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ALGERIA'S DISCREET ROLE IN TUNISIAN DIALOGUE

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The capacity of all major political actors in Tunisia, to begin with the Islamist Ennahda Party which leads the ruling coalition, to dialogue and compromise in order to maintain a relatively non violent transition towards a pluralistic system of government marks the country out from any other in the Middle East today. A number of influential forces in Tunisia have played a role in this rapprochement but arguably, the key factor has been the intervention of Algerian leaders who are very worried about the situation in Libya, which they fear is heading for civil war and have no wish to see their smaller neighbour to the east descend into chaos. The European Union (EU) is simply an actor *in absentia*.

The leaders of Ennahda and those of the opposition coalition Nida Tunes are being strongly encouraged to find a compromise that will allow the constituent assembly in Tunis, elected two years ago, to vote a new constitution: this would open the door to the country's second free and fair elections, a true test of Ennahda's democratic credentials – the Islamist party is credited with a much lower percentage of votes today than in October 2011, when it won 89 out of 217 seats at the constituent assembly. A victory of the opposition would also test Nida Tunes' capacity to avoid an Egyptian-style witch-hunt against its opponent and redress an economic situation which has been fast deteriorating under Ennahda's rule. Both sides have initialled an agreement that would see the current government resign before the end of October and make way for a government of technocrats.

Domestic efforts to bring the sparring partners to the negotiating table have been led by the UGTT trade union, the second oldest in Africa which has successfully resisted attempts by the Ennahda and its militias, the *Ligue de Protection de la Révolution*, to bring it under Islamist control. The murder on 6 February of the leading opposition deputy Chowki Belaid, whose links with UGTT were strong and whose murderers have yet to be brought to justice encouraged UGTT leaders to try and work out a compromise between Nida Tunes, led by the veteran politician Beji Caid Essebsi and Ennahda - in the broader interests of security (fast deteriorating) in the country and the economy (which is shedding jobs daily). UGTT has been backed by the employer's federation, UTICA, the League of Human rights and the Lawyers Association. The latter two are very concerned at continued En-

nahda attempts to control the judicial process and the many abuses of human rights, including continued torture by the security forces which were documented in various Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International reports. UTICA for its part can only take stock of the decline in private foreign and domestic investment, the rising number of factory closures – both foreign and Tunisian owned, rising inflation and deteriorating financial situation overall. A parlous economic situation is provoking great anger among the young who rose up against the former dictator, and feeding into what remains a worrying level of violence.

Algeria's intervention in Tunisian affairs is not the first of its kind, Algeria having been appraised, as was the US, of Zine el Abidine Ben Ali's decision to depose an ailing Habib Bourguiba in from the presidency in November 1987. The leader of Ennahda, Rachid Ghannouchi and Beji Caid Essebsi travelled to Algiers on 10-11th September. The latter, who is 87, has, throughout his distinguished career as a minister of Bourguiba maintained good relations with Algeria, a country he has always respected. When he was prime minister of the transitional government which ran Tunisia after the fall of Ben Ali in January 2011 he secured greater financial help from Algeria than the one provided by the EU. He also won credit for organising transparent elections in October of that year, which brought Ennahda, in coalition with two smaller parties, to power.

President Abdelaziz Bouteflika and other Algerian leaders only agreed to meet Rachid Ghannouchi at Si Beji's insistence. They read him the riot and made brutally clear to the leader of Ennahda, the true master of the Tunisian government, that a stable and well run Tunisia was essential to Algeria's security. This, they insisted was all the more true because they feared Libya was heading for civil war. The war in Mali, followed by French intervention and the bloody attack against the south western Algerian oil and gas field of In Amenas earlier this year made clear to the outside world the disastrous consequences for the region of NATO's failing to secure the arms dumps of the former Libyan dictator. Algerian warnings on this particular point had fallen on deaf ears in Paris, London and Washington in the summer of 2011.

The manner in which events are unfolding in Tunisia, indeed in Libya are pointers to the shape of things to come in North West Africa. The EU has no political voice in the region, despite the economic aid it might offer; EU countries individually can act as France did in Mali and jointly with the UK in Libya; whatever its internal problems, Algeria is an actor whose voice matters. A higher level of political dialogue between Algeria and leading EU countries would thus be to the benefit of all parties in the region.