



## MAGHREB November 2019

### **Turkish inroads unsettle Tunisia's balancing act**

Political instability, resuming conflicts and the intensifying foreign meddling are projecting uncertainty on the Maghreb. Despite successful elections last month, Tunisia is no exception, especially in view of the worsening situation in Libya. Due to the turmoil in the region, Tunis continued its balancing posture to neutralise conflicting geopolitical trends. As part of this strategy, since 2017 Tunisia promoted tripartite meetings on Libya together with Algeria and Egypt. However, the political paralysis in Algiers and Cairo's staunch support to its proxy in the Libyan arena have emptied these meetings of any sense, as shown by repetitive statements on the need for a political solution to the crisis.

In the meanwhile, the escalation in Libya offered outsiders a chance to gain a foothold. For instance, Turkey has assumed a prominent role in sustaining the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli. However, Ankara's aspirations have not been limited to the Libyan arena. According to Africa Intelligence, on 8 November 2019 the outgoing Tunisian Prime Minister Youssef Chahed ratified the military cooperation agreement between Tunisia and Turkey [Youssef Chahed seals military deal with Ankara, 21 November 2019, Africa Intelligence]. The agreement was signed on the occasion of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's visit in Tunis in December 2017. In the light of Turkey's role in the Libyan conflict, where Ankara also re-established a military cooperation with the GNA, Africa Intelligence also suggested that Tunisia could soon receive drones from the Turkish Aerospace Industries (TAI) and Baykar. The latter has provided the GNA-affiliated forces in Tripoli with the Bayraktar TB-2 drones, partially matching the Libyan National Army (LNA)'s aerial superiority gained with the provision of long-range Wing Loong drones by General Khalifa Haftar's regional backers. The Wing Loong (Chengdu Pterodactyl I) is a Chinese strike drone, capable of carrying 1.000 kg of ordnance guided and unguided, sold also to Egypt, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates.

The military cooperation between Ankara and Tunis raises important questions about Tunisia's traditional partnership with the West. Since 2011 the US stepped up its military assistance to Tunisia,

playing a pivotal role in supporting the fight against terrorism and enhancing border security. Nevertheless, cooperation with Western countries has always been a sensitive issue for Tunisian authorities [Umberto Profazio, Tunisia's reluctant partnership with NATO, 6 April 2018, IISS].

Tunisia's limited budget can in part explain the interest in the more affordable Turkish offer. However, the ideological nexus embodied in the Islamist orientation of the ruling parties must not be underestimated. It is not by chance that one of the first leaders to visit the newly elected Tunisian President Kais Saied was the head of the Libyan High Council of State (HCoS) Khaled Mishri. A member of the Justice and Construction Party (JCP), Mishri is a prominent representative of the Libyan branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, despite having announced his resignation from the group early this year. His visit highlighted the significant sway that Ennahda still maintains in Tunisia, despite the remarkable decline in the latest elections.

It remains to be seen if President Saied, who according to the Constitution is primarily responsible for Tunisia's defence, security and foreign policy, would accommodate Ennahda's orientations or will try maintaining Tunisia's balancing policy as it navigates the regional turmoil. Much will depend on the next Prime Minister and his relations with the *Palace de Carthage*. Chosen by Ennahda, the former Agriculture Minister Habib Jemli is currently making a first attempt to muster a governing coalition and, given the fragmentation of the vote, he undoubtedly faces an uphill struggle.

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