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# AFTER THE REVOLUTION: EUROPE AND THE TRANSITION IN TUNISIA

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## SUMMARY

The place to start the battle for the success of the post-revolutionary southern neighbourhood is the place where the wave of revolutions started: Tunisia. Tunisia could either become the first country in the North African region to consolidate a genuine democratic system or it could become simply another failed revolution. Either outcome would have huge implications, both symbolically and for the dynamics of the region. This memo, based on a visit by the authors to Tunis in late February to meet key members of the democracy movement, analyses the fragile situation in Tunisia. Although the country is not in chaos, it faces huge challenges in consolidating democracy. It needs to strengthen independent civil society and the media, as well as building a functioning economy that meets the needs of the rural poor.

Although Tunisians are bitter about the EU's failure to challenge the Ben Ali regime, they know they will need European help. The EU now has the opportunity to make amends for past failures by offering prompt and generous help that Tunisia needs and deserves. This will serve European interests in helping to consolidate a more stable and pluralistic southern neighbourhood. To show that it stands with Tunisia's move toward democracy, the EU should share its transitional experiences on building democratic institutions, reforming the security sector and transitional justice, and offer a rule of law mission to support transition over the longer term. In addition to financial assistance, it should also offer high profile support for Tunisia as an attractive environment for business and tourism, encouraging mobility between Europe and North Africa, as well as offering access to EU markets in agricultural products.

The European Union's southern neighbourhood is still being shaken by a revolutionary wave. Egypt and Tunisia have managed to overthrow autocratic regimes, Libya is struggling to get rid of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, and tensions are likely to persist in other countries for months to come. Whether or not regimes fall, EU policies will have to change drastically, whether to respond to successful regime change or to successful repression of protests. A number of increasingly accepted conventions about the Arab world – that democracy and human rights were perhaps not universally shared values; that privatisation and other economic reforms could be given priority over political change – have been thrown out of the window. But the success or failure of the regions' revolutions will be defined above all by what follows the overthrow of autocrats. The question now is how to move from peaceful protests to stable and healthy political, economic and social systems in the region. The emergence of democratic, pluralistic and fairer societies is just one of the possible outcomes, and perhaps not the most likely in all cases.

The place to start the battle for the success of the post-revolutionary neighbourhood is where the wave of revolutions started: Tunisia. There are strong prospects that Tunisia could become the first country in the North African region to consolidate a genuine democratic system. On the other hand, it could also still become simply another failed revolution. Either outcome would have huge implications, both symbolically and for the dynamics of a region that is currently undergoing seismic shifts. This memo is based on a visit by the authors to Tunis in late February 2011 to meet key members of the

democracy movement – civil society, media, the academic community and advisers to the Transitional Government – to hear from them what support they want from the EU in their historic moment. The authors also met representatives of the EU and its member states in Tunis, to hear more about how they are engaging with the process of transition.

Tunisia is currently full of hope and excitement following what is known there as the *karama* (“dignity”) revolution. Very capable minds are now focused on the question of how to support the country’s transition to democracy. On the flight to Tunis we met a young Tunisian banker who has split his time between London and Tunis, but is now considering returning for good. He was not the only one. The airport in Tunis resounds to the ululation of women welcoming their relatives back from exile.

However, both the mood and the situation remain fragile. The streets of Tunis are still laden with armoured cars, the military still patrols the streets and the police are still mainly in hiding – and, as the main instrument of former president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali’s repression, they will remain discredited for a long time. Half a dozen protests flow through the streets of the city every day. A hundred metres away from the heavily guarded prime minister’s office, the centre of the old town is still a no-go area at night because of the uncertain security situation. Beneath this tension, there are substantial political uncertainties. There is no clear revolutionary leadership, substantial divisions are emerging between the political and civil society actors emerging from the fog of revolution, and ministers come and go, while escalating social demands complicate the picture.

The basis of relations with the EU is also uncertain. There is a sense of bitterness vis-à-vis the EU’s unconditional support for Ben Ali. For example, one Tunisian told us that “the EU wanted democracy for itself but not for us.” Whereas those taking part in the so-called colour revolutions in Serbia or Ukraine looked to Europe for inspiration, the revolution in Tunisia happened despite Europe. And, for most Tunisians, the EU is associated with France and Italy – the closest, most visible and present member states, which are seen as having been in bed with Ben Ali. Nevertheless, Tunisians know they will need European help. There is a sense of pragmatism that the EU is a strong economic power on its doorstep, with relevant experiences to share and possible support for its transition. Another Tunisian pro-democracy activist told us that “even if Europe did not support us, we need to move on since the Europeans will be the only ones to help.”

In other words, the EU has the opportunity to make amends for past failures by offering prompt and generous help that Tunisia needs and deserves. Above all, this will serve European interests in helping to consolidate a more stable and pluralistic southern neighbourhood. The EU should not start where it usually does: teaching and preaching. This time a humbler approach is needed. The EU should offer advice where it is asked for, financial assistance and trade where it is able, and also some quick eye-catching measures, across all

sectors, to show that it stands with Tunisia’s move towards democracy. Europe has an interest in supporting Tunisia in becoming an established democracy that could serve as a model in a turbulent but still predominantly authoritarian region. The time to act is now.

## A lack of clarity

In any conversation in Tunis, whether with professors or taxi drivers, there will very quickly be a reference to what things were like “under Bourguiba” or “under Ben Ali”. Since their independence in 1956, the Tunisian people have only known two presidents, who were both more or less authoritarian: Habib Bourguiba, who ruled from 1957 until 1987; and Ben Ali, who ruled from 1987 until 2011. This means that Tunisia has no previous experience of successful, ordered political transition. The revolution therefore marks not just the departure of a president but the end of an epoch. Yet the road onwards is already confusing.

Tunisians seem to be united around the end goal of democracy, but there is a lack of clarity and – understandably – a divergence of views on how to get there. Some want gradual political reform, others want to preserve the economic and social origins of the revolution, and others still call for the Tunisian people to stop protesting and go back to work. The population is increasingly atomised. While Ben Ali remained in power, the protesters were united by a single goal. But since his departure in January, the protests have become narrower in focus and sometimes more parochial. Some people protest in front of the Interior Ministry against former police abuses, while others, such as the staff of the national airline, go on strike for higher salaries. There are few structures – for example, political parties or NGOs – through which these demands can be channeled. It is striking that, two months after Ben Ali resigned, there is still no charismatic new leader in the mould of Lech Walesa or Vaclav Havel.

Interim president Fouad Mebazaa has announced elections by 24 July to elect a constituent assembly that will write a new Tunisian constitution. In the meantime, however, the country’s transitional government is struggling to enforce its authority over a population that does not accept its legitimacy or that of most local government. Mebazaa is the former speaker of the parliament under Ben Ali’s regime; Beji Caid Essebsi, the second interim prime minister, appointed on 27 February, was a foreign minister under Bourguiba. On paper, the government has huge power, because the parliament, itself still filled with Ben Ali’s people, has given the interim president the right to govern by decree. But, in striking contrast to the situation in Egypt, there seems to be little fear among Tunisians that the interim authorities will try to consolidate their position and stay in office. The danger instead is of a fluid and unelected transitional government that is unable to persuade the people to accept its decisions.

The interim government has repeatedly been forced to make concessions following complaints that it had not moved

quickly enough. At the end of February, caretaker Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi resigned, along with the two other ministers remaining who had served in Ben Ali's government. The interim president's decision to hold elections for a constituent assembly also meets one of the protesters' key demands (the earlier plan to vote first for a new president under the old constitution risked, in the eyes of many, inadvertently creating a second Ben Ali). A political reform commission appointed by the government in January will help devise the code under which the elections are held. But this sequence of reform extends the time for which an interim, unelected government will run the country, leading to a risk that the crisis of authority will only worsen in the coming months.

In post-revolutionary Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine, the protest movements had leaders who could assume responsibility for government within a matter of weeks, not months. They also had some history of competitive elections, established political parties, NGOs and more independent media, while economic power was more diffused. They also had a legal framework, including a constitution, electoral codes and media laws, which, even if not fully respected, were at least in place and did not need to be drafted almost from scratch. With the exception of Czechoslovakia, Central and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s did not have such a solid base, but the existence of organised movements such as Solidarity meant that they had governments in waiting – and much more European support.

In this sense, Tunisia is starting from a lower base. It needs to build an entirely new political society from scratch: an effective administration that can lead economic regeneration, an independent and capable judiciary, civil society, and media organisations with national reach. While there is no shortage of political parties – 24 have registered since the fall of the regime, and some estimates put the number likely to apply for approval in the coming months as high as 36 – there is a real need for organisation and capacity building in order to create an effective opposition to steer the country through the coming months. The government has taken steps to create this political space by legalising political parties, freeing the media, dissolving the secret police agency, and declaring an amnesty for political prisoners. But the task is huge.

Another urgent question is what role people who were part of Ben Ali's political system should play in Tunisia's regeneration. Under Ben Ali's centralised and tightly controlled system, the party and the state were virtually synonymous. Tunisia now needs to strike a very fine balance. On the one hand, it needs to keep enough of those people on board to be able to continue running the country effectively and offer elite networks a stake in the success of the post-revolutionary environment. On the other hand, it needs to weaken the former elites enough to make sure the revolution is not hijacked by the old guard and corrupt interests. A number of the new political parties are viewed as vehicles through which the old elite can get back into power through the back door. The issue will clearly be divisive.

Two further commissions appointed by the government – on corruption and on violence against protesters during the revolution – may help draw lines between those complicit in Ben Ali's crimes and those who were merely official functionaries. Many are dissatisfied, however, that the commission on violent abuses does not have a mandate to investigate the actions of the regime before the uprising began at the end of last year. Handling the police force, at once the hated enforcer of Ben Ali's rule and an essential element in restoring stability in the country, will pose a particularly tricky challenge.

However, despite the confusion about the transition, Tunisia is not in chaos. It remains a decently functioning country with effective state institutions, a very well-educated, French-speaking elite, emancipated and active women, and strong connections to Europe. Corruption at the top was heroic in scale, as Ben Ali sold off the state through so-called privatisations to family and friends. But most of Tunisian society has remained relatively honest. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index places Tunisia 59th, above Macedonia, Greece, Italy, Montenegro and Georgia. Tunisia is also a respectable 55th in the World Bank's "ease of doing business" index. Obviously, such indices have limitations, but they still give a sense of the overall trend: systems do function.

## Creating an independent civil society

Sihem Bensedrine is a journalist and human rights activist who was arrested and harassed under Ben Ali and who has lived in exile for the last few years. For years, she was the driving force of the opposition radio station Kalima, which broadcast only through the internet and satellite.<sup>1</sup> Now back in Tunisia, Bensedrine has plunged into the political turmoil that could see her country transformed into a more democratic state. As their headquarters, she and her activist colleagues have rented a small, dark, ground floor flat in central Tunis, which is already bustling with activity. Two student volunteers help manage her agenda, and friends, including doctors and professors, come by to discuss politics and decide on next steps. Bensedrine is also trying to obtain radio and television licences to start regular broadcasts and to provide the public with better and freer access to information. Ordinary citizens frequently knock on her door asking for help with everything from addressing injustice by state institutions to caring for sick relatives.

Tunisian pro-democracy activists such as Bensedrine are full of energy and optimism, and although their organisations are weak, the expectations of them are already huge. Despite the will of the Tunisian people to consolidate the political change that they have brought about, counter-revolution – in other words, a quiet re-appropriation of power by wolves in democratic sheep's clothing – is not impossible. Without the development of checks and balances as the new democracy

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.kalimatunisie.com>.

emerges, the old elite could use its money, power, networks and, in particular, its ownership of the majority of private media outlets to entrench itself successfully in the new system and push back many of the changes.

Under Ben Ali, it was difficult for political parties other than the leader's Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) party or civil society groups to develop, since they were subject to tight legal constraints and the country's political culture allowed no space for the idea of a "loyal opposition."<sup>2</sup> The long-term success of Tunisia's transition to democracy is likely to depend in large part on whether it now develops national institutions and civil society groups that can organise debate and monitor the government effectively. Among the most important priorities are national representative political parties, an independent and professional judiciary, and NGOs with countrywide reach.

Independent media will be equally important. Social networking websites – in particular, Facebook and Twitter, which have been accessible in Tunisia only since 2008 – were among the well-documented enablers of the revolution: the words "Thank you Facebook" can even be seen scrawled on a state building in downtown Tunis. WikiLeaks, which documented for the first time a level of corruption among the ruling elite that most Tunisians suspected, also had a big impact. The internet will undoubtedly continue to play a critical role in information dissemination and holding both the transitional government and whatever follows it to account. However, only around 27 percent of the Tunisian population use the internet, and access can often be sporadic, so more traditional media will also play a critical role in the development of a democratic society.<sup>3</sup> The interim government has lifted restrictions on press freedom. But although the three main newspapers are now able to discuss issues facing the country, training is needed to improve their ability to carry out accurate and professional investigative journalism, as their operating environment has changed so radically.

Television is likely to remain the most important medium for years to come. It will be difficult to establish diversity and choice on domestic television and radio in time to support genuinely competitive elections in six months' time. Currently there are only a few private channels, which are owned by Ben Ali, his family and his networks. While their broadcasting is not counter-revolutionary, some civil society groups fear that it could shore up the positions of many of the members of Ben Ali's administration, without providing support for, or coverage of, an effective opposition. Al Jazeera is more popular than the domestic television channels, but while contributing to pluralism in general, it is unlikely to support the development of democracy within Tunisia by hosting local political talk shows or investigating corruption.

An independent communications authority has been set up, but it is not yet clear how far or how quickly it will contribute to greater pluralism of the media by granting more licences to new media outlets. The development of a new press code is also problematic. There is plenty of legal expertise within Tunisia's universities, but, as with the constitution and the electoral code, there is little trust in the transitional government as a legitimate entity to oversee this process. Without clear guidelines on different candidates being accorded sufficient airtime to make their case for election to the public, it is unlikely that elections will be genuinely free and fair. On the other hand, until elections have taken place, a question mark hangs over whether the interim president and government are competent to approve the guidelines for developing this framework.

## Challenges for a new democracy

Amine Ghali is the programme director of the Al Kawakibi Democracy Transition Center, a Tunisian NGO set up in 2006 which, as one of the few regional organisations working on democracy promotion, has been active in Tunisia in the run-up to and following Ben Ali's departure. According to Ghali, Tunisia needs to learn from previous successful transitions and failed revolutions, from South Africa and Argentina to Poland and Ukraine. He says Tunisians have a lot of questions regarding what they should do next and could benefit from the experience of others.

Despite the atmosphere of optimism in Tunis, it still remains possible that, in the coming years, the process of transition in Tunisia could produce a centralised system that is perhaps freer than that of Ben Ali but nonetheless quite authoritarian. In recent history, many revolutions failed to produce consolidated democracies – for example, in Iran in 1979, in 1989-91 in post-Soviet states such as Belarus, Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia, or in Kyrgyzstan in 2005. In Tunisia, just like elsewhere, democracy may not easily take root in one go, and may require more than one upheaval, moving between phases of centralisation and democratisation before it consolidates. Since most candidates for presidential or parliamentary office with experience of government in Tunisia will be those who have served under the previous regimes, the old guard is likely to gain more than a foothold under the new system if the electorate places confidence in experience.

One of the well-known reasons why Europe, the United States and the international community accommodated Ben Ali's regime and others like it for so long was a fear that Islamists were the only alternative organised political force. In fact, no strong leaders are emerging from this corner either. Indeed, Rachid Ghannouchi, leader of the Islamist party Ennahda – who has been allowed by the transitional government to return to the country – has ruled out running for president, and some observers in the country predict that his party is likely to maintain a relatively low profile throughout the elections. Civil society appears broadly in agreement that the

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Alexander, "Tunisia: Stability and Reform in the Modern Maghreb," Abingdon: Routledge, 2010 (hereafter, Alexander, "Tunisia").

<sup>3</sup> Christian-Peter Hanelt and Almut Möller, "How the European Union can Support Change in North Africa," Bertelsmann Stiftung, spotlight europe 2011/01 – February 2011, available at [http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/cps/rde/xber/SID-F48153E2-9600944F/bst\\_engl/22-02-2011%20spotlight\\_europe\\_NorthAfrica.pdf](http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/cps/rde/xber/SID-F48153E2-9600944F/bst_engl/22-02-2011%20spotlight_europe_NorthAfrica.pdf).

various Islamist groups should be included in consultations about the transition process. Many want to draw on the example of Turkey under the Freedom and Development Party (AKP), which they see as a positive example of reconciliation between Islam and democracy.<sup>4</sup>

However, some European diplomats in Tunis note that even if Islamists win only the expected 10 percent of the vote in future parliamentary elections, they may begin to play a decisive role in the development of legislation. Their financial structure in Tunisia is unclear, but there is a possibility that over time they could build up strongholds across the country, especially if economic grievances persist. This would follow a pattern of growing support for Islamist groups elsewhere in the region, such as Hamas, Hezbollah and the Muslim Brotherhood, who have organised an alternative system of welfare when governments have failed to do so. They could therefore have a bigger impact than expected in the first parliamentary elections if they are delayed much longer than six months, or in subsequent rounds.

Tunisians feel that the regional context will play an important role in determining whether or not democracy takes root in their country. While a sense of being a pioneer of Arab democracy might help, isolation could be harmful, and there are no guarantees as to how the change of regime in Egypt, the armed uprising in Libya, or protests in Morocco, Bahrain, Yemen, Algeria and elsewhere might end. In any case, Tunisia is not likely to get too much help from the Arab world, since other countries' elites either would prefer the Tunisian experiment to fail or, as in the case of Egypt, will be too busy managing their own post-revolutionary transitions.

## Where it all began: the economy

The number one issue with the potential to make or break the democratic transition is the economy. Demonstrations continue daily in Tunis and around the country as people seek to highlight the many social and economic grievances – unemployment, low salaries, high-food prices – that were suppressed during Ben Ali's oppressive rule, and which ultimately triggered the revolution. Although the transitional government and its ministries are the target of many of these protests, they are increasingly also aimed at other employers too: the revolution has shown that protest works. So far, the interim government has been forced to accede to many of the demands of the protesters. Unless it can stabilise the situation, fears around security may lead to the emergence of a strongman – whether from the ranks of the previous regime or elsewhere. As the ultimate guarantor of order, the army is currently very popular, and could possibly step in as a last resort if social tensions appear to be getting out of hand.

This ongoing state of protest also risks paralysing the urgently needed economic recovery. The interim government puts the cost of the uprising to Tunisia's GNP at €6-8 billion, but with a different sector on strike each day, it is hard to see how growth can be kick-started. The governor of Tunisia's Central Bank, Mustapha Nabli, has said that social pressures are the major challenge to economic recovery in the next few months.<sup>5</sup> This adds to investor uncertainty: in the aftermath of the revolution, Moody's downgraded Tunisia's credit rating to Baa3 from Baa2, and it may still drop further. It also does not provide a very encouraging image to the tourists that Tunisia badly needs to encourage to come back – bookings with Tunisian travel agents are down 50 percent for the first three months of 2011 compared with last year.<sup>6</sup>

While concerns about the economy are shared by the entire population, the disconnect that the rural population (which makes up around 33 percent of a population of 10 million) feels from the transitional government in Tunis further aggravates its sense that its concerns are not being addressed.<sup>7</sup> Levels of rural poverty are high, and European trade policy has only really benefitted the larger farms of 200 hectares or more. An unfair system of land tenure which predates independence means that around 50 to 60 percent of farmers with smaller holdings have no right to pass on their land to their children. As a result, investment in these subsistence farms is low and yield is well below potential. Before Mohamed Bouazizi's suicide tipped the Sidi Bouzid region and then the country into revolution in 2010, discontent about this situation and about the expropriation of a number of farms was already simmering.

Clearly, there is no quick or easy solution to such a deep-seated problem, but it will be important that the transitional government at least communicates an awareness of, and attention to, these rural questions that contributed to bringing thousands of people onto the streets during the revolution. A high-profile initiative, such as the appointment of a commission to look into this question and to make recommendations to the new government once elected, could be an important step. So far, rather than receiving recognition for their grievances, the rural regions have had to suffer extra costs, such as treating those seriously injured in the protests in overstretched and under-resourced hospitals – not to mention the influx of refugees from Libya coming across Tunisia's south-eastern border. Without any indication of support, there is a risk that rural communities will believe that their revolution has been betrayed.

<sup>4</sup> See "Tunisia's opposition leader hails Turkey as model, ahead of visit," *Agence France-Press*, 25 February 2011, available at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=tunisia-opposition-leader-to-visit-turkey-report-2011-02-25>.

<sup>5</sup> "A Conversation with Mustapha Nabli, Governor of Tunisia's Central Bank: The Economic Dimensions of Unrest in the Arab World," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, 23 February 2011, recording available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/events/?fa=3165>.

<sup>6</sup> Najeh Jaouadi, "Le Tourisme, premier contre-coup de la révolution," *Réalités Online*, 4 February 2011, available at [http://www.realites.com.tn/details\\_article.php?t=539&a=22300&temp=1&lang=](http://www.realites.com.tn/details_article.php?t=539&a=22300&temp=1&lang=).

<sup>7</sup> The World Bank, *World Development Indicators for 2009*, available at <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator>.

## A chance to make amends

The office of the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women is as bustling with activity and energy as the offices of other democratic activists. Women, some of them veiled, come in and out and mix with foreign journalists and delegations. They range from feminists to pro-democracy activists to campaigners on other issues. Posters on the walls reveal a mix of activist causes apart from democracy itself, for which the organisation has fought: solidarity with Palestine; support for miners' families; women's liberation; and anti-racism (one poster calls for "*laïcité, égalité, mixité*", or "secularism, equality, diversity"). As a result, for years it was harassed by both the more conservative elements of Tunisian society that did not share its pro-feminist agenda and also the authorities, which supported the emancipation of women but not democracy.

The Association of Democratic Women is an illustration of the EU's failure to challenge Ben Ali's regime. The organisation received a €30,000 grant from the EU in support for its activities, only to find that the money was frozen in a bank account by the authorities. Instead of putting pressure on the Ben Ali government to release the money, the EU requested the funds back from the NGO at the end of the financial year. Given such experiences, the emerging political class in Tunisia understandably sees Europe as having been at best silent about and at worst complicit in the abuses of the Ben Ali regime. They are aggrieved that, as the drama of their revolution unfolded, it took European leaders so long to come down off the fence and express unequivocal support for those demanding change.

In particular, Tunisians are well aware that the EU's neighbourhood policy, which was, in theory, aid and trade in return for progress on democracy and human rights, operated very differently in practice. Leading politicians from EU member states had largely uncritical relations with Ben Ali, and although the European Commission delegation tried to take a tougher line on political questions, it was frozen out by the regime and, in more recent years, has concentrated on technical collaboration on a project level. Useful co-operation projects with non-state actors on issues such as rural poverty had restarted in the last few years. However, the commission largely ignored the failure of Ben Ali's regime to live up to its commitments to reform in return for aid. The Union for the Mediterranean, with its clear focus on commercial projects, added further to this impression of EU hypocrisy.

A number of incidents in recent years particularly undermined the EU's rhetoric about the importance of political reform in Tunisia. The most recent of these was the opening of discussions on advanced status, or privileged partnership, for Tunisia within the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2010. The EU aimed to capitalise on the relatively open business environment but did not insist on the attendance of key civil society groups in consultations. Worse, this step took place while the legislative assembly was in the process of passing a bill that subjected human rights defenders to

criminal penalties for contacting foreign organisations and institutions to raise concerns about abuses.<sup>8</sup>

Some member states were more principled than others in these instances, but unfortunately the different attitudes of member states only added to the impression that there was no unity behind an EU neighbourhood policy that supported political reform. Different member states were driven by different interests, but the prevailing European approach was always the lowest common denominator. Even specific written agreements on the importance the EU places on ongoing contact with civil society working for political reform, such as the EU guidelines on human rights defenders, seem to have been largely ignored.<sup>9</sup> The European Commission delegation and the embassies of many member states appear to have had little or no relationship with civil society in Tunis at an official level. For example, Rama Yade, the former French secretary of state for human rights, refused to meet opposition NGOs during Ben Ali's reign.

The Mediterranean member states were particularly important, not only because they call the shots in EU foreign policy towards Tunis but also because their national efforts are much more visible than the EU collective. This is no surprise: these are the states with the biggest business interests to protect and the biggest stake in the "stability" that could keep illegal migration in check. The pattern is familiar elsewhere: the less you have to lose, the more principled the behaviour. Tunisian activists are particularly critical of France and Italy for their ties to Ben Ali. Spain and Germany – the latter of which also has a large economic role in Tunisia – are also influential but not judged as harshly by Tunisians.

This European approach continued even as the Ben Ali regime collapsed. Tunisians are particularly scornful of former French foreign minister Michèle Alliot-Marie for offering help to Ben Ali in dealing with the protests. Only when Ben Ali had fled the country did the EU move beyond relatively anodyne calls for respect for the rule of law and human rights to express support, through a statement on 14 January 2011 by Catherine Ashton, High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and Stefan Füle, European Commissioner for the European Neighbourhood Policy, for the "Tunisian people and their democratic aspirations."<sup>10</sup> Even then, there was little the EU institutions could do beyond what France, Spain and Italy allowed them to. Member states' embassies in Tunis were focused on getting their own citizens out of the country, and then – particularly in the case of Italy – managing their borders to counter the flows of thousands of migrants leaving Tunisia, rather than supporting the Tunisians in consolidating democracy. The EU always seemed to be acting slowly and reluctantly in the

<sup>8</sup> For more detail on the NGO law, see <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2010/06/18/tunisia-move-against-human-rights-defenders>.

<sup>9</sup> For the text of the guidelines, see <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/GuidelinesDefenders.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> "Joint statement by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton and Commissioner Stefan Füle on the events on [sic] Tunisia," European Union, press release, Brussels, 14 January 2011, available at [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/118865.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/118865.pdf)

face of events in the same way as the interim government in Tunis, rather than getting out in front with a clear and bold indication of support for the democratic revolution.

However, despite this history, Tunisian civil society does still seem to be open to the right kind of EU support. The EU is by far Tunisia's most significant trading partner, with €9.9 billion of Tunisia's €11.8 billion exports going to the EU and two-thirds of foreign investment coming from the EU.<sup>11</sup> The EU also represents an important group of democracies with recent experience of democratic transitions. The US is not that visible in Tunisia, Maghreb integration has failed and, in any case, other Arab states are likely to be consumed by their own post-revolutionary transitions or will have few stakes in seeing the revolution succeed. The EU therefore still has a chance to make amends for past failures by offering prompt and generous help with the transition.

Although the Tunisians are still open to co-operation with Europe that can support their transition, the reputation of the current ENP towards the southern neighbourhood is rather damaged. If the EU wants to take the opportunity to be a supportive friend in Tunisia's transition over the coming months, it must frankly recognise that things cannot simply continue as before. The comments from the French government at the end of February on the need for a "sea change" in policy towards the region recognise the scale of the problem. The European External Action Service (EEAS) initiative led by Pierre Vimont to revisit the whole EU policy towards the southern Mediterranean is another important acknowledgement that a "post-Lisbon" EU should now be in a position to aim for a big change.<sup>12</sup> The challenge for the EU is not to refocus its assistance from one region to another, but to sufficiently support countries that perform well in terms of reform, and most importantly to spend money on the basis of a political strategy.

The test will be whether there is political will over the medium and longer term. So far, the evidence suggests that the EU is not willing to take sufficient action to realise its ambition to be Tunisia's "main ally in moving towards democracy," as Ashton put it in her opening statement to senior officials meeting on Egypt and Tunisia in February.<sup>13</sup> Ashton called for a historic response by the EU and should be given credit for making efforts to raise money from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the European Investment Bank (EIB). Yet this effort was eclipsed in the Tunisian press by the pledge by member states of €17 million of extra financial aid that Ashton was able to announce during her visit. The offer looked particularly low when compared to the €100 million that Italy requested in the same week for support in dealing with the influx of Tunisian migrants at Lampedusa and elsewhere.

## A plan of action

If the EU is serious about acting as Tunisia's closest partner in supporting its transition to democracy, it will need a plan of action that is, as former Tunisian industry minister Afif Chelbi put it in February, "up to scratch."<sup>14</sup> An overhaul of the neighbourhood policy with greater economic assistance clearly linked to progressive transition towards democracy is absolutely necessary, but this will take time to bed down, and to prove itself to the Tunisian people. In the meantime, Europe needs a more ambitious, immediate response.

### Quick reactions

At this critical moment, the EU should look for striking ways to show that it is now firmly committed to offering its support to Tunisia's transition. A few high-profile actions at this point would demonstrate that the EU is sensitive to the enormous step that Tunisia has taken and the costs that it has incurred. These measures could include:

- identifying "crisis points" in the regions where the revolution started and where short-term aid would go a long way, such as overstretched hospitals running out of medical supplies and injured protesters in need of sophisticated medical treatment.
- continuing to send high-level politicians from the EU and member states to express support for Tunisia's transition, as Spanish prime minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero did in early March, and to show that Tunisia has not been forgotten amid later dramatic events in Egypt, Libya and elsewhere.
- generous assistance for the south-east of Tunisia, near the Libyan border, which is facing an extra pressure from large influxes of refugees from its neighbour.
- a quick boost to the Tunisian tourist industry – which is a vital sector to kick start Tunisia's economic growth. This could include a campaign to encourage Europeans to take their holidays in Tunisia, spearheaded by ministers and the high representative going there as tourists at their own cost. The EU could also organise a delegation of large European tour operators to visit Tunisia with European ministers, to encourage the companies to re-engage there.

### Support to rural areas

In addition to the €17 million of additional aid, which should be increased if possible, the EIB has announced a lending fund of €1.87 billion to be placed at Tunisia's disposal. This money should be closely targeted on the economically

<sup>11</sup> Export figures from Eurostat; investment figures from Alexander, "Tunisia".

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Willis, "Africa shock to cause 'sea change' in EU foreign policy," *EU Observer*, 24 February 2011, available at <http://euobserver.com/9/31867>.

<sup>13</sup> See "EU to rush trade deal with Tunisia as 'exodus' continues," *Euractiv.com*, 15 February 2011, available at <http://www.euractiv.com/en/global-europe/eu-rush-trade-deal-tunisia-exodus-continues-news-502150>.

<sup>14</sup> "Tunisian minister slams 'ridiculous' EU aid," *EUbusiness*, 17 February 2011, available at <http://www.eubusiness.com/news-eu/italy-tunisia-aid.8ny/>.

distressed regions, in order to demonstrate to protesters that their concerns are being listened to, and to allow the elections in July to take place amid relative calm. The potential that a void in offering social and economic support could be filled by Islamist groups that consequently gain a stronghold provides an extra incentive to provide immediate aid to the poor agricultural regions.

#### *Supporting a general climate for business and investment*

The immediate issues for Tunisia's credit rating are security and political stability, which are priority areas for the interim Tunisian government. However, EU governments could support the recreation of a climate for investment and tourism through high-profile statements and visits to Tunisia with business leaders to encourage foreign direct investment and to provide a significant reinjection of dynamism in the economy. They could hold a European Council meeting in Tunis, combined with a major event profiling Tunisia as a stable and exciting environment for tourism and business. They could also support the upgrading of Tunisian infrastructure, particularly in internet and telephone communications and in ports, which business managers have cited as obstacles to investment.<sup>15</sup> Economic assistance, whether in agriculture or business investment, would not only benefit the country but also help shore up the position of the interim government, which would appear as a partner in these activities.

#### *Encouraging travel between Tunisia and Europe*

To facilitate exchange of experience and further feed entrepreneurship in both Europe and Tunisia, the EU could offer Tunisia an EU mobility partnership and a visa-facilitation deal, reducing the cost of visas from €60 to €35 and granting long-term visas to businessmen, students and civil society. Such a mobility partnership could include greater co-operation between European and Tunisian universities, possibly extended to the wider Maghreb region. Possible initiatives might include joint campuses and the opportunity for Tunisian students to spend a year in European universities and vice versa – a 'Dido' programme, modelled on the successful European Erasmus programme. A gesture of goodwill in the area of mobility would also be useful to counter the impression that southern EU states' primary concern in relation to the situation in Tunisia is border control to prevent illegal migration.

#### *Supporting the development of a more pluralistic system*

In addition to economic support, the EU should offer support in building the structures for a multi-party system. The EU has already committed to election observation, and this has been welcomed by the transitional government. But beyond

this, there is enormous scope to share experience, particularly from Central and Eastern European countries, which have been through a similar process in recent memory. The EU could:

- help develop civil society and independent media so that they are professionally run and know how to monitor government effectively. Specifically, the EU could provide technical advice on how to set up a broadcasting council that could grant licences to contribute to developing the capacity of independent local media.
- help build political parties, with support from European political foundations. The EU could also use this moment to think about a more far-reaching commitment to democracy assistance by funneling support to democratic transition in Tunisia and elsewhere with more speed and flexibility than the bureaucratic structures of the EU currently allow.
- help to develop mechanisms and electoral processes that can facilitate a political environment. This could include the development of an election commission to communicate with the regions to explain the steps being taken towards the transition to democracy and to encourage participation in, and registration for, the upcoming elections.

In the medium to longer term, perhaps the most important focus for the EU is to ensure that its future neighbourhood policy is genuinely focused on supporting and entrenching political reform. Through negotiations with candidate countries, and agreements on partnership, co-operation, and association with neighbours to the east, the EU has a clear framework, and strong monitoring capacity, for developing and maintaining an institutional structure that provides a basis for stable democracy in countries moving through transition. If the newly elected government of Tunisia seeks support, the EU should follow up on the promise of close partnership in putting this framework and experience at Tunisia's disposal, while making sure that it contains clear benchmarks for a continuing transition to democracy, to which positive conditionality is applied. If this framework were applied more broadly and consistently across the neighbourhood, it should be possible to have a differentiated policy that genuinely rewards reform. In that case, the old problem of ad hoc advanced status would not rear its head again: Tunisia could achieve an elevated status because it is genuinely advanced in the region this time.

#### *Consolidating democracy*

An invitation to Tunisia to join the Council of Europe would reinforce the supportive framework for its transition to democracy over the longer term, and the EU should push in Strasbourg for this invitation to be extended<sup>16</sup>. Drawing on the EU's own resources there is also much that could be done

<sup>15</sup> Alexander, "Tunisia."

<sup>16</sup> The authors are grateful to Daniel Gros, Director of CEPS for this recommendation.



to support the development of mature democratic institutions in Tunisia over the longer term. It could offer to send a rule of law mission to Tunis with a mandate<sup>17</sup> that includes:

- strengthening a more professional and independent-minded judiciary by sharing expertise and sponsoring training programmes.
- offering administrative support to the commission on corruption and helping to build anti-corruption measures into the new institutions.
- seconding administrative help and legal and casework specialists to the commission on accountability to share expertise on transitional justice. The caseload facing this commission is already unmanageable, and its mandate is currently restricted to the two months in the run-up to the revolution. In the longer term, there is much more work to be done to offer justice to the victims of abuses during over 30 years of repressive rule. Morocco, South Africa and Chile are viewed as relevant examples, as well as Romania. Prison reform will also be an important area where the international community can share experience and expertise.
- offering expertise and funding for security sector reform. Police reform will be the most difficult and important task in this respect. Engagement with the army will also be an important dimension. Joint EU-Turkey initiatives in this respect could also play a role.

The potential cost for Europe of failing to engage differently with Tunisia at this fragile historical moment is high. But, as the process of political reform gets underway in Tunisia, there is still every chance that, in the coming years, we may see it emerge as the first genuinely democratic Arab state. The opportunity for the EU to play a new and supportive role in this process is there for the taking, but this requires a decisive response both at the extraordinary Foreign Affairs Council on 10 March and at the European Council on 11 March, as well as a sustained commitment over the longer term. Consolidated democracy in Tunisia would be an enormous success story for the Tunisian people themselves who will have secured it. But it would also be a model for the other states in the region emerging from the other side of the momentous wave of protests that we are currently seeing across North Africa and the Middle East.

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<sup>17</sup> The authors are grateful to Jordi Vaquer, CIDOB Foundation for this recommendation.

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