultation mechanism at Secretary of State-level has been created in accordance with the Protocol of 2000. The Association Agreement establishing a Free Trade Area, which entered into force in 2005, also led to the founding of the Association Council; Military, Tourism,

Transportation and Agriculture Joint Commissions; the Turkey-Tunisia Business Council; and, the Friendship Groups in the respective parliaments.

In the post revolution period, bearing in mind the importance of the economy which could make or break the revolution, Turkey is further strengthening its support to Tunisia by proposing not only political and economic cooperation and regional integration but also assistance in the capacity-building and institutional reform process. Turkey is determined to support Tunisia, share its achievements through the implementation of cooperation projects fruitful for both countries, and encourage Turkish companies to invest in Tunisia.

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Within this framework, Turkey has been the first country to assist the tourism sector. with the visit of a delegation of the Association of Turkish Travel Agencies (TURSAB), along with press members, in February 2011, almost a month after the revolution. This visit was followed by that of Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu on 21 February 2011. Minister Davutoğlu insisted on the historic responsibility of Tunisia to successfully carry out the transition towards democracy. He clearly indicated that Tunisia did not have the luxury to fail during this process which would be a model for the North African countries as well as for the Arab world.

The visit of the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan with a high level delegation composed of six ministers to Tunisia on 14-16 September 2011 constituted another strong sign of Turkey’s willingness to be an active actor in Tunisia’s transformation and was concluded by the signing on 15 September of the “Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation”, which foresees annual meetings at Prime Ministerial level.

Last but not the least, on 22-23 January 2012, the Turkish Minister of Economy paid a visit to Tunisia announcing the grant of a credit line of 500 million dollars by Turkish Eximbank for Tunisian businessmen, the increase of the imports quota for dates from two tons to 5 tons annually, and, the opening of a Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA) Office in Tunisia. The TIKA Office in

Tunisia will support development projects, provide technical and project assistance in areas such as fighting diseases, agricultural development, irrigation, energy, and education.

Many other visits are planned for the upcoming months this year, such as the visits by the President of the Republic of Turkey Abdullah Gül in the beginning of March, by the Turkish Minister of Culture and Tourism Ertuğrul Günay in April, as well as, the visits of the Prime Ministers of Turkey and Tunisia, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Hamadi Jebali, and the visit of the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu.

Reciprocally, the first official visit of the Tunisian Foreign Minister Rafik Abdesselam abroad was to Turkey in the beginning of January 2012. This emphasized the importance given by the Tunisian authorities to Turkish-Tunisian relations. During this visit, Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoğlu said: “We believe that the success of Tunisia will be the one of the peoples of the region and of Turkey. The breakthrough achieved by Tunisia during a year is honorable. Our goal is to ensure that all state institutions and ministries of Turkey and Tunisia could move into action together, as one delegation.”

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Having said all these, this positive interaction between Turkey and Tunisia did not happen overnight with the “14 January Revolution.”

For the last ten years, Turkey had taken constructive steps in its foreign policy towards the countries of the region. Turkey has maintained close relations with the Arab world under the framework of its “zero problems with neighbors” policy particularly since 2002.

Since 2002, Turkey’s relations with the region have been multi-faceted, encompassing diplomatic, economic and civil society dimensions. Turkey actively and positively participated in the resolution and discussion of major issues in the Arab world. Furthermore, Turkey’s clear reaction to Israel’s attack on Gaza has been highly appreciated in the Arab world, as well as, in Tunisia. Israel’s May 2010 attack on the Mavi Marmara, an international humanitarian aid ship on its way to

Gaza, which resulted in the deaths of one U.S. and eight Turkish citizens, and the principled and firm reaction shown by Turkey also had an impact on Turkish-Arab relations.

Turkey has been seen as a success story for the Arab world and Tunisia, where people have been suffering from lack of democratization, economic development and fair distribution of income. The Turkish experience was perceived, in the Arab world, as “economic development, democratization, and fresh voice to reform. Turkey has become the largest economy of the region even though it does not enjoy any oil revenue; it has taken structural steps towards democratization; it has established relations with the West while it has clearly showed its reaction to Israel when necessary.

Within the framework of the positive image of Turkey in Tunisia and the interaction between the two countries, Turkey supported, from the beginning, the movement of social change and democratic transformation initiated in Tunisia and spread in the Arab world, and sided with the people in the region, and will continue to do so.