

WORKSHOP

THE MIDDLE EAST DIRECTIONS PROGRAMME

EXPLORING TUNISIA'S FUTURE IN A CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

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 @medirections

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■ INTRODUCTION

Since 2011, it has become increasingly apparent that to achieve long-term stabilisation and democratic consolidation, Tunisia needs to rethink its geostrategic positioning and to explore new opportunities with international partners. It is all the more important that political elites find answers to different situations and constraints. These include: the negotiation of a future strategic partnership with the EU; pressure from the private sector and economic elites who are attempting to explore potentially promising markets in sub-Saharan Africa; the exacerbation of regional conflicts and rivalries in North Africa; and challenges relating to Libya's stabilisation and reconstruction.

However, despite the success to preserve the precarious democratic experiment, Tunisia seems to be ill-equipped to deal with these diverse situations. Focusing on Tunisia and broadly on the Maghreb, this workshop's aim is two-fold: to explore the risks and opportunities associated with these developments; and to understand the impact of the rapidly changing geo-economic and geopolitical situation on the future of this region, and the consolidation of Tunisia's nascent democracy.

■ PROGRAMME

09.15 - 09.30

Welcome Remarks

Luigi Narbone | Director, MEDirections, EUI

Hamza Meddeb | Research Fellow, MEDirections, EUI

09.30 - 11.00

Session 1 | Navigating the troubled waters of democratic transition and tumultuous neighborhood

Tunisia is at a critical juncture in its contemporary history. Its democratic transition has entered its eighth year amid economic hardship, fragile political arrangements and social tensions. While elections and the peaceful transfer of power continue to mark political life, economic challenges have increased; and the regional environment has deteriorated, threatening the viability of this nascent democracy. The chaos engulfing Libya is proving to be particularly destabilising for Tunisia. The Libyan predicament has been affecting Tunisia's weak economy and its precarious political arrangements, as the polarisation within the country is fuelled by the actions of regional and international players who threaten to spread their rivalries across North Africa. The country's marginal role in the efforts to find a diplomatic solution, as well the difficulties it has been facing in finding reliable interlocutors and establishing a mutual framework for cooperation in border security, show that Tunisia is directly affected by a situation in which it has no real role or leverage.

Tunisia cannot but react to this long list of challenges. However, whereas international donors are offering recommendations, imposing conditionality and determining how to react to the economic and social imbalances, and whereas the regional politics have entered a critical moment threatening Tunisia's stability, Tunisian policy-makers feel the urgent need for a clear direction that could put an end to the short termism and erratic reactions that aggravate problems. The Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade agreement offered by the EU failed to meet the expectations of Tunisian civil society and most of the political class. This reflects the crisis of the EU offer not only towards Tunisia but also – and broadly – towards its southern neighbourhood.

This session will examine how Tunisia has tried to respond to these challenges. What are the trends that will shape the future of the country? What are the priorities for a strategic vision that would be able to address the security and economic woes and what place is there for Europe in such a vision? How Tunisia has managed to deal with the instability in Libya? And how can Tunisia and more broadly Maghreb countries take advantage of the reconstruction of Libya?

11.00 - 11.30

Coffee break

11.30 - 13.00

Session 2 | Looking for new partnerships: Tunisia and the rising powers

In addition to the importance of the EU as a political and economic partner, Tunisia has been looking to engage with new economic partners – China, Russia, Turkey, India as well as promising African economies. In 2018, Tunisia joined

the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) and the Chinese flagship initiative, The Belt and Road Initiative. This activism reflects Tunisian elites' increasing awareness of the cost of Tunisia's over dependency to the EU, as well as their willingness to progressively adjust to the geo-economic dynamics that are shaping the world. This session will discuss the changing geo-economic context in the Mediterranean and how Tunisia is engaging with the rising global and regional powers.

13.00 - 14.30

Lunch