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## Why Youth Empowerment Can Sustain Tunisia's Democratic Consolidation

by Pietro Marzo

### ABSTRACT

This paper will focus on why the empowerment of young Tunisians is crucial to sustain the fragile democratic consolidation process in Tunisia. It will demonstrate how young Tunisians were the trigger of the Jasmine revolution and how their demands were among the main factors that guided the process of transition to democracy. Through the analysis of the involvement of young Tunisians in the transition to democracy, this paper argues that their current situation may affect the process of democratic consolidation, by strengthening or jeopardizing it. The role of the European Union is also investigated, by recommending possible policies that could play a role in assisting youth empowerment in Tunisia. The paper also puts forward a package of recommendations to the Tunisian national government.

*Youth | Tunisia | Domestic policy | Democracy | European Union*

keywords

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by Pietro Marzo\*

### Introduction

This paper focuses on youth contribution within the process of the transition to democracy in Tunisia, with the aim of describing how youth empowerment is the key to sustaining the consolidation of democracy and avoiding the risk of regression.

Recently many analysts and experts have focused their attention on the connection between the worsening of the situation of Arab youths and the rise of Islamic radicalisation among them. The issue of foreign fighters joining the Islamic State or other terrorist groups represents only the tip of the iceberg, since a growing number of young Arabs are increasingly involved in illegal activities.

Youth empowerment is the main way to deter this emerging trouble, which poses a serious threat to the stability of many countries, primarily those that have successfully deployed a democratic system. Against this backdrop, Tunisia is rightly considered to be the Arab country that has achieved the greatest results on the path towards democracy among those countries who experienced the so-called Arab Spring.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, it is the country that presents the greatest contrast between active youth engagement in the revolution and improvement of their situation.

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<sup>1</sup> The democratic transition in Tunisia has been seen as a beacon of light for a region in which the democratic promises of the Arab Spring have rapidly evolved into chaos, such as in Libya and Syria, or have brought to harsh new regimes as in Egypt. In this sense the Nobel Prize for peace awarded to the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet is an international acknowledgment of the country's democratic achievements.

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## Why Youth Empowerment Can Sustain Tunisia's Democratic Consolidation

The national government, as well as a large part of civil society, is aware that youth empowerment represents a critical challenge upon which the resilience of the democratic achievements may depend. Almost all stakeholders agree on the fact that building a more inclusive new generation, and providing them with opportunities and education, will create a bulwark against the pressure of internal and external potentially subversive groups whose aims are to divert Tunisia from its path towards modernity. But the struggle is still not being tackled with the tailored approach it needs and politicians are striving to find an adequate solution. Many policies and initiatives have been launched recently with the objective of dealing with youth-related issues such as unemployment, marginalisation and social exclusion. But the effectiveness of such policies is extremely weak, as shown by the worsening data from many indicators. Tangible and effective policies are lacking and a sense of detachment is rising, which could pave the way for unpredictable and dangerous perspectives. Some clues of a regression scenario are already showing themselves on the ground. For instance, in January violent riots occurred with groups of young Tunisians demanding more opportunities and job policies. This has created a negative backlash for the domestic political equilibrium of the country and fuelled attempts by some discontented political members to slowly delegitimise the current government. In response, the ruling party is accused of silencing social movements and opposition manifestations by resorting to the justification of national security concerns.

Externally the country is also on the verge of collapse and, given the already mentioned rise in the problem of young foreign fighters, the fear of terrorist attack is high. The three big terrorist attacks within the country have highlighted the opposition of IS and the Salafist group towards any political and social breakthroughs and hopes of modernity. Although Tunisia demonstrated to the world that it is a resilient society during the revolution, its success will be determined on its capacity to face the scale of pressure it may have to deal with.

In this vein, this paper argues that in Tunisia the best strategy to improve the resilience of democratic achievements is to invest in youth empowerment.<sup>2</sup> It urges the national government as well as the international community to strengthen their commitment through a more structured and tailored approach to deal with the issue, on whose outcome the stability of Tunisia, and even of the region as a whole, might ultimately depend.

The first section briefly depicts the democratic improvement achieved by Tunisia and highlights elements of strength and weakness that have emerged in the past five years. The second part lays out the events since the beginning of the revolution, focusing especially on the youth commitment in making the revolution goals effective and the tools they used in accelerating it. Also presented in this section is the transition process prior to the 2014 Tunisian Constitution. It also addresses

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper the category of young Tunisians is taken to mean those between 15 and 29 years old.

the ongoing deterioration of the socioeconomic situation of the Tunisian youth. The third part introduces the European Union action in Tunisia, assessing what may be needed to facilitate the consolidation of democracy in the North African country. In the last section the paper offers some recommendations to the national government.

## 1. Between consolidation and crisis, the Tunisian democracy

Following the launch of the Tunisian Constitution in January 2014, along with the presidential and national elections, Tunisia has met all the requirements to accomplish its democratic transition. The endeavours of the two major parties to form a National unity government have demonstrated an awareness of political cooperation as the key pillar to bestowing Tunisia with stability. Furthermore the emergence of a more active and engaged civil society, which has assumed the role of guardian within the electoral rounds has guaranteed transparency and, in turn, has attracted the attention of the international community.<sup>3</sup> The country has thus begun its democratic consolidation process.

Among the most prominent scholars of democracy and democratic transition processes, there is debate over the components necessary for defining consolidation progress. According to Morlino, a new Constitution, shared among parties and organisations, may be the sign of the beginning of the consolidation process.<sup>4</sup> If we apply Gunther's theory, according to whom in a democracy the higher the awareness among a significant political group that the institutions are the only arena for political debate, the higher the level of democratic consolidation,<sup>5</sup> Tunisia shows indicators of being a young and unstable democracy. Tunisia is at the initial stage of consolidating its democracy but it is far from having achieved what has been stated by Linz as a consolidated democracy, "in which none of the major political actors, parties, or organized interests, forces, or institutions consider that there is any alternative to democratic processes to gain power, and [...] no political institution or group has a claim to veto the action of democratically elected decision makers."<sup>6</sup>

The risk of regression to a crisis situation could be around the corner. Indeed, the political internal balance has been challenged by skirmishes which have often taken over the role of institutions and the political sphere, even escalating into

<sup>3</sup> Adel Ltifi, "The Tunisian Elections 2014 and Societal Polarization", in *ARI Policy Alternatives*, December 2014, <http://www.arab-reform.net/node/1396>.

<sup>4</sup> Leonardo Morlino, *Democracy between Consolidation and Crisis. Parties, Groups and Citizens in Southern Europe*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988.

<sup>5</sup> Hans-Jurgen Puhle, Nikiforos P. Diamandouros, Richard Gunther, "O'Donnell's 'illusions': a rejoinder", in *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (October 1996), p. 151-159.

<sup>6</sup> Juan J. Linz, "Transitions to Democracy", in *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Summer 1990), p. 158.

criminal actions such as the political assassination of prominent secular leader Chokri Belaid on 6 February 2013 and the murder of leftist leader Mohamed Brahmi in late July 2013.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, between 2012 and 2015, the country has lived through escalations in tension among the political parties, very often reaching breaking points which has raised concerns about the sustainability of the system. Particularly in late 2014 when the national elections were held, analysts claimed it to be a period of "national cold war".<sup>8</sup> The most recent outbreak of unrest happened in mid-January 2016, when social protests were sparked off across the country, by rising numbers of complaints against the high level of unemployment in Tunisia and the lack of response from the government.

Despite rising tensions, Tunisians are highly aware of the risks association with such escalation and, until now, the existence of a broad political coalition has been a bulwark against regression to conflict. The country's Constituent National Assembly is led by a coalition of parties, with Islamist party Ennahda and secular party Nidaa Tounes at the helm, which have overcome their historical contrast. The Free Patriotic Union party, headed by football club magnate and former presidential hopeful Slim Riahi, and the liberal party Afek Tounes are also represented.

In an interview released in September 2015, Prime Minister Essid reinforced his hope that 2016 will be the year in which the government will at last succeed in deploying the policy package that Tunisia is in need of, and in consolidating its democracy as much as possible. Essid has set down the Tunisian government's challenges for a five-year term from 2016 to 2020. The head of government touched on issues concerning the administration, the fiscal sector, justice and economy, foreign investments and security.<sup>9</sup>

However he did not directly address the main issue which plagues the country: the situation of young Tunisians and the high level of youth unemployment. Perhaps it was deliberately not mentioned by the government because it is considered the most problematic issue. This approach has long been used by the Tunisian authorities. As shown by Paciello and Pioppi public authorities very seldom refer to the unemployment of graduates as a problem, preferring more neutral expressions such as "the question of the employment of graduates."<sup>10</sup> Alongside enthusiastic claims, public authorities have either avoided mentioning alarming data on youth unemployment or publicised lower figures.

<sup>7</sup> "Tunisia opposition figures 'shot by same gun'", in *Al Jazeera*, 27 July 2013, <http://aje.me/18D6SqS>.

<sup>8</sup> Hamed Chekir, "The Legislative Elections in Tunisia: The Start of a New Phase or Continuation of Trench Warfare", in *ARI Policy Alternatives*, December 2014, <http://www.arab-reform.net/node/1392>.

<sup>9</sup> Habib Essid, "Assessing Tunisia's Opportunities and Challenges", in *CFR Events*, 30 September 2015, <http://on.cfr.org/1S8gyRc>.

<sup>10</sup> Maria Cristina Paciello, Renata Pepicelli and Daniela Pioppi, "Youth in Tunisia: Trapped Between Public Control and the Neo-Liberal Economy", in *Power2Youth Papers*, No. 6 (February 2016), p. 12, <http://www.iai.it/en/node/5962>.

Nevertheless, following the social unrest that occurred in January, the core of which was the discontent of the young unemployed Tunisian, Essid made an official declaration to deter the escalation of the protests. He warned of the risks of regression and the breakdown of democracy, raising concerns about the infiltration of people seeking to destroy the democratic transition. He concluded saying that "there has been huge political progress but we acknowledge that there are lots of economic difficulties. We will respond to young people's economic demands but we need a bit of time for that."<sup>11</sup>

The plight of the country and the difficulty of finding a solution for it creates a national paradox. If the government aims at consolidating the country's democracy in the coming years by proposing an innovative series of reforms without prioritising the empowerment of youth, it will inexorably fail by being hampered by young Tunisians' discontent.

## 2. The contribution of young Tunisians to the Jasmine Revolution and the transition process

Tunisian youth was at the forefront of the revolution from the beginning. The event which led to it was triggered by a young man. Youths crowded onto the streets and protested against the regime. They shared information and videos on social networking sites, which woke up a sleeping country. The youth were active in the process of transition and their engagement is still crucial, as without it the country will be unable to accomplish its democratic consolidation.

### 2.1 From the streets to the Constitution: transition to democracy

During the Ben Ali regime, between 1987 and 2011, any form of dissent was silenced and rigid control was exercised over the media. Gradually Ben Ali and his establishment took control of all aspects of ordinary life, leaving the appearance of a pluralistic system, the effectiveness of which was tarnished by the lack of true democracy. Beatrice Hibou has compared the regime to a Police state to the extent that it seemed "un système et des modes de régulation qui permettent le contrôle de la conduite des gens."<sup>12</sup>

When the global economy worsened in 2008, the backlash of the international crisis impacted negatively on the Tunisian domestic economy, revealing a country unprepared to deal with an economic downturn and too dependent on direct

<sup>11</sup> Tarek Amara, "Tunisian democracy will be preserved 'whatever cost' - PM", in *Reuters*, 23 January 2016, <http://reut.rs/1lEXnCb>.

<sup>12</sup> Béatrice Hibou, *La force de l'obéissance. Économie politique de la répression en Tunisie*, Paris, La Découverte, 2006, p. 342.

foreign investments.<sup>13</sup> The country was facing a national emergency, but the disengagement of the people in social and political affairs and the lack of freedom and information were obstacles that created a stalemate. Tunisia was like a large car stalled in the mud. Suddenly the engine was restarted by the youth, whose mobilisation ultimately contributed to launching region-wide protests. When a 26 year old vendor from the Kasserine region set himself on fire, many young Tunisians crowded onto the streets all over the country. Ben Ali's reaction was extreme. He placed snipers on roofs with the purpose of deterring the demonstrations. This action was aimed at discouraging the escalation of the protest, but it turned out to be a fundamental mistake.

Indeed the courage of Tunisia's younger generation, who challenged the ruthlessness of the regime, overcame the fear felt by other groups of being hurt or killed in demonstrations. Moreover young commitment in the revolution caused the bulk of the military forces to give up their role as guardians of a dying regime and to protect the demonstrators instead. The broad engagement of youth in the demonstrations was a turning point which encouraged many groups to enter the fight. As noted by Honwana "The key actors in this revolution were Mohamed Bouazizi, young cyber activists, young unemployed graduates, and civil society groups, including the trade union movement, lawyers, and opposition parties that joined as the conflict escalated."<sup>14</sup> In the polls that followed in the immediate aftermath of revolution, a large number of respondents affirmed that the revolution had been brought about by young people.<sup>15</sup>

The second important mainstay which highlights how young Tunisians were the wind of the revolution was their role in the diffusion of information throughout a geographically disaggregated country. As mentioned above, Tunisia in late 2010 was among the worst countries in the world in terms of freedom of the press.<sup>16</sup> All the mass media was under the strict control of Ben Ali's cohorts, but one: the youngest social network, Facebook. At that time, the largest group of Facebook users in Tunisia consisted of those between 18 and 24 years of age (39 percent).<sup>17</sup> In response Ben Ali tried to increase the regime's control over every social network, but he failed to see the potential of Facebook and its threefold capacity of

<sup>13</sup> Between 2009 and 2011 the amount of FDI decreased from 2,600,675,000 dollars to 432,666,000 dollars.

<sup>14</sup> Alcinda Honwana, *Youth and the Tunisian Revolution*, Paper prepared for the SSRC Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum, 2011, p. 7, [http://webarchive.ssrc.org/pdfs/Alcinda\\_Honwana,\\_Youth\\_and\\_the\\_Tunisian\\_Revolution,\\_September\\_2011-CPPF\\_policy%20paper.pdf](http://webarchive.ssrc.org/pdfs/Alcinda_Honwana,_Youth_and_the_Tunisian_Revolution,_September_2011-CPPF_policy%20paper.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> 2011 Sigma Group poll. See Malika Drissi, *Tunisia: Breaking the Barriers to Youth Inclusion*, Paris, World Bank, 2014, p. 3, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/tunisia/publication/tunisia-breaking-the-barriers-to-youth-inclusion>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Marion G. Müller and Celina Hübner, "How Facebook Facilitated the Jasmine Revolution. Conceptualizing the Functions of Online Social Network Communication", in *Journal of Social Media Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2014), p. 17-33, <https://www.macroworldpub.com/indir.php?dosya=655d985552667db08d1c2ace67407846.pdf>.

communication (one to one; one to many; many to one)<sup>18</sup> which played a relevant role in accelerating the diffusion of news and images throughout the country. The advantage of remaining anonymous meant users overcame their fear of punishment by the regime. Moreover, as social unrest escalated, Ben Ali ordered a curfew and Facebook became the only tool to share real time events and to organise demonstrations. Indeed Facebook not only played a crucial role in connecting even the most marginalised regions of the country, helping them to be informed in real-time about events, but it also spread the bond of "collective identity based on empathy."<sup>19</sup> In this regard, one of the milestones on Facebook was the sharing of videos of the military refusing to shoot upon the demonstrators.

The last attempts to save the regime highlighted how Ben Ali was aware of the centrality of the youth within the revolution, who were expressing grievances towards the regime that went far beyond the concerns of their age group only. Indeed, when the government understood that the situation was no longer under control and the only solution open to them was to calm the anger of the youth, the development minister was ordered to meet their claims by announcing a package of urgent measures aimed at appeasing youth discontent. But the protest, which had escalated into riots, continued and Ben Ali began to feel under real pressure. Forced into a corner, his regime promised the creation of 300,000 jobs in two years, but the distrust of the regime had reached breaking point.<sup>20</sup>

Ben Ali fled the country on 14 January 2011 and young Tunisians were at the forefront of the transition in the immediate aftermath of the revolution. Many youth associations flourished and it was clear that following the inception of the first interim government the biggest challenge was to satisfy young Tunisians' demand for more opportunities. But even those coalitions who tried to address their needs were at best only able to set-up palliative measures or temporary concessions, which were seen as unstructured and without any long term strategy. For instance, the first interim government, formed in the immediate aftermath of Ben Ali's ousting, was accused of being a fully-fledged revival of Ben Ali's former regime. The unity government that was announced on 17 January included twelve members of the ruling RCD, the leaders of three opposition parties, three representatives from the Tunisian General Labour Union and other representatives of civil society, including the blogger Slim Amamou. The coalition had problems since its inception. Just one day after its formation, the three members of the UGTT and Ben Jafaar resigned, claiming that they had "no confidence" in a government that still featured members of the RCD party that ruled under Ben Ali.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>20</sup> "Tunisie: Ben Ali s'engage à créer 300 000 emplois entre 2011 et 2012", in *Le Monde*, 10 January 2011, [http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2011/01/10/tunisie-ben-ali-s-engage-a-creer-300-000-emploi-entre-2011-et-2012\\_1463646\\_3212.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2011/01/10/tunisie-ben-ali-s-engage-a-creer-300-000-emploi-entre-2011-et-2012_1463646_3212.html).



Young Tunisians harshly opposed the first interim government and the following reshuffles were often accused of being connected to Ben Ali's former regime. A proverb started to circulate and became the cornerstone of Tunisians' discontent: "we cut off the head of the beast, but the beast is still very much alive."<sup>21</sup>

### 2.2 The Constitution. Start of consolidation or youth betrayal?

In January 2014, after two years of intense bargaining, Tunisia was presented with a new Constitution.<sup>22</sup> The role of young Tunisians in fostering its birth is enshrined in article 8: "Youth are an active force in building the nation. The state seeks to provide the necessary conditions for developing the capacities of youth and realizing their potential, supports them to assume responsibility, and strives to extend and generalize their participation in social, economic, cultural and political development."<sup>23</sup> Officially young Tunisians were considered not only as a group to cherish, but a national asset in building the nation. Other constitutions of the region do not explicitly mention young generations in these terms. For instance, the Constitution of the Arab Republic of Egypt, adopted in 2014 under Al Sisi, did not pay particular attention to the youth. However, if we look at Tunisia from 2014 to the present, article 8 has not been honoured. The young generation is neither a relevant force in the political system nor a group to which policies are addressed.

Official data on the situation of youth is extremely negative. According to the 2015 African Economic Outlook for Tunisia, the youth unemployment rate is 33.2 percent for 15-25 year olds. If we consider the category of 15-29 year olds the rate increases, reaching peaks of 50 percent, depending on the region.<sup>24</sup> The bulk of them are skilled or graduates, who cannot gain access to the job market. Many unemployed young graduates feel themselves forced to find work in the illegal sector. Some of them also become involved in the cross-border smuggling trade with nearby countries such as Libya and Algeria, while others decide to migrate to Europe. Among the youth there is widespread complaint about the absence of clear strategies to guarantee any long-term job security, and this causes disillusion

<sup>21</sup> Juan Cole, *The New Arabs. How the Millennial Generation is Changing the Middle East*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2014, p. 167.

<sup>22</sup> See Bill Proctor and Ikbal Ben Moussa, *The Tunisian Constituent Assembly's By-laws: A Brief Analysis*, Stockholm, International IDEA, 2012, <http://www.idea.int/publications/tunisian-constituent-assemblys-by-laws>. In the immediate aftermath of the Jasmine Revolutions, the draft of a new Constitution was not at the top of the Agenda. The Constitutional trend began a couple of months later. During this process, young Tunisians were not considered as an active part of the drafting process, reducing their role to simple observers.

<sup>23</sup> Article 8 of the Tunisian National Constitution, <http://majles.marsad.tn/fr/constitution>. English translation from: Fares Ben Terzi, *Improving the Political Participation of Young People through Better Representation within the Central Structures of Political Parties*, Jasmine Foundation, August 2015, <http://www.slideshare.net/JasmineFoundation/policy-paper-on-improving-youth-political-participation>.

<sup>24</sup> Philippe Trape and Mickaëlle Chauvin, "Tunisie", in *African Economic Outlook Country Notes*, 2015, p. 2, <http://www.africaneconomicoutlook.org/en/country-notes/north-africa/tunisia>.

concerning the government's ability to address their problems. Furthermore with no stake in society they are prepared to engage in violence out of sheer desperation.

Disengagement and detachment from political and social affairs is high. A small number of young Tunisians are active members of civil society organisations. Except for mobilising demonstrations young Tunisians are not involved in political participation, especially in rural areas. This astonishing level of disaffection towards institutions is very difficult to manage. They have also been increasingly detached by unfair treatment and police violence which has fueled their distrust, leading to an increase in their loyalty to institutions such as family and local religions. The local Imam is often seen as more reliable than the military.

The press is still manipulated and the Internet is one of the most trusted means both to get independent information and to look for a job, especially in rural areas where 45.9 percent of internet use is for job purposes. This has created a virtual citizenship who has lost contact with the country and its institutions.

The education system is also affected by flaws. Young Tunisians are the most educated within the region, but there is a growing rate of school dropouts, the rise of which may be rooted in the lack of employment and the perception of schools as a waste of time. Concerns raised by experts refer to the absence of students' voices in defining solutions for themselves.

Many young people complain about the limited number of jobs in the public sector in Tunisia as well as the lack of entrepreneurial policies. Given the limited access to credit and widespread corruption, private businesses are discouraged. In a recent survey the most evident barriers to growth complained of by Tunisians were political instability, administrative inefficiency, restricted access to finance, corruption and extortion, difficulty in obtaining electricity, weak contract enforcement and weak networking.<sup>25</sup> Young women particularly are a group who have been held back by unemployment and the ongoing difficulties. In many internal areas of the country more than 80 percent of them are not working or studying.<sup>26</sup>

This is the situation faced by Tunisian youth today. An immense sense of frustration merged with disaffection and detachment are feelings which are shared more and

<sup>25</sup> Amr Adly, "Reforming the Entrepreneurship Ecosystem in Post-Revolutionary Egypt and Tunisia", in *CDDRL Policy Briefs*, April 2014, <https://shar.es/1j5PQK>.

<sup>26</sup> The information about youth conditions have been taken by several country reports published by international organizations and institutions. Among the most relevant: Antonio Nucifora and Bob Rijkers, *The Unfinished Revolution. Bringing Opportunity, Good Jobs And Greater Wealth To All Tunisians*, Washington, World Bank, May 2014, <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/20267>; Malika Drissi, *Tunisia: Breaking the Barriers to Youth Inclusion*, cit.; Victoria Chambers with Clare Cumming, *Building Momentum. Women's Empowerment in Tunisia*, London, Overseas Development Institute, November 2014, <http://www.developmentprogress.org/node/2430>. See also Maria Cristina Paciello and Daniela Pioppi, "A Comprehensive Approach to the Understanding of the Dynamics of Youth Exclusion/Inclusion and the Prospects for Youth-Led Change in the South and East Mediterranean", in *Power2Youth Papers*, No. 1 (December 2014), <http://www.iai.it/en/node/2318>.

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more among the young. Monica Marks has recently said "Many Tunisian young people describe this desperate feeling of suffocation and social exclusion with one word, *hugra*. This word, loosely translating to spurning or exclusion, conveys a deep sense of humiliation."<sup>27</sup> Their contribution in the transition to democracy has been forgotten and their potential of being relevant actors in democratic consolidation has been neglected.

If the situation worsened or a breaking point such as the Bouazizi event occurred again, Tunisia could fall into a regression phase. But this time any clashes could become unpredictable, possibly escalating into a battle of all against all, as quoted by a political commander who warned that a new revolution in Tunisia will not be between people and government but between people and people.<sup>28</sup> Such a worrying and unwelcomed perspective actually presents some clues, which once again put the young at the forefront of a situation on which the future of Tunisia highly depends. Indeed young Tunisians represent the largest group of foreign fighters who have joined IS to be trained and then return to their country.<sup>29</sup> The International Center for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence has estimated that Tunisia has fueled IS with young at a constant pace, reaching a total of three thousand.<sup>30</sup> Despite representing a tiny part of the majority of young Tunisians, the phenomenon is a direct outcome of social exclusion and youth disillusionment. For example, if we look into the mind of a young Tunisian, most likely a graduate, who does not see any future prospects and lives in a backward interior region, whose empowerment is evidently not on the political agenda, it is normal that he or she will begin to distrust the government and to rely more upon his local community. He can then fall into the hands of radical Imams who will fuel his mind with misleading religious ideas, giving him an alternative path to follow, to feel of use.

Looking at the past, we have a clear example in Algeria when the economic difficulties of the mid to late 1980s coincided with the large scale rise of radical Islamism, as many middle-class educated young people found themselves jobless and without prospects. Radical Islam offered an alternative that was more culturally authentic than imported Western ideologies such as socialism.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Monica Marks, "Tunisia: Completing the Transition", in Anthony Dworkin (ed.), *Five Years On. A New European Agenda for North Africa*, London, European Council on Foreign Relations, February 2016, p. 26, [http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/five\\_years\\_on\\_a\\_new\\_european\\_agenda\\_for\\_north\\_6003](http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/five_years_on_a_new_european_agenda_for_north_6003).

<sup>28</sup> Zack Brisson and Kate Krontiris, *Tunisia. From Revolutions to Institutions*, Washington, World Bank, 2012, [https://www.infodev.org/infodev-files/resource/InfodevDocuments\\_1141.pdf](https://www.infodev.org/infodev-files/resource/InfodevDocuments_1141.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> On the topic, see: Arturo Varvelli and Stefano M. Torelli, "Il nuovo Jihadismo in Nord Africa e nel Sahel", in *Approfondimenti per l'Osservatorio di politica internazionale*, No. 75 (May 2013), <http://www.ispionline.it/en/node/7841>.

<sup>30</sup> Peter R. Neumann, "Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s", in *ICRS Insights*, 26 January 2015, <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s>.

<sup>31</sup> Hugh Roberts, *The Battlefield. Algeria, 1988-2002*, London, Verso, 2003.

### 3. European Union action in Tunisia

The European Union has welcomed the democratic improvements led by Tunisia since the Jasmine Revolution. The country has revealed its uniqueness within an unstable region and for this reason has been the favoured partner to deploy a new neighbourhood policy.

It is difficult today to defend the old idea of an undifferentiated European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and, accordingly, Europe needs to be more strategic and pragmatic in addressing the new realities of its neighbours. For instance, Europe should contribute to a more stable MENA neighbour by supporting those countries that demonstrate willingness and collaboration and, in turn, where its actions have a real chance of success.<sup>32</sup> Tunisia is best-suited Mediterranean country for successful external action by the European Union, being at the forefront of democratic transition and consolidation in the Arab World, and it could play a strategic role within the EU neighbourhood.<sup>33</sup>

But time is passing and the situation is worsening, especially considering the new threats which are emerging in the Middle East and North Africa. As mentioned above, the risk of a collapse in Tunisia remains high due to internal political tensions, socioeconomic pressure, terrorist threats and regional dynamics – first and foremost instability in neighboring Libya – that together pose new challenges and call for a carefully considered European involvement on the ground. In this regard, in late 2013 relations between the European Union and Tunisia were strengthened with the launch of the Action plan 2013-2017, whose purpose is “to strengthen the ties between them and promote stability, security and prosperity on the basis of a partnership based on solidarity and common interests.”<sup>34</sup> It promotes a set of priorities which should be addressed by Europe such as administration, justice, human rights, economy, infrastructure, competitiveness and security. Furthermore, the EU and Tunisia have created a “partenariat privilégié”<sup>35</sup> which aims at sustaining Tunisia's consolidation of democracy. Youth-related problems barely receiving a mention, policies are affected by rhetorical narrative and solutions are proposed in general terms and do not consider the worsening of conditions since 2013.

<sup>32</sup> Stephan Lehne, “Time to Reset the European Neighborhood Policy”, in *Carnegie Papers*, February 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/publications/?fa=54420>.

<sup>33</sup> Co-Chairs conclusions, Meeting of the Tunisia-European Union Task Force, Tunis, 28-29 September 2011, [http://eeas.europa.eu/tunisia/docs/20110929\\_taskforce\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/tunisia/docs/20110929_taskforce_en.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> European Commission, *Proposal for a Council Decision on ... the EU-Tunisia Action Plan* (COM/2004/792), 9 December 2004, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:52004PC0792>.

<sup>35</sup> European Commission, *Mise en oeuvre de la politique européenne de voisinage en Tunisie. Progrès réalisés en 2014 et actions à mettre en oeuvre* (SWD/2015/73), 25 March 2015, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/fr/TXT/?uri=celex:52015SC0073>.

Europe still lacks a sound strategy addressed to youth empowerment in Tunisia. Therefore, it should strengthen its support strategy to the national government as much as possible in the deployment of a reform process, by cooperating closely over the most relevant issues. A more youth-sensitive approach should be used, as noted recently by Isabel Schäfer, who said that "the role of the EU is not to tell the youth how to proceed, but merely to offer tools that allow young people to deal with their specific situation."<sup>36</sup>

There are two alternatives by which the European Union can intervene to improve the situation of the youth. The first is to increase the Tunisian government's effectiveness in leading its program of youth empowerment, by providing resources, assistance and highly qualified personnel where needed. In this regard the following actions should be taken:

- Create a permanent bilateral conversation at the institutional level, aimed at assessing the condition of young Tunisians year-on-year as a crucial means to monitor tailored policies and their outcome.
- Strengthen the cooperation within the educational sector by further encouraging cultural exchange even at secondary school level. The possibility to be more integrated in the European context would broaden chances to find work both in Europe or elsewhere. Moreover it would allow Tunisians to consider Europe as an opportunity and not as a constraint, replacing the concept of migration with that of mobility.
- Develop a mutual program aimed at hiring qualified teachers to send to Tunisia, especially in interior areas with the task of providing the youth with more opportunities and, at the same time, hiring Tunisian teachers to assist their peers in European countries, especially those where large numbers of young Tunisians live (Germany, France, Italy). This would have a twofold benefit, reducing unemployment in Europe and Tunisia and having an impact on the educational system in both countries. These teachers would not replace national units, but would support the teaching process, facilitating integration and cultural sharing.
- Assist the national government in the deployment of reforms for youth empowerment through access to expert policy makers. Europe has available a large number of highly skilled professional experts in this field.

The second alternative is where Europe takes on the initiative itself according to its interests, using Tunisian institutions as support. In this regard the most urgent policy would be to recognise the sheer scale of graduates and highly skilled youth

<sup>36</sup> Isabel Schäfer, "Fostering a Youth-Sensitive Approach in the EU's Policies towards the South and East Mediterranean Countries – The Case of Tunisia", in Silvia Colombo (ed.), "Youth Activism in the South and East Mediterranean Countries since the Arab Uprisings: Challenges and Policy Options", in *EuroMeSCo Joint Policy Studies*, No. 2 (February 2016), p. 66-67, <http://www.iai.it/en/node/6023>.

in Tunisia and encourage its member states' companies to plan new strategies of investment in the country. This would match European know-how with the human resources on the ground. The energy sector is the most relevant domain in this regard, especially in the renewable sector. Tunisia's environment presents many opportunities given the large amount of potential green energy from the sun and wind. Several companies in Europe could invest in the high number of young Tunisian engineers. Some things have been done and there are a couple of projects currently operating on the ground, but they are not adequately structured. Other areas which present opportunities for investment are the tourism and food sectors. In doing so Europe has to ensure labour rights, avoiding the exploitation of "cheap labour". Furthermore, European companies should avoid using local labour forces for their own interests in a time-planned period. Instead, they have to foster a process of enrolment in the company's network or encourage workers to gain experience in other projects abroad.

#### 4. Concluding observations and recommendations for the national government

Tunisia is living through a crucial moment in its history. The country, emerging as an exception in the region, has completed a process of transition to democracy and aims at consolidating its institutions. External and internal pressures from conservative and radical forces have increased their strength across the country, affecting its stability.

Tunisia has demonstrated to the world how young Tunisians' frustration can be channelled into transformative political and social change. It remains to be seen if Tunisia will be able to achieve a more complex goal: stabilising its democracy and consolidating its institutions. Much of this depends on the new generations, mostly those who have actively fuelled the Tunisian transition process since 2010. Youth in Tunisia is a double-edged sword for this process. The cornerstone of their empowerment is their involvement in the system and engagement in its activities. Further exclusion and detachment however could unleash unknown reactions, affecting national stability and jeopardizing what has been achieved thus far.

Consolidation has to focus on groups and their participation within the process. Thus, participation must be found at the "horizontal" level, among political parties and trade and labour unions in order to proceed with a shared and legitimated path within the institutional arena. But, most importantly, participation must be found on the "vertical" plane, among political parties and citizens, especially among young Tunisians who were the soul of the revolution and now are becoming more and more detached, causing scepticism with the promises of the current government. Young Tunisians are the key group to involve, empower and give a voice to within the consolidation process, for the following reasons: they represent the majority of

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Tunisia's population;<sup>37</sup> they will be the dominant class of tomorrow; and they were the core of Tunisian revolution.

The National government has to put youth empowerment at the forefront of its agenda. Facilitating youth inclusion will enable the mobilisation of the new generation as an economic and social asset. In this regard strategies that the Tunisian government could adopt are to:

- Create a permanent board of specialists and recognised experts, with different backgrounds and fields of expertise. They should be divided into small teams (4-5 units) and deployed regionally, in order to gather youth energy and initiatives. This should be facilitated through the selection of youth leaders at the regional level who would cooperate closely with the teams in supporting the deployment of activities. In an advanced phase, if the feedback is positive and the participation increases, the creation of regional youth councils will be an asset, since a broader and stronger interaction between national representatives and youth would allow leverage to be exerted on the decision making process both at a local and national level. The outcome would be to raise participation and increase the perception of being part of the system, so reducing any feelings of detachment. In order to preserve individual input the national government has to painstakingly select its experts, relying also on independent international organisations which are already involved in empowering youth, in sustaining its activities and cooperating as much as is possible.<sup>38</sup>
- Focus on the needs of youths in the interior areas where the level of poverty and detachment is higher, in order to balance inequalities and to pave the way for the creation or the restoration of a middle class. Reducing the gap between the coastal and the interior areas, in terms of opportunities, services and education will be a valuable strategy to avoid new clashes. In this context the deployment of tailored policies, especially in the fields of education and job creation, should be a priority for the government.
- Create a more protected environment to support and encourage youth entrepreneurship. Tunisia is a country with a sheer scale of youth entrepreneurial initiatives, with a rising number of small but strong startups.
- In this vein, the reduction of barriers and constraints, along with tailored social policy is the main challenge for the national government. It has to guarantee entry into the formal economy with registration and licenses to operate from the government, deterring people from the operation of informal businesses.

<sup>37</sup> Youth between 15 and 29 years of age represent 28.4 percent of the 10.7 million population of Tunisia. See Tunisian National Institute of Statistics, *Enquête nationale sur la population et l'emploi 2012*, Tunis, 2013, p. 47, <http://beta.ins.tn/fr/node/1046>.

<sup>38</sup> The United Nations Volunteers (UNV) program has played an extensive role in fostering youth inclusion through the project "Arab Youth Volunteering for a Better Future."

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- There should be a focus on contract enforcement and on the eradication of practices which limit free competition and, in turn, curtail the opportunities and market accessibility for many youth entrepreneurs.
- Protecting property rights and the rule of law should be considered, which suffer from major flaws. In this vein, the government should also deploy policies aimed at assisting young entrepreneurs who have been affected by bankruptcy.
- Dealing with the rising issue of school dropouts, by intervening with policies to reintroduce students back to school or, as an alternative, orient them towards the job market.
- Encourage participation of the youth in social and political activities in order to increase their perception of being a force to build a better country. Participation in social and political activities would restore relations between public authorities and the younger generations. In doing so national government should empower those institutions which are already structured on the ground (trade unions, NGOs, social student unions), by providing them with training, expertise, logistical support and reliable institutional channels.

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