What does the Future Hold for Tunisia?

Tunisia is a popular tourist destination in North Africa, a cultural melting pot, with Roman, Arab, and Western cultural influences and European progressiveness. However, Tunisia’s attractiveness as a holiday destination has not been the only reason why the country has been in the news over the past decade. Tunisia was where the wave of color revolutions that later swept through almost every other Arab country arose in January 2011, with the Tunisian Revolution and the ousting of former President Ben Ali from power.

Its natural borders are delineated by the Mediterranean Sea and the Sahara Desert, and the neighboring countries Tunisia shares its land borders with — Algeria and Libya — have always had an influence on the situation in Tunisia, and they still do. Although Tunisia is not rich in natural resources like its neighbors, Algeria and Libya, there have always been many countries that could see the advantages of Tunisia’s location on the north coast of the African continent, who have sought to consolidate their presence and influence in the country. The United States has shown great interest in Tunisia’s strategic location, focusing much of its attention on this country in recent years as part of a broader plan to strengthen the US military presence in Africa, and America has sent into Tunisia soldiers from the private military company (PMC) Engility, a PMC with plenty of experience leading secret military operations in a variety of countries: Afghanistan, Kuwait, Bosnia, Georgia, Yemen, the Philippines and Colombia. If the recent American operations in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan are anything to go by, it cannot be ruled out that these PMCs have also been given orders from Washington to take control of key infrastructure in Tunisia and create special military zones on the country’s territory, which could serve as a springboard for the United States to expand the US influence throughout the region in the future.

In 2015, Barack Obama declared his intention to make Tunisia one of America’s non-NATO allies. In January 2017, Democratic senators Alcee Hastings and David Schweikert submitted a bill to US Congress to provide “assistance to support the military readiness of the Government of Tunisia,” “assistance to support efforts of the Government of Tunisia to combat terrorism,” “assistance to strengthen and reform the security sector of Tunisia,” “economic reforms and assistance,” “assistance to support democracy and civil society in Tunisia” and “assistance to support increased border security for Tunisia”. However, despite Washington’s desire to develop a close partnership with Tunisia, the Tunisian government was not open to US intervention in the country’s domestic policy, by expressing its opposition to having US and NATO military bases established on Tunisian soil, and opposition to Washington’s intervention in the Libyan Civil War under the pretext of the fight against terrorism.

By the turn of the 21st century, Tunisia had one of the best education systems in the region, and the country was focused on rolling out computerization and developing ties with Western Europe. However, none of this helped Tunisia make progress and improve the political, economic and social situation in the country. The many years of rising inflation and chronic economic crisis this North African country has already endured have influenced the domestic political landscape, which has proven itself to be in a weak and dependent position, including being left at the mercy of external factors such as the actions of both Western and regional players.

All of this affects the political climate in the country. The Ennahda Party (“Renaissance Movement Party”) who won the last parliamentary elections in October 2019 may position itself as a moderate Islamist party, yet we must not forget that it is essentially an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood terrorist group (banned in Russia - ed.), from where it draws its inspiration and ideology. The Ennahda Party must have realized that having an Islamist lead the
government as the President is not ideal for developing relations with the West, which are very important for Tunisia, so they seem to have found their own kind of compromise behind closed doors, which is to have a secular Prime Minister appointed who can negotiate with the international community.

Moreover, despite the campaign funding Ennahda received from abroad (supposedly from the Gulf states), it began to show that the party has no real experience running the country, and foreign investors do not have enough confidence in them to allow Ennahda to compensate for their incompetent governance with cash injections.

Today, people in Tunisian society itself are well aware that most of the country’s problems stem from poor governance. All of this adds to the pressure on the parliament, the government and all the political parties. However, there is a lot that depends not only on the actions of the Tunisian authorities and the government. Neighboring Libya has a major influence, and a significant percentage of the Tunisian economy has followed Libya, slipping into the informal sector, where no taxes are paid, no auditing is done, and people live outside the laws that regulate the formal economy, the taxpayers that the authorities depend on so greatly.

In June, Tunisian Prime Minister Elyes Fakhfakh warned that officials predict the country’s economy could contract by almost an unprecedented 7% due to the coronavirus pandemic. At the same time, the Prime Minister stressed that state debt has reached “frightening” proportions, totaling $32 billion, which is equal to 84 percent of Tunisia’s domestic national product. Due to negative economic growth, the state budget will have a deficit of more than $ 1.7 billion, which means that most government organizations will face bankruptcy. The Tunisian authorities had already sent the International Monetary Fund (IMF) a Letter of Intent in April, stating Tunisia’s intention to resume negotiations with the IMF in the near future in order to secure a successor Extended Fund Facility (EFF) arrangement. The IMF and a number of other foreign creditors had previously refused to cooperate with Tunisia, as Tunisia was included on the FATF blacklist for illegal money laundering and financing terrorist organizations. However, given the gloomy economic situation in Tunisia due to the coronavirus pandemic, with border closures and expected losses of $ 1.4 billion in the tourism sector, the IMF approved a $745 million emergency assistance loan in April to help the country tackle the coronavirus crisis.

Tunisia’s political crisis and the country’s social unrest have not died down amid all of these economic concerns and high unemployment rates. As a result, due to the major conflict between the Tunisian parliament and government, President Kais Saied made an official request for Prime Minister Elyes Fakhfakh to step down on July 15 at a meeting also attended by the parliamentary speaker Rachid al-Ghannouchi, and Fakhfakh, who had been in office since February this year, complied by handing in his resignation. Relations between Fakhfakh and the Ennahda Party led by parliamentary speaker Rachid al-Ghannouchi soured in July, when the former Prime Minister announced he planned to reshuffle his cabinet, potentially leading to six party ministers from this party losing their posts. As this conflict unfolded, several political alliances in Tunisia’s Assembly of the Representatives of the People (unicameral parliament) decided to invite members of parliament to vote on a motion of no confidence in Fakhfakh’s government.

In his statement of resignation, Fakhfakh accused Ennahda of complicating the work of the government and undermining stability. “These calls are destroying the principle of solidarity in the government, leaving no doubt that Ennahda is moving away from the commitments and promises it has made to coalition partners of its patriotic intent to save the country and its shattered economy,” said Fakhfakh.

In these circumstances, Tunisia’s future remains uncertain. Like the United States, France is also trying to hold onto its influence in Tunisia, where Tunisian President Kais Saied was welcomed on an official visit to Paris in late June, who engaged in an active talks with French President Emmanuel Macron. According to reports, the talks mainly dealt with rather sensitive issues such as the situation in Libya and an ongoing discussion in the Tunisian parliament to have France apologize for crimes permitted against Tunisians in the past during the colonial era and pay reparations. Countering Turkey’s influence in Libya and in North Africa in general is an important foreign policy issue for President Macron, especially following an incident which recently took place off the coast of Libya involving Turkish warships and a French naval vessel. In light of this, there is this notion in Paris that separating Tunisia from Ankara is now of particular importance for France. Following the events of the Arab Spring, Ankara provided substantial financial aid to the new Tunisian authorities in the hope of growing its influence in North Africa, a region which was once part of the Ottoman Empire, including through Islamist parties that share similar ideologies with the Muslim Brotherhood (banned in Russia - ed.), which many countries declare an illegal terrorist organization, with views shared by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. In addition, as the French media has highlighted on numerous occasions, the Tunisian island of Djerba has been used as a military stopover by Turkish intelligence, with regular transit flights from Turkey to Libya landing in Djerba-Zarzis Airport, carrying cargo for various purposes for Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj’s Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA). However, France is considered
one of the countries that supports al-Sarraj’s opponent in the Libyan conflict, commander of the Libyan National
Army Khalifa Haftar.

Nevertheless, Tunisian President Kais Saied decided it was better to say nothing about Macron’s attempts to win
Tunisia over to his side in the Libyan conflict. In a telephone conversation in June, he assured Emmanuel Macron
that Tunisia values its sovereignty, and would not be used as a military stopover by anyone.

Yet, this has in effect already happened...

_Vladimir Danilov, political observer, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”._