

**Funder Learning Visit to the Arab Region
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A View from the Outside: European Perspectives on Middle East Transitions

The Representative of the European Union in Tunisia shared his thoughts on the events in the region in 2011-12 and on the immediate period ahead.

Speaker: **Adrianus Koetsenruijter**, Head of EU Delegation to Tunisia

Moderator: **Fulco Van Deventer**, Policy Advisor, Cordaid

- Adrianus Koetsenruijter introduced himself and his work for the European External Action Service (EEAS). He said the EEAS is Europe's only unified political voice in the region; however, the EEAS under Lady Catherine Ashton is not completely independent but is in continuous consultation with the EU member states.
- The EEAS has an office with more than 50 staff in Tunis. Two important areas of cooperation are the economy and education. Since the revolution, the European Union decided to increase support for democratisation, the constitutional assembly, independent media, and civil society. Environmental issues and rural development only play a minor role.
- It was claimed that before the revolution, there were 9,000 NGOs in Tunisia – but most of them were sports clubs.
- What were the main characteristics of the Tunisian revolution?
 - Dynamics of globalisation played a major role: a growing middle class, a growing sense of the world, and a well-connected young generation.
 - The people felt desperate, left with high unemployment and no options, no independence, no freedom to choose.
 - Throughout the region, political power centres were not able to renew themselves; its leaders were aged (ex. Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Muammar Ghaddafi in Libya, Zine Ben Ali in Tunisia) and there was a general feeling that something needed to change.
 - The revolution in Tunisia was a leaderless and a popular revolution, supported by the majority of Tunisians. The transition government which followed when the President and the Prime Minister stepped down was widely accepted by the population.
 - The current government is a democratic one. However, the election results were weak for liberal parties, and the two smaller parties which form part of the government troika are not strong enough to challenge Ennahda, which won 37% of the vote in the elections.

Discussion

Q: What was the role of the Tunisian army before and during the revolution? Can we start thinking about serious institutional reform anytime soon?

- The role of the army has been very limited – the police were much stronger. The army decided not to shoot its own people.
- If democracy ought to grow in Tunisia, then civil society will have to grow and centralised power will have to decrease. Power must be distributed at different levels. If the country is ruled only by the Parliament, then we will again see a small group dominate the country.
- Ennahda is a local movement – it is good that it exists, as long as there are checks and balances.

Q: What is your aid strategy?

- The overall amount of money available to support civil society organisations in Tunisia is about 10 million Euros.
- Supporting civil society is not the “natural” role of the European Union; the Tunisian government provide more structured support to CSOs.
- What is important is that the activity come from below. People have to take their own destiny into their hands, get used to freedom of speech and being able to take initiative.

Q: There is criticism about the double standards of the European Union regarding migration and economic development. Can the EU really make a difference in the next two years?

- Tunisia needs to be offered partnership to foster economic development and stability.

Q: After the revolution, the world is talking about conditionality [of support]. How can we address this with an Islamic government?

- What matters in the eyes of the European Union is the rule of law. Are we giving Tunisia the same guarantees that we have offered Spain and Poland? No, because we are not in the position to do so. Our support to Tunisia is about 160 million Euros, not a huge sum.
- Half of entrepreneurs of Tunisia are European
- Tunisia would be a good addition to the European Union. Half of Tunisia’s entrepreneurs are Europeans. Including Tunisia in the EU would not cost much money. However, Europeans are hostile to the idea of including Maghreb countries in the EU.
- Europe is not doing enough in Tunisia. And the EU is not actually spending more money overall, but it is redirecting money away from countries where no transition is happening.

Q: What are the key human rights challenges and how is civil society equipped to tackle those?

- The human rights challenges are still the same as before the revolution. Women for example are suffering more today than they were before; the society is conservative, and women are not treated as equal. Freedom of speech has improved though. Yet, all rights are on the agenda.

Q: What is the role of Qatar and other Gulf states for post-revolutionary Tunisia?

- Qatar is not a progressive state and not a democracy. There is no cultural connection between Tunisians and Qataris or Saudis. The Gulf monarchies also seldom make long-term commitments, unless there are chances for attractive investment.