



NORTH AFRICA: NEW ELECTIONS, OLD PROBLEMS?

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Joint Roundtable Event held by the Brookings Doha Center, Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), and Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation

OVERVIEW

Since the 2011 uprisings, North Africa has endured a period of significant transformation, characterized by socioeconomic and security challenges that continue to affect the internal and external dynamics of each country. In Tunisia, many citizens are anxious about the current political and economic situation, even as they remain hopeful about the elections set to take place at the end of 2019. In Algeria, the remarkably peaceful recent protests have demonstrated the significant role played by the country's youth and how transition can begin to take place without causing major instability. Meanwhile, as tensions escalate in Libya, concerns about how this conflict could destabilize the wider region are growing.

These events are driving a crucial transitional phase that will define the future of the region, shaping the domestic politics of each country and their international relations. Overall, while many challenges remain, North Africa's human capital and its strategic location have the potential to create a bright future for the region and its Mediterranean neighbors.

This roundtable reflected on the current political and economic situation in North Africa, with the aim of coming up with new approaches to the challenges faced in three countries: Algeria, Libya, and Tunisia. The event was organized into four sessions, focusing on each of the three countries and the future outlook for the region, respectively. It took place within the framework of the Mediterranean Dialogues (MED) initiative and was the first event of its kind to be held in Doha, Qatar.

Session One: Algeria

Events in Algeria are still unfolding, and it is difficult to analyze and predict what will happen next. Taking that uncertainty into account, this session examined drivers and features of the recent protests, as well as how the movement is likely to evolve.

The participants pointed out that the protests have been nationwide, festive, and peaceful, with a unified set of demands, including: the refusal of a fifth term for President Abdelaziz Bouteflika; the rejection of Bouteflika's allies; and the need for a genuine political transition. They urged against analyzing the movement within an "Arab Spring" framework, as this creates blind spots. Rather, they argued that many Algerians view the movement as "finishing the revolution" that was started by their parents.

They also noted that the army has maintained power, but that it is unclear whether it wants to govern. One participant said that the army currently has three choices: to contain the protests, undertake a coup, or pursue an extraconstitutional route that is led and supported by the military.

The discussants argued that the Algerian opposition is fragmented because the regime has been successful in coopting and controlling political parties. However, the current protest movement has clearly shown that the model of a democratic façade does not work.

They added that the movement is only in the initial stages of establishing its leadership. There are debates over who could play this role, and some of the names being mentioned are close to the regime, which is likely to stir pushback from protesters.

The discussion also dealt with the question of whether Algeria's current economic situation could affect its ability to handle a major political transition. Some participants argued that there is a burgeoning economic crisis tied to falling foreign reserves, rising youth unemployment, and overdependence on hydrocarbons, while others argued that the situation is not so dire, citing the country's efforts at economic diversification and relatively high current level of foreign reserves.

Participants considered the various acts of civil disobedience that have taken place so far, and how these acts could help expand protesters' power. Several participants expressed concern that holding elections in July 2019 would be detrimental to the transition process, as the regime and its allies could use the elections to coopt the transition. With respect to what role international actors might be able to play, most participants agreed that foreign intervention would not help the movement.

SESSION TWO: LIBYA

The conflict in Libya has developed quickly over the past few weeks and there is a lack of reliable information about what is happening on the ground. While acknowledging these factors, this session analyzed the causes and dynamics of the current conflict, and considered how events are likely to unfold.

Several participants noted that Khalifa Haftar does not have the necessary military force to overtake Tripoli, having miscalculated the size of the counteroffensive and the likelihood that armed groups would flip to his side. However, they also suggested that Haftar can no longer retreat for fear of political repercussions, making him especially dangerous.

Some participants also wondered whether Haftar's calculations about the Tripoli offensive will be affected by his interest in running for elections, or his allegedly poor health. They also pointed out that Haftar is in a position where he is running low on cash and in charge of a shaky alliance. Another participant said that there is a risk that Haftar could face challenges to his authority in the East, due to tensions in his camp there.

With respect to the role of the international community, one participant noted that more international actors were surprised by Haftar's offensive than should have been the case, due to wishful thinking regarding his intentions. Other participants argued that a limited response from

the international community could embolden Haftar to continue his offensive, potentially leading to a long period of conflict.

One participant argued that establishing a ceasefire is becoming increasingly difficult, but that a U.N. resolution could eventually lead to a diplomatic solution, adding that there are some forces already moving toward such a resolution. Another participant proposed that the situation in Libya be understood as a proxy war among competing Gulf States.

Participants pointed out that Egypt plays a key role in Libya, which it perceives as a threat to its security and economic interests, as well as a potential energy purchaser. They also discussed the various roles and interests of the United States, Russia, France, and Italy, and especially the competition between the latter two states and its deleterious effects on Libya.

Several participants noted that Libyans are extremely polarized in their opinions of Haftar, with one participant claiming that a silent majority is skeptical of all parties and that this majority could be a center of gravity around which to build peace.

SESSION THREE: TUNISIA

In this session, participants looked back at the successes and failures of the past eight years in Tunisia. They then considered the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections in 2019 and how these might affect the status of democracy in the country.

The discussion started off with a review of Tunisia's history, with participants remarking that recent years have seen Tunisians become disenchanted by the gap between their post-2011 expectations and the realities of the political transition.

With respect to politics, the participants noted that, while Tunisia had the oldest constitution in the Arab world, its political history prior to 2011 was not characterized by a multi-party process. They also said that, following the 2011 transition, Tunisian politics came to be characterized by: an electorate that is disappointed by the elected parties; a dispute about the nature of citizenship; and the absence of a constitutional court.

One participant said that the upcoming elections are expected to usher in a new power-sharing agreement among political parties. They questioned how well the current party system is working, in light of the past coalition's failure and stressed that Tunisians' 2011 demands must be addressed more proactively in order to safeguard the country's democratic trajectory.

Another participant questioned the success of the transition, noting the frequency of strikes and protests across classes and across the country, resulting from a lack of trust in the dysfunctional political system. They pointed out that the current system is comprised of a political elite with connections to Habib Bourguiba and Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali. This situation has led some Tunisians to say that Ben Ali's regime is back, but in a more dangerous form.

With respect to economics, one speaker argued that the situation has not changed much since 2011. The economy has continued to be dominated by oligopolistic families and corruption, resulting in continued polarization, protests, and strikes.

On a separate note, participants discussed how one beneficial outcome of the 2011 uprisings was the disengagement of the international community. That being said, China has shown increasing economic interest in the country.

They added that Tunisians have become increasingly concerned about their neighboring countries in recent months. The government's attempt to secure the country's borders with Libya has harmed the informal economy. Meanwhile, Tunisians are observing the current movement in

Algeria, with many of them hoping that it will result in better outcomes than those seen in their country.

SESSION FOUR: THE FUTURE OUTLOOK

In this session, participants discussed the recent protests at the regional level and speculated about what might happen next in Algeria, Libya, and Tunisia.

One participant noted that there are five structural issues facing North African countries: 1) the pursuit of stability through ballots; 2) the role of external actors, including the oversized influence of the Gulf and Europe; 3) elections for the sake of elections; 4) the inability of street protests to translate into formal politics; and 5) the lack of economic vision and alternatives.

Another participant argued that protests have been the defining characteristic of the Arab world in recent years, but that the issue is that protesters are only able to define what they do not want, rather than what they do. They added that the Arab world should stop hoping for leaders to emerge, and instead focus on designing institutions.

Participants also discussed the intellectual gap in the region and the difficulty of imagining new ideologies or social contracts when citizens are punished for speaking out about existing challenges. One participant stressed the need to understand the recent protests at the regional level, in order to learn from the mistakes of the past and to understand the constraints facing each country.

Another participant claimed that the problem in North Africa is not elections per se, as these can tell us a lot about social contract issues. Rather, the problem is that elections can be legal without being legitimate, and therefore do not tell us much about democracy.

However, one participant argued that we should guard against the idea of exceptionalism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, focusing instead on the “horizontalization” of power. Building on this, another participant wondered whether horizontal mobilization translates into leadership, stressing that the MENA region desperately needs intellectual leaders to emerge.