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TUNISIA, THE ONLY TRUE ARAB SPRING

The so-called Arab Spring began in Tunisia on December 17, 2010, when an illegal vegetable vendor, following mistreatment by the police, set himself on fire in front of the governor's headquarters in Sidi Buazid. That was the spark that set the country on fire and caused the ousting of Ben Ali on the following 14th of January. Then, in time, with a driving effect, other Arab Springs went blooming in other parts of the middle east.

But the Tunisian Spring, unlike others, was aimed at molding a new form of democracy, albeit an unstable one, ensured by the adhesive mix between a strongly secular society and an Islamic party like the Ennahda, which was legitimated by years of opposition to the dictator and which was guided by a man, Rashid Ghannouchi, who was first considered a terrorist but who later showed a high sense of the State.

The elections

Ennahda won the elections but could not turn faith in the Koran into an economic system able to produce the wealth that was expected by those who had voted the party. They tried, a bit clumsily, to 'Islamise' society but, in such a context – this was their greatest mistake – they provided room and alibis to a series of radical Islamic fringes like Ansar al Sharia, which was then banished in August 2012.

The killings

A little over two years after the revolution, on February 6, 2013, all of it risked an early end with the murder of an opposition leader, Chokri Belaid. Four gunshot wounds to the neck from up close in what seemed like an execution. Five months later, on July 25, another political leader of the secular front, Mohamed Brahmi, was murdered in an ambush. Same weapon, same technique, same execution. The dawn of hope for a people that was the first to stand up against a corrupt dictatorship, their dream of liberty and of a better life had faltered when faced with the rigidity of an Islam made of intolerance and hate that surely armed the hand of the killers. But it was this double murder that cast light on the contradictions of the course towards democracy and that gave strength to the Tunisian people.

Chokri Belaid was the leader of the Democratic Patriots Party, a secular left-wing political formation that had obtained roughly 1% of the suffrages during the elections. Belaid was a lawyer who, together with his wife Basma (a lawyer too) was very busy socially. He was an atheist who was seen by the people as a symbol of the will to change and of dedication in

politics. Belaid, who is now buried in the section for martyrs in the cemetery of Djellaz, had exposed, a few days before being killed, the presence of groups within Ennahda that were inciting violence. Belaid had accused Ghannouchi of protecting these groups. What Belaid was referring to was the League for the Safeguard of the Revolution, a defense force within Ennahda that was founded right after the revolution. In another incident, just a few months later, Lofti Naguedh, the Secretary General of the “Nida Tiunis” and Secretary of the Union of agriculture workers in Tataouine, was attacked and lynched during a demonstration organized by the League and attended by a group of Islamic extremists.

Brahmi was also from Sidi Buazid. Born in a farmer family, Brahmi had studied economy, was a secular socialist but remained a fervent Muslim, he was part of the constituting assembly for the drafting of the new constitution and had his own little left-wing party: “Popular Current”.

Both Mohamed Brahmi and Chokri Belaid were symbols of a strong and alluring social message; one that is surely important during this historical phase. That is why their death, like that of the street vendor Muhammed Buazizi two years before, has had a social impact much more widespread than the importance that the two actually had socially or politically speaking.

The symbols of change

Either way, the death of the two politicians; the wave of commotion that followed; the growing resentment against the inefficiency of the governing Ennahda and against a presumed collusion, indulgence or laxity of the party with regards to Islamic radicalism; the fear that this radicalism could turn into terrorism, have moved the indignation from street demonstrations to a political current. A new constitution was voted (there was no mention of Shaaria within it), there was even a vote. And this, at least in the Middle East and North Africa, represents an exception. Tunisian democracy ran the risk of drifting towards civil war, instead, it was reinforced.

A number of circumstances and bad examples in neighboring countries have also influenced the Tunisian situation: the civil war in Syria, the military restoration in Egypt, the spread of the ISIS in the Arabic peninsula, the Libyan chaos. The Ennahda has suffered a decrease in popularity equal to that of the Muslim Brotherhood, a movement to which Ghannouchi's party is affiliated. This was also due to a number of scandals such as that in which the son-in-law of Ghannouchi, Rafik Abdessalm, also the country's foreign minister, was found using public money to pay the hotel where he slept with his lover.

But Ennahda and Ghannouchi (who leads the more radical wing of the party) have also the merit of taking a step back when they realized that their consensus was declining, thus favoring elections.

The victory of Nida Tunis

On the past 16th of October, during the parliamentary elections, which took place in an orderly and correct way (again, an exceptional event in the region), the popular verdict was

favorable to a secular formation founded in June 2012 called “Nida Tunis” (“Call Tunis”), which won 85 seats (out of 217), making Ennahda go from 89 to 69 seats in parliament.

The most surprising aspect is that, amid the various options available to the Tunisian electors, they chose not only a secular party, but also a management with ties to the country's political past. The leader of “Nida Tunis”, Beji Caid Essebsi, is an old time politician who was already active in the struggle for independence against the French. Essebsi served several times as minister during Boughiba's rule and has safely ferried through the dictatorship of Ben Ali, serving as president of the parliament. During each of these political transitions, Essebsi has managed to back away when the regimes toughened up and became unpopular.

In his political party are businessmen and politicians that were active and prestigious during the preceding regime. The “Nida Tunis” is a moderate party inspired by a reformist and secular spirit; it is a nationalist party that echoes the stances of the Bourghiba politics, including the fact that religion must be kept at bay by the institutions.

Does this imply a rehabilitation of the past? Not necessarily, but surely the Tunisians have realized that to demonize the past when faced with an uncertain future is a useless risk.

Either way, on November 23, in the election of the president of the republic, where participation reached its peak, Essebsi obtained the highest number of votes and will be running in the second round against the runner up, the present president ad interim Moncef Marzouki (also a secular socialist) on December 28.

It is not important whether the “Nida Tunis” will form a government with or without the support of Ennahda, seen as the political system is currently substantially bipolar. It isn't even important if 88-year-old Essebsi will become president. In the political life of the country Ennahda – it must be underlined – still has power and influence.

The most important aspect is that democracy, in Tunisia, has begun to work and to have its own rituals, forcing politicians to confront themselves with the popular consensus and will.

And the terrorists?

There is, however, an unsolved problem; this democratization process does not include the more extreme fringes and the more radical Islamic groups. There is the legal country on the one side, on the other there is only terrorism. Among the foreign volunteers that crowd the ISIS militias, the Tunisians are the most numerous. There is talk of roughly 2500 militiamen, some of whom – about 400 – would have returned home with specific military know-how.

There are parts of the country, towards the border with Algeria, where terrorist groups have settled. From Libya they smuggle weapons and the seed of instability. Ansar al Sharia, involved in the attack against the American embassy on September 14, 2012, still has its leader, Abu Iyad (the battle name of Saifullah bin Hassine), currently a fugitive (who probably escaped to Libya). His group is strong of about 3000 active militants, but the

count grows to 10.000 if we include the sympathizers. And we must not forget that a young Abu Iyad had served in the ranks of Ghannouchi's clandestine movement of Islamic tendency. In February 2011, after the start of the revolution, he was released from Tunisian prison where he was serving a 43-year sentence for terrorism.

There is the AQIM of Abdelmalik Droukdel, which now has some operative bases in the country and which has recently designated its own representative of the Tunisian branch of the movement, Khaled Chaieb (aka Lokman Abu Sakhr). There are other, less known but equally dangerous, formations like the Katibah (brigade) Uqba ibn Nafi (from the name of an Arab warrior that had conquered northern Africa), which counts a few hundred militants among its ranks. And there are the radicals within that cultivate extremist theories within the Ennahda.

Then there are the Koranic schools financed by the Wahabite Saudis, the preachers of the Gulf that scour the country, expanding the radical ideology.

All of this is due in part to the condescending of the Ennahda with regards to the radical groups. Since 2011, despite various arrests, nobody has been sentenced for terrorism. Ghannouchi himself, during his public speeches, has hardly addressed the issue of violence. Roughly 40 mausoleums of Sufi saints have been destroyed. When conditions of social chaos develop, there is always operative room made for terrorism.

The challenges ahead

There are great challenges facing Tunisia in the near future. In October, the ministry of finance has increased Tunisia's defense budget from 110 million dollars in 2014 to 280 million in the coming year. There are agreements in place with the US for the procurement of helicopters, radars, weapons and anti-terror training. The stability of the country must be protected through a reinforcement of its security forces.

There is the reform of the police, which today counts 35.000 men in its ranks; a police force which still has ties to the old dictatorship and which still applies the same violent methods of the times of Ben Ali. Violence against journalists and political activists, arbitrary arrests, torture and corruption. The special forces have become famous, 'Ninja', they call them; they are tasked with intervening on motorbikes during demonstrations. In the field of human rights, democratic Tunisia still has a long way to go. The most trusted ally of the Tunisian revolution this far is the army, which has a force of roughly 40.000 men.

The vertical drop of the resources from tourism has brought the country's economy to its knees. This means unemployment, frustration and an end to stability. Tunisia was promised 500 million dollars by the IMF and 500 million by the US; they would need ten times as much to lift the country's economy back on its feet.

But mostly, there is an ongoing cultural conflict which sees secular forces that reflect the panarabic Marxism of Bourghiba clashing against Islamic sides and, within these, a clash between moderates and Salafites. Then there is the future political destiny of Ennahda, currently crushed between secular opposition and the radicalism of some of its inner fringes. It will have to chose soon whether it will honor its adhesion to democracy and

pluralism. It will have to choose between the rules of politics and the influence of religious ideology. There are two distinct experiences and paths that live within the party: those of the people that escaped and were exiled – like Ghannouchi himself – and those that stayed, during the dictatorship, going from one prison to the next while undergoing torture and abuses, such as Hammadi Jebali, the Secretary General of Ennahda. The former may be more inclined to bow to the destructive appeal of the military option, the latter will probably be more prone to adopt a political struggle.

THE CASE FOR SHUTTING DOWN THE ICC

The International Criminal Court in the Hague has failed in its primary objective: pursuing criminals responsible for crimes such as genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity that are not indicted by their respective nation states. Apart from a bunch of African warlords, African opposition members and African officials – indeed, all those currently indicted by the Court come from the African continent – no one else is currently being investigated by this controversial addition to the global judicial system that began operating in 2002.

If not the Bush US Administration, who else?

The UN's Special Rapporteur on Counter terrorism and human rights, Ben Emmerson, claims in a recent statement that the information contained in the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Report indicate that “there was a clear policy orchestrated at a high level within the Bush administration, which allowed to commit systematic crimes and gross violations of international human rights law”. Furthermore, Emmerson states that it is time to take action since “international law prohibits the granting of immunities to public officials who have engaged in acts of torture”, the US should hence bring those accountable to justice.

We all know this is never going to happen in the United States. President George W. Bush and his deputy, Dick Cheney, have both affirmed that they knew what was happening to foreign citizens in the CIA's black sites, during the Extraordinary Renditions programme and in the US government's outsourcing of “enhanced interrogations” to “friendly countries” with a despicable human rights records. In fact, they both licensed this policy in the name of “homeland security” and continue to stand by it.

Who should go after them then? The ICC, of course, since the Bush Administration waged two wars, invaded two sovereign countries, deposed their governments and perpetrated torture against alleged terrorists in the name of the fight against terrorism. One could object that the United States are not a signatory of the Rome Treaty – President Bill Clinton signed it, but Congress never ratified it – but then again neither is Sudan, whose President Omar al Bashir is wanted by the ICC for crimes against humanity. And no wonder President Bush was one of the Court's staunchest opponents.

Weak with the strong

Just recently the ICC has suffered another major setback when the Court's Prosecutor, Fatou Bensouda from The Gambia, was forced to drop her charges against current Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta. The tribunal's highest profile case ended in failure due to the lack of evidence needed to bring the indictment before the judges. Prosecutor Bensouda blamed Kenya for blocking her attempts to find out the truth, failing to hand over vital evidence and for its attempts to intimidate and interfere with the witnesses.

The truth of the matter is that this case should have never started. The accusations against Kenyatta referred to the 2007 post-electoral unrest that killed over one thousand Kenyans and displaced around 600 thousand of them. The son of Kenya's first president, Jomo, was not even a contestant in those elections, but had backed the winning horse, Mwai Kibaki, against Raila Odinga. And it was the losers of the contest that started the mayhem. In addition to this, Kenyatta used his indictment by the ICC in his successful bid for the presidency in 2013.

In fact, Uhuru Kenyatta was the first sitting head of state to appear before the ICC and, despite the difficulties this may have caused, it is hard to deny that the investigations carried out by the Prosecution were insufficient, to say the least. Furthermore, countries are encouraged to cooperate with the Court, but the latter lacks any power to compel them if they fail to do so. With all due respect, are we sure that a Prosecutor from The Gambia has sufficient leverage to deal with high profile cases involving officials currently in office, or officials tout-court?

A political bias?

All of the ICC's open cases are in Africa: Ivory Coast's former President Laurent Gbagbo, former DRC Vice President Laurent Bemba, Congolese militia leaders Germain Katanga and Mathieu Ngudjolo Chui, Uganda's Lord Resistance Army's founder Joseph Kony, the already mentioned Sudanese President Omar al Bashir; all have been charged, some are wanted and others are currently being tried by the Court. And they are all African. Thomas Lubanga, a Congolese militia leader, was the first person to be convicted by the Court in March 2012. And guess where he comes from?

The world is filled with armed conflicts, rebel militias and extremist terrorist groups ranging from Latin America to Far East Asia. But, for instance, the ICC has failed to bring charges against Islamic State leaders, Al Qaeda affiliated terrorists and even the Taliban. There would be plenty of evidence against them, but where does the ICC stand on the issue of terrorism? Isn't a bomb planted in a market of Kabul to kill as many civilians as possible a crime against humanity?

Governments are another issue. Since the ICC has no police powers, how effective can it ever become? The list of countries that do not recognize the authority of the ICC include, apart from the United States, China, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Turkey, Egypt, Russia, Iran and Israel. The African Union, for one, has asked its members not to arrest al Bashir and none of them have done so yet.

If rulers are indicted but remain unpunished or if they deny their collaboration to the Court, impunity will prevail and those wanted will never be apprehended. But if the high profile cases are dropped, then what is left for the ICC to pursue? And shouldn't we start encouraging local, weaker justice systems to bring to court their own war criminals instead of having them tried abroad, away from the local public eye and by a continent-biased judicial system?

The ICC was an ill-conceived solution to the issue of crimes against humanity and has failed to bring justice to their victims, be they innocent civilians caught in a conflict or alleged terrorists. No one will ever be held accountable for their loss or for the abuses they suffered.

THE LABYRINTH OF INTERESTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

In the Middle East there exists no certainties, but a continuously evolving situation that does not allow for lasting alliances, rewards from political stances, or a clear definition of who is a friend and who is not. Today's friend could be your enemy tomorrow and vice-versa. Often the enemy of my enemy fatally becomes my friend, albeit temporarily so. This happens because interests intersect one another and there exist no ideological common denominators, just threats that either unite or divide. Thus alliances, although unnatural, find their own peculiar logic.

The cause of all this is surely to be found in the social upheavals that have invested the Middle East in the past two years. Behind many of these circumstances there operates the US administration, the only remaining superpower in the world, which has failed or has refused to play a leading role in the region, perhaps because of the heavy legacy left on the ground by George W. Bush. After all, the US has dedicated its efforts in disengaging from local conflicts rather than piloting their outcome. The middle-eastern oil is strategically less important today than it was in the past, and this may be one of the reasons. Notwithstanding, the absence of a strong American policy has allowed many regional actors to recite their part and to cultivate tactical interests that are scarcely connected to a strategic overall vision.

The areas of conflict

Today the areas of major conflict are Syria, Iraq with the ISIS, the civil war in Libya and the classic Israel-Palestinian face-off. Other hotbeds are eager to capture the spotlight, like the issue of the stability of Yemen (with the growing conflict against the Houthi), that of Lebanon (which is slowly catching the civil war virus from Syria) and the precariousness of Jordan which sees its territory literally filled with Islamic extremists. Then there is the Kurdish issue, which cannot be forgotten, after the role they played in the fight against the ISIS (which opens the door to a future request of autonomy/independence) and in the stability of Iraq itself. Lastly, we have the Iranian nuclear issue which, although leapfrogged by more imminent problems, is no less important than it was in the past.

A labyrinth of interests

It is most interesting, in order to find your way among this labyrinth of intersecting interests, to figure out who stands with who.

There are 'de facto' sides that confront each other over the issue of the Muslim Brotherhood: Qatar and Turkey support them; Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates oppose them. For Saudi Arabia, the motive is ideological – Wahabism does not allow for a 'political' Islam like the one of the Brotherhood. The UAE have always been faithful allies of their Saudi neighbor so they support them in this issue as well. Siding with them is also Bahrain, a Sunni regime that governs a country with a Shiite majority thanks to the military support of the Saudis and Emirates. On the opposing front we have Qatar, a small country with great ambitions and ample financial means that for some time has been competing against Saudi Arabia's hegemonic policy in the Sunni world. Qatar has thought it wiser to position itself alongside the Muslim Brothers and the more radical fringes that ravage the region (Qatar even harbors an official delegation from the Afghan Talibans). Qatar's stance was dictated by the growing ambitions of its emir, Tamin bin Hamad Al Thani, who succeeded his father on the throne in June 2013. The emir runs the television network Al Jazeera, which is often used with clear political aims. Turkey supports the Brotherhood because Erdogan's AKP is in fact the Turkish branch of the same movement. Also, the Turkish president has for some time adopted a political line that follows the regional ambitions of the dissolved Ottoman empire,

thus trying to recite a hegemonic role in the region. The privileged relationship Turkey had with Mohammed Morsi in Egypt constituted the first building block of this strategic pattern. The ousting of the Muslim Brothers and the restoration of the military regime in Cairo has in fact invalidated the project. Thus, the formations that confronted each other over the Muslim Brothers – Saudi Arabia and UEA on one side, Qatar and Turkey on the other – are the same that now fight over whether to support General Al Sisi or not.

Yet, again, absolute certainty does not exist. In the past weeks some of the heads of the Muslim Brothers residing in Doha have left the emirate. It is not yet clear if Qatar is trying to fix its relationship with Egypt and/or Al Sisi, or if the US is pressuring them or if – and this is the more accredited version – emir Al Thani has realized that the side of the extremists is a dangerous ground to walk.

It is on the support of the Muslim Brothers that the issue of Hamas has been lately unraveled. Qatar has expressed its unconditional support to the Islamic Palestinian movement and, within it, to its most radical wing which embraces the armed conflict. The political leader of Hamas, Khaled Meshal, a guest of the emir of Doha, is said to have been forced to refuse any and all mediation with Israel if he wanted to remain in the emirate. On this front, Qatar is siding with Iran and Hezbollah, while on the opposite side sit Saudi Arabia, General Al Sisi and the Palestinian National Authority.

On the Syrian front

Speaking of the war in Syria, Qatar and Saudi Arabia also compete on the support of the rebellion, where the more extremist factions, including the ISIS, are secretly financed by Qatari non-governmental organizations, while other groups are supported by the Saudi side. In this theater, Kuwait is in line with Qatar and the UAE. Siding with the Saudis, for obvious survival-related reasons, we find Bahrain. But there are other supporting actors: Iran and Russia, which support the Alawite regime of Bashar Assad; Turkey which unconvincingly supports the armed opposition, often closing their eyes on its more radical fringes that hide on Turkish ground; the US, which supports the 'secular' armed opposition but who is still uncertain as to what kind of support to deliver; the Lebanese Hezbollah, who fight alongside the Syrian loyalists.

Strange alliances

Because of the natural domino effect which befalls the various middle-eastern events, the confrontation between the sides emerges even in the light of the emergency determined by the military victories of the ISIS in Iraq. Qatar and Kuwait sympathize, in a dissimulated way, with the caliphate; Saudi Arabia and the UAE oppose it; Iran sides with Iraq, this time in the company of the USA.

The convergence of interests between Tehran and Washington is surely a passing breeze dictated by the wartime emergency, yet it nonetheless represents an event emblematic of the contradictions that affect the region. It is not policy that alters the events, it is the events themselves that marginalize policy.

Amid these contradictions, it appears equally unnatural but realistic that the Americans are today on the same side of the barricade with the Syrian regime and it is equally emblematic that Qatar, which harbors the biggest US military base in the region, is the same country which does not express hostility towards the ISIS. We could argue that Qatar is an ally of Iran when speaking of support to Hamas and to the Syrian opposition, but when we speak ISIS, they are on the opposite

front. Siding with the Kurds, who are supported by Europe and the US, are, for instance, the Turkish PKK militias, which are considered a terrorist group by both Europe and the US.

And in Libya?

What about Libya? The Islamic groups in the country are supported by Qatar; there is a rebel General called Haftar who is well-liked by Egypt and the US; there are the UAE that support Egyptian aerial strikes on Libyan ground (it seems that they even participated directly in some of them). Today the civil war in Libya is not influenced by a power struggle internal to the country but by the interference of those that support the various factions involved.

The only common denominator: extremism

It is difficult to find one's way among this complex labyrinth of interests and worries which seem to define the role of each single actor involved. Surely the main problem is today represented by Islamic terrorism that finds room to operate and connivance in the instability of several countries in the Middle-eastern region of the world.

Either way, a clearly religious matrix that juxtaposes Sunnis and Shiites doesn't seem to exist: Sunni Hamas has the support of the Iranian Shiites; the Kurd, whom are mostly Sunni, fight the Sunni ISIS; the Egyptian and Emirates Sunnis shoot against the Libyan Sunnis; the Shiite Hezbollah sympathize with Sunni Hamas.

Sometimes the only common denominator is the extremism which strikes minorities, as happens today in Iraq on the part of the ISIS. Not because such minorities profess different religions or rites (it is the case with the Yazidh and Christians), but because they represent a different ethnic entity, such and the Turkomans, the Shebak or the Sabei, whom are Muslim and are divided among Sunni and Shiites internally. It is also the case of the Sunni Kurds, which oppose the Sunni Arabs. Other times the common denominator is extremism pure and simple, so you'll have the moderate Sunni Islam of the Kurds facing the extreme Sunni Islam of the ISIS.

In such context, when everyone fights everyone else (when the Soviet Union was around, the juxtaposition was at the level of superpowers, thus preventing the insurgence of so many regional conflicts), there is a loss of clarity in the choice of one's side. There are no ideologies, no historical basis; there exists only that which is apparently more convenient at the moment.

A dangerous game

Even those that support the more radical fringes of Islam, as is the case with Qatar, know that the game, leaving aside contingent interests, is a very dangerous one. For instance, it is quite possible that the initiatives of the Emir Al Thani are so outrageous because he feels guaranteed by the American military presence in his country.

The creation of the Caliphate itself postulates the cancellation of the borders as they were traced during the colonial period, therefore Qatar too could find itself engulfed in a Muslim empire guided by people like Al Baghdadi.

As we have stated, there are other hotbeds that still burn under the ashes. Some have manifested themselves already in the present fragility of Jordan, Yemen and Lebanon. Others will emerge later, depending on what will happen in Saudi Arabia when the old king Abdallah will abdicate; or on what will happen in Oman, where sultan Qaboos has no heirs; or on whether Rouhani's moderate line will prevail in Iran; whether Erdogan will manage to Islamise the country any further

without sparking social unrest; on whether the 40 million Kurds that occupy six of these nations (Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Iran, Armenia and Azerbaijan) will manage to achieve their dream of independence. We can definitely easily foretell that what is happening now in the middle east is but a prologue to something much worse that will happen in the future.