German-Tunisian Economic Cooperation and the Prospects of Democracy

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Abstract
Following are the notes of the presentation entitled “German-Tunisian Economic Cooperation and the Prospects of Democracy” delivered in the annual DAAD scholarship holders that took place in April 2013 in Darmstadt, Germany.

1. Introduction
[Slide 1] Hello everyone, I would like to welcome you to the presentation and let us hope it won’t be very boring. We would begin by examining the framework of our topic.

2. Tunisia: A Short Timeline
[Slide 2] For those who do not know it, Tunisia is a 162 thousand-square kilometre country in the south of the Mediterranean. [Slide 3] The history of the country is not as monolithic as it may seem; originally inhabited by the Imazighen, Tunisia was also under Phoenician, Roman, and then Vandal influence and control. The Arabs colonised Tunisia around fourteen hundred years ago, followed afterwards by the Ottomans, and then the French. After its independence, [Slide 4] the
The modern republic of Tunisia was founded in 1956 by Habib Bourguiba, succeeded in power by Zinelabidine Ben Ali who fled in 2011 to Saudi Arabia after social protests known as “The Revolution of January 14th, 2011” swept the country. Subsequently, Monsef Marzouki was appointed at the currently symbolic position of president by a constitutional assembly, where the major political power is the Ennahdha Islamist party, controlled by Rashed Ghannoushi. [Slide 5] The assembly is composed of 217 members, and the Islamists and their allies form the governing Troika, in black dots, the opposition is in red dots, and the independents and other in grey.

Tunisians account for around 10.7 million and in 2011 Tunisia had a GDP of around $46 billion that has ever since been going down. Unemployment is still high, especially among youth, accounting for around 17%, that’s almost three times as much as Germany. Tunisia was the first southern Mediterranean country that concluded an association agreement with the EU, and later obtained an “advanced partner” status. Though most ties are with France and Italy, because of the import and export volumes and other cultural and historic relations, Germany kept close relations with the country throughout the different political parties in the Bundestag. However the nature of these relations shifted and has been intensifying since 2011.

3. German-Tunisian Economic Cooperation

German-Tunisian cooperation was being fostered since the mid-seventies. [Slide 6] The German-Tunisian collaboration, commissioned by the Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung (BMZ) was carried out by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), in the fields of sustainable infrastructure, social development, climate change, and economic development. The main focuses were tourism, environmental protection, energy, food security, sanitation, and governance, within the framework of the Millennium Development Objectives and the Regional Cooperation in Africa and the Mediterranean Union. Germany also contributed in funding NGOs in Tunisia, however direct criticism for the Ben Ali regime was timid if not absent for one reason or another.
Immediately after January 2011, Germany welcomed the change in Tunisia and Egypt. [Slide 7] In February 2011, the BMZ shifted its cooperation scope and allocated 97 million euros for further economic cooperation. Dirk Niebel, the Development Secretary Minister stated the readiness of Germany to “offer its support for democratic, pro-reform forces”, announced the establishment of special funds to promote democracy, education, and economic activity in the region, and initiated a visit to the region to make an announcement “not to democratise a country from outside”. A statement that Germany actually kept, at least officially, during the 2011 military intervention in Libya as it has withdrawn its NATO troops within the former Jamahiriya and sent them to the AWACS forces in Afghanistan, and limited its involvement to the usage and installation of military equipment. Later, Germany lent 100 million euros to the rebels for alleged humanitarian causes.

[Slide 10] In March 2012, high level government discussions took place in Berlin about the German offer of a 60-million-euro debt swap in exchange for employment-intensive infrastructure projects. In the same month, Germany gave a push to its cooperation in the Tourism sector after a million-euro program with TUI Germany, a major private sector travel agency, was signed and [Slide 11] was being put in practice around July 2012 when Gudrun Kopp, visited the country to substantiate the situation of the German companies providing around 50,000 jobs, to evaluate advancement of development programs, and to reiterate Germany’s interest in a constitution based on human rights, gender equality, and good governance. In August 2011 three large funds were launched: An economic fund to support small, medium-sized, and micro enterprises with a volume of 52 million euros, a fund to promote Democracy via financing consultancy policy services and supporting Tunisian civil society, with a size of more than six million euros, and an eight-million-euro education fund to help train and employ young Tunisians. [Slide 12] Additionally, the BMZ reported allocating 40% of its Human Rights Facility for NGOs to strengthen Human Rights in the region and the Deutsche Welle Academy announced further training for freelance journalists and bloggers. [Slide 13] The same perspective and goals were emphasised in November 2012 when Hans-Jürgen Beerfeltz, the BMZ State Secretary, re-echoed the important cooperation ties with other German
Partners such as the Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW) [Slide 14], The German-Tunisian Chamber of Industry and Commerce, and other. More recently, 35-million-euro agreements about military cooperation in the fields of military medicine and illegal immigration were sought. Usual discussions about collaboration in the fields of Justice with the Permanent State Secretary Brigit Grundmann took place, and academic cooperation mainly in the fields of engineering was announced to be further continued.

Germany also contributed to influence the whole European contribution, valued by more than 400 million euros for Tunisia alone between 2011 and 2013, aside from other facilitations by the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

4. Prospects and Challenges for Democracy and Human Rights

In pre-2011 Tunisia, it was common to imprison human rights activists and members of the opposition on basis of being anti-government thus anti-state. [Slide 15] After Ben Ali’s removal the much-praised revolution found itself facing issues of corruption and of course unemployment. The latter was the main topic of electoral programs, [Slide 17] and the Islamists were not very shy in giving a number: 590 thousand jobs in five years. Without any details, the number seemed more like praying for employment than actual economy, and for the record that’s the size of the whole public administration of Tunisia, and that’s ten thousand jobs per month. [Slide 18] Of course as soon as they realised that they were the new political majority, more efforts were put into playing the political game than actual problem solving. In particular, the constitutional assembly that was supposed to draft a constitution in the maximum delay of one year redirected its attention to more executive details and is still until now, after a year and a half and two Islamist governments, not done. On a side note, Tunisia’s first constitution was adopted during the 1800s when the state was a monarchy, and the republic’s first constitution was adopted in June 1959 after the ratification of the Tunisian civil status code that made Tunisia the only country in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), aside from the State of Israel, where polygamy is banned and punishable and made the
status of women slightly better than its MENA Muslim-majority neighbours. The Islamists, openly
criticising Bourguiba for the freedom he gave to women, sought to draft the new constitution in a
different way, for example introducing terms such as “women complementing the men” instead of
equality between sexes, this was further complicated by the nature of the patriarchal society and
the recurrence to Islamic laws to justify the state of inequality as “dictated by God”. [Slide 21]
Furthermore, the Islamists seemed to care about puritanical Arabisation and Islamisation efforts
more than the actual reasons of the social unrests, i.e. unemployment and social inequalities. [Slide
23] After free speech and media freedom were earned by Tunisians, the new temporary authority
continued to exploit religion to impose itself as a permanent authority. Old methods seemed to be
picked up by the new power as suddenly being anti-Islamists meant being anti-state, and biasedness
in choosing who gets social aids and who qualifies for international programs, even aforementioned
German ones, started to constantly surface yet again on the basis of adhering or sympathising with
the Islamists, this and other factors made the social protests occur more often and violent clashes
between protesters and the Police took place in more than one occasion, e.g. the events of April 9th,
2012, the Siliana events and the usage of gunpowder and real bullets against citizens, and the
attacks on the United States embassy, which emphasised the concerns of human rights activists and
the actual willingness of the Islamist government to freedom. On a side note, ethnic problems
continue to be ignored under the same pretexts Ben Ali used, as the recognition of the Amazigh
cultural rights continue to be silenced under the same Pan-Arabist and Pan-Islamist excuses that are
used elsewhere, for example the Arab-Kurdish problem.

[Slide 26] In the scope of the announced objective, i.e. supporting the democratic transition,
the Tunisian side must understand that cooperation is not charity and the German side can follow a
few points to ensure a safe transition process:

- Clear and concise inclusion of basic human rights and gender equality in the upcoming
  constitution: No circumvention such as “as long as it does not contradict Islam”, or “as long
as it does not contradict the first chapter of the constitution”, which is more or less the same thing. If freedom and equality are for everyone, why not carve it in the constitution that binds all the stakeholders?

- Clear and precise schedule for at least municipal and parliamentary elections: the post-Ben Ali interim government succeeded, despite all the social protests that were taking place, in organising fairly transparent elections, to which I can personally attest as an assistant to the European Electoral Observation Mission, just after nine months of Ben Ali’s ousting.

- Clear mapping of the institutions that would supervise future elections and the political influence on them [Slide 27]: The institutions must be neutral and if future elections are run by the Ministry of the Interior, the stakeholders of Tunisian-European affairs can expect a Ben Ali with a turban in future elections. In addition, the Islamists pressed for international monitoring by the European Union, the American Carter Centre, and other international observers when they suspected that the interim government could falsify the results, and it is only the right of the Tunisian people to suspect that as well.

- Last but not least, a hopefully not-so-far-fetched aspiration for German supports to secular civil society organisations. Of all the European countries, Germany knows that in its way to achieve its current freedom of speech, it had to go through the Lutheran reform gradually releasing itself from the yoke of the Church, to a somewhat lesser binding authority.

To sum up, on one hand Germany was probably the least, among its European Partners, in criticising Human Right abuses committed by the Islamist governments, either due to timidity or in attempts to gain more geostrategic and economic privileges. It would be disappointing to somehow assimilate this to the past French cooperation with Ben Ali. And while It is not in any way expected to do the work that the Tunisians themselves will have to do; voicing national concerns over human right abuses, particularly towards women, would have its impacts, especially when such mistreatments are denounced by NGOs known for their devotion and good record, e.g. Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch. [Slide 28] On the other hand, the Islamists need international
funding and are aware that the international community is more than observing the outcome of the Tunisian model, and they need to cease the sweet double discourse talk and actually put the long-due promises into actions that would help lower unemployment and build a sane infrastructure. The Tunisians, in their turn, need to work out their internal ideological and cultural differences in a holistic framework that does not disqualify anyone.

A happy finale would have been quoting what the BMZ State Secretary Hans-Jürgen Beerfeltz said in his visit to Tunisia last November: “If peace is joined by prosperity, then that is the best foundation for sustainable development”. It may be also important to note that in the times of Ben Ali, peace and significant growth statistics existed, but it was within a police state. And history may tend to repeat itself very often.

5. Conclusion

[Slide 29] Thank you for your patience. Ms Stahl will be moderating the next minutes. Please proceed with remarks, criticism, and questions.

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2 The text “[Slide α]”, in “strong” stylisation denotes the number α of the slide to be displayed. Other slides are displayed automatically.