



NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE FOUNDATION

MAGHREB STRATEGIC TRENDS

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Executive Summary

The Maghreb region has been shaken by mass protests in Tunisia and Egypt organized by the secular opposition forces against their governments.

The opposition leader's murder in Tunisia has sparked demonstrations nationwide bringing to the government's dismissal. This matter will probably enlarge the rift within the ruling Troika coalition and will not be resolved any time soon. The political crisis has also highlighted the lack of improvement of the country's economy, including the high unemployment and high inflation, to the point that Standard & Poor's has lowered Tunisia's credit rating with a further impact on foreign investment.

Even though Ennahda is the biggest party in the National Constituent Assembly, with 89 of its 217 seats, this majority will not be enough to run the country. The opposition figures like the former Prime Minister, Beji Caid el-Sebsi (Nidaa Tounis) party are expanding their hold on the society. The country is entering in a hard phase, with a new government in the making and a constitution still in development, the parliamentary and presidential elections, scheduled respectively for June and July, could be postponed. The Salafist groups are pushing the country, even through violence, towards an increased radicalisation and Ennahda's behaviour towards these groups is still not clear. But it's not possible to exclude any kind of compromise in the short-medium term.

Many deadly demonstrations took place in the Egyptian city of Port Said, sometimes accompanied by violent protests in several other cities along the Suez Canal and in the Nile Delta. The protests and street violence have destabilised Egypt's political transition. The country's economy has been close to the collapse, with soaring unemployment, an increasing budget deficit, shrinking hard-currency reserves and a sharp fall of the currency's value. The negotiations stall with the IMF for the loan of \$ 4,8 billion has further compromised the country's economy and they will necessarily be reopened in March.

The decision to boycott the next parliamentary elections by the opposition parties is igniting the protests and will not give more chances to the National Salvation Front to win the hearts and minds of Egyptians. It will enable instead the Islamist parties to gain considerable majorities in the absence of effective rival candidates. In the meantime, Egypt's military, the real bulwark of stability, has confirmed its willingness keep out of domestic politics.

The problem of light weapons' diffusion in the area is becoming a real threat to national security, and Islamic militants movements from one country to another within the Maghreb region are constantly growing.

Algeria's government, which seeks to combat terrorism through coercive measures, during the Organization of Islamic Cooperation summit (Cairo, 6-7/2/2013) has proposed the adoption of a generalised policy of rejection of any terrorist pressure, denying also the payment of a ransom to free a hostage. The attack against the gas facility near In Amenas is

still vivid in the capital. The present plan to beef up border security within the Maghreb area is useful and necessary but could be insufficient in preventing future attacks.

In Libya the security conditions are dramatically worsening and the government of Prime Minister Ali Zaidan is struggling to restore calm, still without success. The new cabinet could be superseded by a new one, but stability risks to remain elusive. The introduction of Islamist militias within the security system is the first step toward a strengthened role of Islamism into the society. This will provide opportunities to the Muslim Brotherhood and perhaps to Salafist movements as well, such as Ansar al-Sharia, for further political gains if they decide to make a foray into politics.

Situation Report

Tunisia

This month has seen the escalation of Tunisia's political crisis in the aftermath of the killing of the leftist politician and secretary-general of Popular Front party, Shokri Belaid (6/2/2013). A few days ahead of his death, Mr Belaid warned that the ruling Ennahda party and its backers were planning a wave of political killings, an accusation that the party strongly denied. At the end of February, Tunisian officials said that the killer has been identified, while other three suspects belonging to a radical Islamic group, including a police officer, had been arrested in the previous days.

Belaid's death threw Tunisia into deep unrest, igniting the biggest street protests since the overthrow of Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, leading to the resignation of the Prime Minister, Hamadi Jebali (19/2/2013). Mr Jebali stepped down after he failed to convince other Ennahda members to form a technocrat caretaker government in a bid to quell tensions.

Although Jebali's plan was largely supported by the opposition, the Ennahda party emerged as the main opponent of his strategy. The 23rd of February Ennahda's Shura Council chose the current Interior Minister Ali Larayedh; the new premier has time until the 8th of March to form a new government and spell out his policies.

The leader of Ennahda, Rached Ghannouchi has tried to enlarge the current ruling coalition (Ennahda, Congress for the Republic-CPR, Ettakatol) to another two parties, such as Wafa, which is made of CPR dissidents, and the independent Islamists of the Freedom and Dignity group. On the other hand, the two opposition parties, the Republican Party and the Social Democratic Path, declared that they would refuse to participate in any government with Ennahda officials in the key ministries (26/2/2013) [February 26th, 2013]. Earlier the leftist Popular Front too, formerly led by Mr Belaid, had refused to support such a government.

During the protests, the opposition has asked the ruling party to give up its control over the key ministries of Interior, Justice and Foreign Affairs. Liberals and secularists have

also accused Ennahda of failing to rein in religious extremists threatening Tunisia's stability. Meanwhile radical Islamists and Ennahda supporters have organized demonstrations against France outside its embassy in Tunis. Protesters have shouted slogans against the French intervention in Mali and the comments from French Interior Minister Manuel Valls, who criticized the "rise of Islamic fascism in Tunisia after the politician's murder. Tunisia has refused to formally back France's intervention in Mali and to allow French military planes to fly over its air space, being concerned by the consequences of the conflict on neighbouring countries, Tunisia included.

During the month, large caches of weapons (i.e. AK-47 Kalashnikov assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, munitions and explosives, etc.) were seized in the cities of Medenine and Tunis by the Tunisian National Guard.

Egypt

In Egypt, after the deadly protests that shook the country during January and the first half of February, the cabinet has approved a new draft law regulating public demonstrations. Public demonstrations would be restricted to a specific location in each province decided by the governor. Moreover the use of platforms for the speakers and of tents during sit-ins would be prohibited. The bill will probably stir harsh critics and should be ratified by the Shura Council in March.

President Mohamed Morsi has announced the date of parliamentary elections that will take place in four stages. The election scheduled earlier to begin by the 27th of April, have been anticipated to the 22/4, at the request of the Coptic minority to avoid the concurrence with Easter holidays.

On another religious front, the Muslim Brotherhood has experienced a defeat. The Muslim clerics of the Al-Azhar university elected Shawki Ibrahim Abdel-Karim to the post of Grand Mufti, the country's top Islamic jurist, while the Muslim Brotherhood had proposed Abdul Rahman al-Bar (11/2/2013). In the past, the Grand Mufti was appointed by the president.

By the 26th of February the National Salvation Front announced the boycott of the elections, deepening the country's political crisis. The United States reacted promptly, pressuring the Front to change its position. The previous day, Mr Mursi had invited opposition parties at a meeting to discuss electoral problems and to find ways to ensure fairness in the process; unfortunately the coalition rejected the proposal.

Lybia

In Libya, the security conditions are deteriorating and the government is trying to integrate former fighters into the fledgling security forces including the Islamist militias, such as Nawasi brigade and Ansar al-Sharia. While Prime Minister Ali Zidane was getting the support of the National Congress for his choice of ministers, some militiamen occupied

the main chamber of the parliament, forcing lawmakers to meet in a nearby hotel (6/2/2013). The militiamen had two requests: assistance for the injuries suffered during the revolution, and the removal of some ministers because they were linked to Muammar Gaddafi.

During this period the parliament started to debate a bill known as the Political Isolation Law. The bill lists 36 different categories of Libyans considered “directly responsible” for “corrupting political, economic, social, and administrative life” during the Gaddafi era and therefore banned from holding governmental positions. But, if the General National Congress (GNC) will pass the bill, many ministers will lose their post.

In Eastern Libya, where security is particularly at stake, media and social networks called by 15th February for a “new revolution” known as the “Correction of the Path”, prior to the second anniversary of the revolution. Benghazi activists called for the dissolution of the General National Congress and asked for new elections, but the Muslim Brotherhood’s Justice and Construction Party, which holds the second-largest number of seats in the Congress, warned against the danger of any protest. In the end the protest didn’t happen by the 17th of February; the issue could resurface if the political and security conditions will not change.

Algeria

The politics of Algeria have been shaken by the wind of change. A year before presidential elections, many politicians are leaving the political scene. The main parties, such as National Liberation Front (FLN), the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD), Socialist Forces Front (FFS) and National Democratic Rally (RND), are struggling to find their new leadership. The only prominent political group that has enjoyed relative stability is the Workers’ Party (PT) led by Louiza Hanoune.

Regarding new Islamist parties, the Ministry of Interior has refused to grant a license to the first Salafist party (the Free Awakening Front) and forbade the planned founding convention by the 16th of February. This procedure is usually applied to all parties that declare their affiliation to a system other than the republican and democratic one.

On February 5th soldiers of the People’s National Army (ANP) repelled an armed terrorist group that was about to break into the military barracks in Jebel Boudoukhane, in the Southern province of Khenchela, Algeria, near the Tunisian border. The Algerian-Tunisian border has seen an increased operational activity by criminal and Islamist groups, often thwarted by the army. Algeria is intensifying its surveillance of critical installations and is trying to prevent terrorist infiltrations from Tunisia and Libya. While the terrorist attacks have dropped dramatically in the Northern part of the country, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika has affirmed that fighting in neighbouring Mali is raising the threat of “the terrorism that we never stop fighting”.

Morocco

The 25th of February, Morocco's Prime Minister, Abdelillah Benkirane, stated that "Algeria does not want that Morocco intervenes in Mali, I don't know why". Rabat is not engaged in Mali, but a possible role in the stabilisation of the country should be taken into account in the months ahead.

The opposition parties of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM), National Rally of Independents (RNI), Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP) and Constitutional Union (UC) participated in the meeting on February 15th asking to the ruling majority to accelerate the democratic reforms. The same has done Morocco's 20 February movement during the anniversary of its foundation but the number of people affiliated with the movement has dropped since its establishment in 2011.

After the royal pardon for four Moroccan Salafist sheiks, and their release from prison, three of whom participated in a meeting along with many leaders of political parties on the 15th of February. The gathering was probably organized to pave the way to integrate the Salafist into the new political arena.

Trends

The effects of the Arab Spring revolts are slowly bearing their fruits in the new political systems. Even though, many popular protests are shaking countries before ruled by authoritarian leaders, this can be read as sign of new overtures towards freedom of speech and new balance of powers within the countries' new political arena. These aspects are particularly strong in Egypt and Tunisia, while in Libya the separatist sentiment in the eastern country is increasingly growing as long as the political system and security conditions remain at stake. Algeria and Morocco, not involved by the revolutions, are working on a new political path towards more openness to the opposition parties and civil society.

Egypt's political process is going faster than Tunisia's but both countries are ruled by moderate Islamist coalitions, which are constantly dared by fragmented but resilient oppositions.

In the month of February, Tunisia has seen the most serious political crisis since Ben Ali's ouster, and the opposition leader's killing has brought to the Prime Minister's resignation and the call for a new government. After harsh critics by the opposition parties and nationwide protests that have polarised the country, the ruling Islamist party Ennahda has declared that independent figures will take over the ministries of Interior, Foreign Affairs, Justice and Defence in the next government. This overture will improve the political climate and reduce tensions, but the appointment of the current Minister of Interior Ali Larayedh as new Prime Minister will probably stir further critics. Unlike Egypt, Tunisia has not yet a constitution. The parliament is divided over the nature of the country's future

political system more than one year after it was elected. Since the revolution, Tunisia has also been shocked by violence blamed on Salafists and social turmoil over the government's failure to improve socio-economic conditions. The Ennahda ruling party appear divided within its own ranks and the secular oppositions are increasing their national consensus.

Mr Jebali's plan to form a technocratic government, although largely supported by the opposition, has been bitterly opposed by Ennahda's leader, Rached Ghannouchi, who refused to give up key ministries and insist on the party's electoral supremacy.

A battle for the influence within Ennahda itself is taking place for the formation of the new government ahead of the next parliamentary and presidential elections. More hard-line Ennahda figures might emerge in the future. Although Salafist influence is a constant trend of particular concern to many people within Tunisia, some Ennahda conservative members are prone to talk with these groups, looking at the Egyptian ruling coalition as model.

The role of Salafist seems to be growing in the entire region and the links among their groups are widespread. For instance, Ansar al Sharia Tunisia has launched a number of new Facebook pages, as a part of a new strategy to increase their followers and put down their roots into the society. In Libya, the militant brigade of Ansar al Sharia has become part of the local security system, and took also part at a meeting on security issues along with Benghazi Security Directorate, the Benghazi intelligence services as well as various brigades under the Interior and Defence ministries. Some sources affirmed that the participants had issued a statement at the end of the meeting in which declared that the implementation of Sharia was not up for debate and that the Grand Mufti was above criticism.

In Algeria, the new Salafist party, Free Awakening Front, made a foray into politics but the Ministry of Interior has refused to give the license and banned any official activities. The fear about the return of the turmoil of the 1990's is still alive in Algerian people and the popularity of Islamic parties in the country has somewhat decreased in the recent months.

In Morocco, four Salafist sheikhs have increased their media visibility since their release from prison in February 2012, condemning the French intervention in Mali and trying to push Moroccan authorities to should not provide facilities or airspace to any non-Muslim state to be used against a Muslim state. Unlike Tunisia and Egypt, Morocco has not witnessed the rise of Salafist political movements and the four Salafist sheikhs seem neither able to build up a leadership nor to become politically influential.

In Egypt, instead, the already splintered Salafist al-Nour party, which won the second largest bloc of votes in the parliamentary elections in 2011, just behind the Muslim Brotherhood, has become critical of Mr Morsi and the Brotherhood for what it describes as their attempt to monopolise power. New rifts between the Salafi al-Nour and the Brotherhood have recently emerged over a reconciliation meeting organized by the al-Nour Party with liberal opposition figures of the National Salvation Front, which has made demands ranging from a new Government to the President's dismissal. Competition between the various Islamist parties is expected to be fierce in the upcoming elections.

Egypt is the only country that has been experiencing a Salafist party within the ruling government coalition, while in Tunisia and Morocco the Salafist groups are more radical and mostly opponents to any kind of democratic government. Tunisia's Ennahda Party and Morocco's Justice and Development Party think that dialogue is the only way to deal with them, while Algeria authorities don't give them any chance to move freely within the political spectrum.

Libya has never known a party system, and in a political system still in development, amid an almost complete absence of political programs to beef up the security situation, the Salafist movements could increase their grip on the population. For Salafist groups and Islamic militias, such as Ansar al Sharia, after their inclusion into the security organizations, the next step could be a foray into politics with a program aims at law and order that is not yet put into effect.

With the worsening of security conditions and the marginalization of the eastern region by parliament and government, the Islamist groups could focus their strengths on this area trying to replicate what has been done in the northern Mali.