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Turkey-Tunisia
A Battle of Power Vacuum and Political Pragmatism

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The latest decisions of President Kaïs Saïed have been echoing the region's geopolitics imperatives and role of regional and international powers. The 63-year-old is a constitutional scholar who decided to end years of political stalemate. Analysts readily compare his acts to Bonaparte who carried out the coup d'etat of 18 Brumaire, ten years after the French revolution.

Introduction

In this stance, Tunisia's political scene is witnessing a revolution that neither the deep state nor the secular intelligentsia saw coming. The neo-Islamist party, a-Nahdha, has been in political front either in semi-governing the country or being a kingmaker in new Tunisia. In ten years with a centrist foresight led by a pragmatic and visionary leader Sheikh Rached al-Ghanouchi, Tunisia's House Speaker.

This charismatic leader through his political maturity has shaped the country's fragile democracy and more importantly the Sunni Islamist political theory, hence Brotherhood's movement ideology, strategy and project in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings. This political shift began nine years ago with the endorsement of senior and wiseman political leader involved in Tunisia's politics for decades. He was one of Tunisia's post-Bourguiba system designer, late President Bedji Caid a-Sebssi¹. His contribution had strengthened the country's political ongoing democratic learning process.

So, to the late institutional struggle between a democratically elected President and Parliament. Political and geopolitical analysts could argue that Tunisia's political future doesn't look promising, this could signal a relaunch of the thorny debates that have raged between the Secularists and Islamists.

Politics in Tunisia is considered too complicated and as much a national sports as anywhere else in MENA region. One could reference the six decades of ideological and societal disputes that mark the relation between these ideological protagonists: the traditionalists and the modernists.

It seems Tunisia has passed through the period of transitional testing to end a quarter century of political police patronage under Ben Ali regime. Thus the pro-Ben Ali and the secular intelligentsia didn't swallow the loss of power or the control of Tunisia politics and people's mindset. They participated in six decades with the iron hand of Bourguiba and Ben Ali policies. Using the alibi of defending the country from the danger of the "Green Peril" (Islamism), then they have been provoking the a-Nahdha party's leader to the fatal mistake.

Politics of challenges

A parallel with Turkey's politics looks accurate between the two countries social, cultural and strong secularism values among the francophone and nationalist elite within the Tunisian society, which makes analysts to draw a parallel between the two countries. In February 28, 1997 Constitutional coup against Refah (Welfare) party and its charismatic and visionary leader in Turkey, Professor Necmettin Erbakan². Today, experts on the Turkish-Tunisia relations are trying making the comparison of President Kais Saied to Turkey 1997 "soft" coup. In 2008 the military and the secularists vehemently opposed the candidacy of Mr. Abdullah Gül, then Turkey's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs Minister, for the post of President. Warning Turks and the rest of the world that Turkey would descend into chaos if he were elected.

Another country in the region that its military institution has a strong hands in domestic politics and its ramifications, like in Turkey before. Algerian generals, in hand with the secularists had used the same fear tactics on January 1992; a similar strategy occurred in Egypt in July 2013 when General

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-49111905>

² <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/turkeys-disastrous-1997-coup-seen-24-years-later/2155925>

al-Sissi overthrew the democratically elected president Dr. Mohammed Morsi and threw him in jail until his last breath, using the same alibi used in Turkey in 2008, and Algeria in 1992, and moderately today in Tunisia. Acting like the “Republic guardians,”scaring the masses and Western powers.

This would clarify two imperatives to better understand the relations between Turkey and Tunisia in post-modern time: Both countries have a solid backbone of secularism values (version French *laïcité*). This goes back to Tunisian president Lahbib Bourguiba, who was called: Mustafa Kemal Atatürk of Arabia. Meanwhile, both societies are deeply traditionalists — the Islamists in Tunisia have become a serious political force acting from the center of power, and are no longer relying on the polls to sustain their legitimacy, they are a real force of change in the country. Like in Turkey with a thin nuanced approach of the Islamism ideology. In Turkey, it is more a combine of nationalism with a dose of pragmatist Islamism³.

Militancy, obstruction and rejection

Yet these days, serious leaks are under Carthage and Bardo Palaces 'bridge over troubled waters. This might lead to burn this fragile bamboo bridge between President Kaïs Saïed and the Parliament Speaker Sheikh Rashed al-Ghanouchi. The cabinet's reshuffle, voted by the ARP on January 26, was rejected by President Saïed. And the absence of a Constitutional Court to arbitrate had made this relation toxic because only the President is the protector of the Constitution.

Seven years after its creation in the 2014 constitution, Tunisia's Constitutional Court remains vacant. Tunisia, has been unable to find agreement on the 12 judges of the court⁴. Today, Tunisia needs to enhance the court's creation in order to be able unlock the ongoing political impasse between the president and House Speaker on one hand, and the obstructionists to any political breakthrough following the current institutional crisis.

While the fight continues over the new constitutional system, this has been going since the nomination of Premier al-Mechichi new cabinet last winter. He was promoted to minister of the interior, then head of government by President Saïed, before he turned his back on his “protégé”. He allied himself with the parties that had offered a majority in the ARP with the support of a-Nahdha party and Qalb Tounes party.

President Kaïs Saïed, however, saw this alliance as “betrayal” to his action. A deal that was made to breakthrough, and smooth up the relations between his office and the House⁵.

Socioeconomic crisis

The socioeconomic crisis is raging in Tunisia, while politicians are allowing themselves to be mocked by Tunisians. Thus, the rating agency Moody's downgraded Tunisia, for the ninth consecutive time since 2011, making it almost impossible to exit the international financial market. To find the seven billion dollars needed to complete the 2021 Budget. Premier al-Mechichi and Parliament president Sheikh al-Ghannouchi are sending help signs towards the U.S administration to step up and come to help Tunisia's fragile economy.

On the other hand, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has already issued its conditions, reiterating its demand to lower the overall civil service wage bill from the current 17.5% of GDP to 14% by 2023. In 2017, the IMF requested to reduce the same cost of the civil service from 14.5% to 12.5% of GDP by 2020⁶.

In addition, the IMF calls for political stability in order to relaunch a new wave of investments and the start of economy recovery. But, the semi-political crisis that has been blocking the function of

³ <https://medyascope.tv/2020/07/05/why-and-how-does-nationalism-engulf-islamism-in-turkey/>

⁴ https://www.cartercenter.org/news/pr/2021/tunisia_050621.html

⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/tunisian-president-relieves-prime-minister-his-post-2021-07-25/>

⁶ <https://wits.worldbank.org/GPTAD/PDF/archive/Turkey-Tunisia.pdf>

the country's democratic institutions, is seriously paralyzing the entire country. Adding a health situation that stuck on economy great deal. There have been 603.K confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 20.550 deaths. Where a vaccination process is on slow mode⁷.

A rich country with promising agriculture products and natural resources, such phosphate, which has fallen by more than half since 2010, since production never exceeded. During the decade of the Jasmine revolution, four million tonnes, with 20,000 employees working at the national Phosphates Company (CPG) located in the central city of Gafsa.

Oil and natural gas are virtually in the same situation, except that Tunisia produces less than 100,000 barrels per day. The airline TunisAir is practically in undeclared bankruptcy, another sector that was terribly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Tourism in Tunisia is the second lung of the country's economy. With 6.500 employees for six operational planes and fifteen grounded, for troubleshooting. Suppliers refuse purchases on time. The national electricity, water, railroads and many others are going through serious difficulties.

New geo-economic exchange paradigm in Turkey-Tunisia relations

After seventy-fives years of French protectorate seem not to have erased 300 years of Ottoman presence from the memory of Tunisians. Even President Lahbib Bourguiba, though very attached to the sovereignty of independent Tunisia, did not hide his admiration for the modernity instilled by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

In 2020, it is rather President Recep Tayyip Erdogan who set a political model to look at by Tunisian Islamists. An interesting paradigm that one could relay on in Turkey-Tunisia relations post-Jasmine Revolution, and the emergence of a-Nahdha party in Tunisia's political spectrum. A comparative element that would be close the dialectical comparison the model of thoughts between American founding fathers and the French Revolution⁸. But it is not only a question of ideology; in Tunisia, pro-Turkish tropism is a reality.

Hence, the relations between the two countries have been intensified on the tourism level, this because of no visa, which turned out Turkey and in particular the city of Istanbul becoming most attractive destination for Tunisians. Following by incoherent commerce public policy that made the business desire to flow. Since the revision in 2013 of the free trade agreement in force since 2005, things have not changed in favor of Tunisia. The elimination of customs taxes on certain food, consumer and equipment products has widened, at the end of 2019, a trade deficit of \$913 million with Turkey, or 38.5% of Tunisia's foreign debt service.

On the other hand, the economic situation does not look rosy, despite the high motivation of the a-Nahdha leaders and sympathizers to take this opportunity between the two excellent relations between the Turkish president and Tunisian House Speaker. However, Turkish authorities were alarmed about the incoherent economic cooperation situation, have pushed Turkey ambassador in Tunisia to be more active and push for economic diplomacy with Tunisian business community and actors to rebalance the cooperation volume between the two countries.

He will have much to do in view of Tunisia's low attractiveness for Turkish investors: out of 3,455 foreign companies established in the country, only 25 are Turkish. They work in services, international trade and tourism, for a total investment of 138 million dollars⁹.

Turkey considers Tunisia as an open door to Africa, but was counting on an electoral victory of the Islamists of a-Nahdha to advance its pawns. The Tunisian elections of October 2019 have shaken things up. This did not prevent President Erdogan from making a surprise visit to Carthage in December 2019, during which he exchanged views with his Tunisian counterpart, Kaïs Saïed, before launching his anti-Haftar offensive in Libya.

⁷ <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=tunisia+covid+19>

⁸ https://www.upi.com/Odd_News/2002/06/13/US-founders-and-the-French-Revolution/49661024008366/

⁹ <https://www.theafricareport.com/40438/turkeys-push-to-win-over-the-maghreb-the-gateway-to-africa/>

It is difficult to see clearly in this relationship of fascination-rejection between Turks and Tunisians. “On the political level, Erdogan’s attempts at interference are as much a source of discomfort as the Islamists’ servility towards him,” notes a left-wing observer. It is a different matter in everyday life, where the Tunisians’ attraction for Sublime Porte – the former central government of Ottoman Turkey – is largely satisfied through Turkish soap operas and a kind of nostalgia for the pomp of the Beylical period.

“At that time, the state apparatus was functioning,” asserts one detractor of the revolution. The craze was such that some institutions offered Turkish language courses, while kebabs and ice-cream parlors abounded alongside stores selling “made in Turkey” clothing. “This has destroyed our clothing sector, but it’s a fad that will pass,” says a former leader of the textile federation, who stoically asserts: “We’ll come to our senses when our debt has become unsustainable and politics can’t remedy it.”

In a sense of anti-Turkey sentiment that is clearly expressed by the Secular parties and elite, fearing that “Neo-Ottomanism” narrative is on the rise in Tunisia in particular, and in the region in general, a feeling that also shared in Algeria, notably among the pro-french cultural values who are nervous on the latest Ankara-Algiers 2020 rapprochement¹⁰.

The infographic in Appendix.1 provides a comprehensive overview of the Turkish-Tunisian relations throughout the period (1857 - 2021).

Tunisia: the prospect of change and rupture

In spite of the political upheaval and ensuing economic, deadly health crisis, financial turbulence, and the late institutional crisis, Tunisians, however, can continue to feel a ray of hope from their “Jasmine revolution.” In spite of, political parties and elite are still in post-coma recovery making sure the ongoing shaky political process will not fall into political regress. Tunisian voters are still believing in their revolt, but they lost trust in political leaders and elite. A lack of credibility in politics is apparent among the voters across the Maghreb region.

Such a political *Tunisiami* “twisting” of the news continues as the Western and counter-revolution media in Arab countries persist in misinforming its general public and writing off the people’s civility, polity, and hope as a lost cause, disrespecting millions of men and women struggling for freedom, dignity, and even one day, direct democracy.

Tunisians are worried today for political instability and economic uncertainty.

Tunisia did come along in light of the challenges that the country and the people to some extent have been facing in the last ten years of change and rupture that millions of Tunisians have proudly took the streets, and later have been voting for “new” Tunisia and total rupture with the old system.

A sentiment was vehemently shown among large majority of Tunisians following President Kaïs Saïed’s Sunday, 25 July 2021 bold decision. Today Tunisia is indeed divided like Turkey when it comes to politics and its complex societal themes managements, Tunisians who are caught between hope and doubt, they come across that Tunisia is today better off than it was ten years ago. A solid statement that goes with the feeling of a large majority of Tunisians in terms of liberty, free movement and political institution practice. Even though, there is a moment of doubt about the style of governance and the post-Ben Ali multi-partism lack of experience and trust; firstly among the legitimate new Tunisia political parties and elite, secondly, between the people and the politicians because of the latter could not deliver, notably the president who was elected with a comfortable majority that gave him a legitimate and a solid political capital, and yet, he made an amateurish decision that its repercussion is still not clear yet — where Tunisia is heading?

Lastly, the role of the foreign actors (Arab regional powers) and the role of France in Tunisia politics has been a real obstacle to the process of change and rupture that Tunisians have rose up for

¹⁰ <https://www.dailysabah.com/op-ed/2020/01/21/algeria-turkey-make-remarkable-rapprochement-in-skillful-diplomatic-moves>

and at each election the message was clear: Tunisia is not going backward, an argument that are making the pro-Turkey role in the region, it's a matter of a power vacuum per se.

Tunisian Exceptionalism

The question of whether Tunisian exceptionalism is real or just a political element that analysts like to use as a language element manner to enhance their arguments when it comes to the Tunisian political success story. Tunisians agreed on this point, and it is sustained these last ten days about the role of Tunisian army in politics unlike in many Arab countries such as Algeria, Egypt, and Sudan etc... Tunisian army is a “republican” orientated one, and it is apolitical⁹. This goes back to the first days of the country independence that Tunisian leaders during the first days of independence President Lahbib Boureguiba did not surrounded himself with the military, therefore the military were obliged to fulfil their constitutional duty and not get involve in politics.

It is an important point that it needs to be made, Tunisian army was marginalized by President Lahbib Boureguiba because he did not want to take any chance for letting it to get control of the country's public life with a fearful military intelligence like the neighboring country: Algeria for instance.

Yet, President Lahbib Bourguiba had excelled to put aside the army, but he did create a very solid police institution that was controlling the country's affairs. His late trusted general who his interior minister and later Prime minister who in 1987 overthrew the president. His name was General Ben Ali.

Another layer for Tunisian exceptionalism that should one look at, it is noted in the sterile debate that took place on social media, following President Kaïs Saïed's decisions to freeze the parliament acts, fire the prime minister, and rule for thirty-days with executive-order. Tunisian elite and political parties, despite, their ideological differences they agree on the principal of political concession and consensus. This what is letting the analysts to keep the window of hope open.

Revolution or evolution

The Tunisian uprisings was not motivated by a revolutionary imperative. This is what made the Tunisian uprisings successful — here also one could add the role of the army that was a major factor in Tunisian history. Nonetheless, analysts are arguing, making comparative parallel from socio-political perspective mentioning the American revolution, the French Revolution to the Bolcheviks revolution. A process of change and peaceful transition will take time, but the ongoing process is healthy even though it seems very shaky.

Hence, the question of the dynamic of political evolution and social change that is taking place in Tunisia is not far from the Turkish model. A model that pro-islamist and anti-French values analysts in the region are in favoring, despite the harsh and tough resistance from liberal/secular movements in Arab countries and Tunisia is one of them, in this stance, Tunisia's former president Lahbib Bourguiba was considered by the Arab secularists: the evolutive process that was led by President Erdogan in his fight with the army and the secular parties and elite in Turkey. Wondering what made President Kaïs Saïed to take bold decisions, instead of waiting. Also he raised the question of new generation of leaders, particularly with a-Nahdha party who is playing a major role in the process of change, but the party's leadership needs to take a new step that corresponds fully with new Tunisia politics¹¹.

Currently President Kaïs Saïed's strategy might get a boomerang effect because Tunisians are exhausted, and are losing patience with their politicians. The economic situation is dire, Tunisians youth are crossing daily to Italian shores looking for a better life elsewhere. A dream that turns into a nightmare of the Italian authorities and Tunisians alike. An humanitarian imperative that needs to

¹¹ It's been calls within the party youth leaders, calling for Sheikh Rashed al-Ghannouchi to hand over the party chair to the new generation

be tackle as a national security one and not just law-and-order issue or simply a political selling point for right wing parties in Italy and France.

Adding the turmoil security and political instability in Libya are having a direct effect on Tunisia's socio-economic situation. A situation that is challenging the Tunisian authorities how to deal with domestic terrorism that is an imminent threat to the country's national security and political stability. As a result these two domestic politics 'imperatives are provoking economic uncertainty. A situation that has worsened in the aftermath of COVID-19 pandemic crisis, the country has been severely impacted by the pandemic. With a fragile economy and institutional instability Tunisia will be haunting the ghost's spirit of a permanent coup d'etat¹².

Conclusion

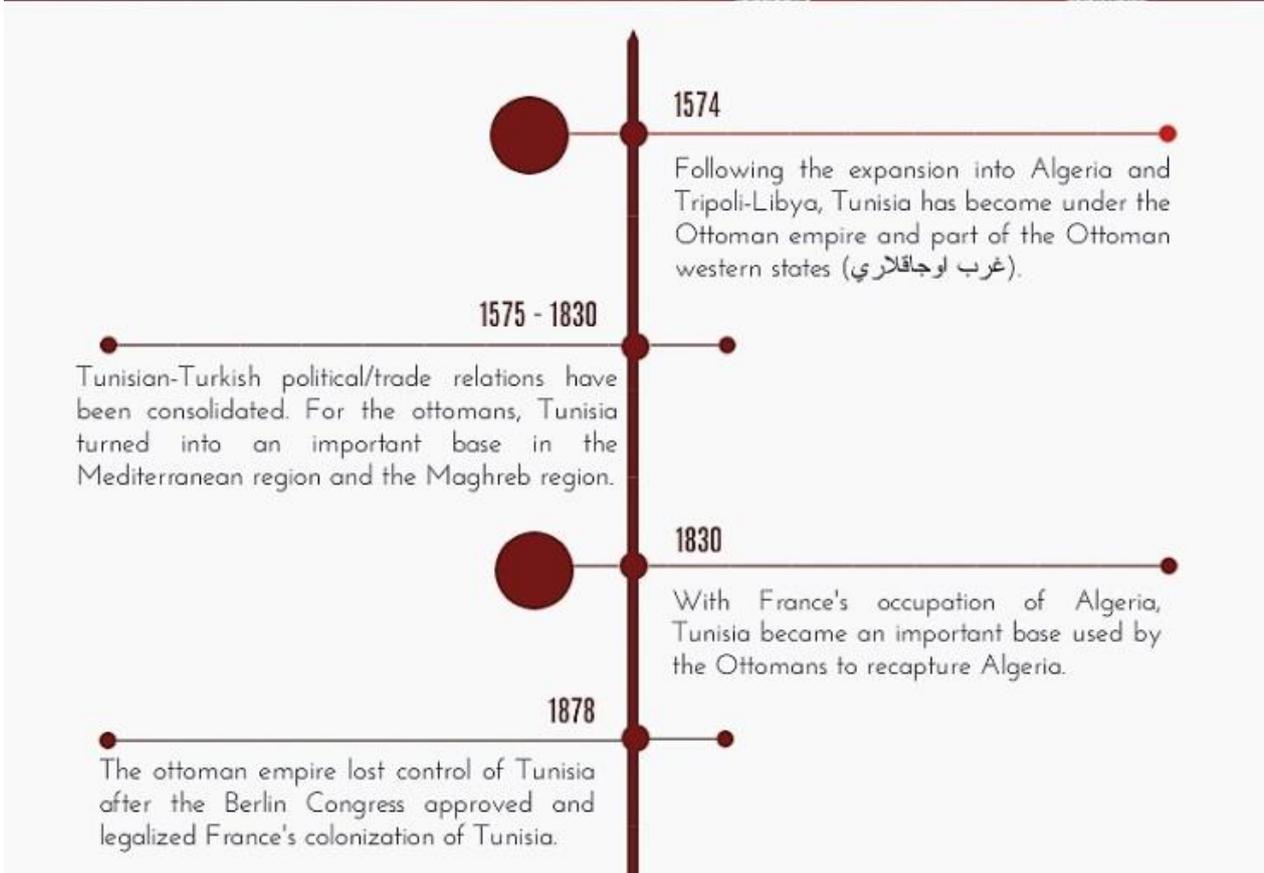
A new paradigm was being set for MENA region with the realization that its authoritarian leaders thought that were immune, and that change could come from within the system.

Tunisia got trapped between two ways of thinking, a dilemma that has been striking the so-called Arab "secular" states, the deep division between the elite and the masses on one hand, and the radical secularists and the traditionalists on the other. Hence, a political thought that left Arab states perplexed. Unlike in Turkey, where there is a deep sense of positive secularism (*laïcité*), where democracy has become red line, July 15, 2016 failed coup attempted is a prefect example.

Tunisia today is between two choices: either take the road that millions of Turks have had taken on the night of July 15, 2016 or surrender like Egyptians to a-Sissi's coup of July 3, 2013. According to the latest developments, the latter seems more likely to happen with less collateral damage.

There is, however, thin comparison to February 28, 1997 Constitutional coup against Refah (Welfare) party and its charismatic and visionary leader in Turkey, Professor Necmettin Erbakan. After all, President Kaïs Saïed's coup would enhance the democratic process instead, like the putschist "constitutionalists" did in Turkey. One hopes this animosity between the Tunisian political leaders and elite will not be reduced to yet ideological showdown between the Islamists and Secularists. However, this could signal the establishment of the passage of real people's representatives control over the former oligarchic system and intra-society policing state. Though a confirmation that elections are means, but includes the application of the rules of laws as all Tunisians indicate.

¹² <https://www.mitterrand.org/le-coup-d-etat-permanent.html>



1878- 1956

Despite the radical break in relations between Turkey and Tunisia, Turkey hosted many Tunisian activists and supported the right of Tunisians to be liberated from the French occupation.

1956- 1960

Tunisia restored relations with Turkey after independence. The political and commercial relations between the two countries were developed and flourished during the rule of **Adnan Menderes**. Moreover, a Visa waiver was applied between Tunisia and Turkey.

1961- 2001

Relations between the two countries have cooled, especially with Tunisia heading to Europe and France.

2002- 2010

Turkey under **AK Party** adopted a new policy towards the Arab world and Tunisia was among the Arab countries that Turkey attached great importance to, as important economic and cultural agreements were concluded between the two countries.

2011- 2012

After the **Jasmine Revolution**, both countries signed The Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation on 15 September 2011. A branch of **TIKA** was opened in Tunisia to provide financial and technical aid.

2012- 2014

On 25 December 2012, a joint declaration on the establishment High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council (HLSCC) between Turkey and Tunisia was signed in Ankara. It aimed at a closer bilateral cooperation mechanism and agreed to cooperate in the fields of politics, security, military, economy, science, technology, and trade.

2014-2020

The Turkish president and FA Minister paid official state visits to Tunisia to enhance the bilateral cooperation mechanisms between Turkey and Tunisia. The latest visit was paid in December 2019 before the Turkish military operations in Libya.

2021

President *Recep Tayyip Erdogan* held a phone call with Kais Saied, underlining the importance of democracy and the protection of freedoms amid a power grab viewed as a coup.



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