President of Tunisia Rushes to Support Libya

Tunisian President Kais Saied visited Libya on March 17 after the constitutional oath of office of the transitional Government of National Unity, becoming the first foreign politician to meet personally with the new Libyan Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibeh after the vote of confidence in the interim cabinet. The main point of the visit was the talks of Kais Saied with Libyan Prime Minister Dbeibeh, Libyan politicians and business representatives to discuss bilateral cooperation between the states, "giving business impetus" to the relationship between the countries, as well as strengthening their trade relations.

It should be noted that Tunisia previously sought to remain neutral to the Tripolitan Government of National Accord and the House of Representatives (Tobruk), without giving priority to any of the former authorities.

After congratulating the head of the Cabinet on the approval of the interim executive authorities of Libya, the Tunisian president emphasized that the formation of the Government of National Unity had began in Tunisia, where the Libyan Forum of Political Dialogue was held from November 9 to 16, 2020.

Immediately after this Forum of political dialogue, Tunisia actively took up financial deals with Libya, offering the neighboring North African state a renewed partnership for the extraction of natural resources and the strengthening of trade. A bilateral trade agreement concluded in 2006 brought Tunisia a revenue of 400 billion dinars (about $145
billion at today's exchange rate), with Tripoli buying food, construction materials and basic goods from Tunisia. However, bilateral ties have been frozen because of the mass unrest that led, at the instigation and with active participation of the West, to the overthrow of the then current regime and the assassination of former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2011.

Under these circumstances, Tunisia began to propose a new agreement with the National Oil Company of Libya, which could have contributed to the resumption of trade and the flow to Tunis of Libyan energy products it needs. Former Tunisian Finance Minister Hakim Ben Hammouda estimates that political stability in Libya could increase the gross national product of the Tunisian Republic by 3.8% and bring Tunisia an income of $9.7 billion from 2021 to 2025. In addition, the stabilization of good neighborly relations and business cooperation will also lead to a decrease in unemployment in Tunisia: by the end of 2025, the number of unemployed citizens may decrease by 6.7%, similar to the past migration processes of Tunisians who were employed in Libya.

As a result of the steps already taken by the parties, a Libyan-Tunisian agreement was recently concluded to coordinate an expanded seminar organized by the National Petroleum Company of Libya (NPC) to identify the real needs of the promising Libyan oil sector, creating projects that will not only increase production rates, but also contribute to the national economy of the two countries. The head of the NPC has already noted that Libya's crude oil storage and transportation lines have been destroyed in recent years, which is why the country will need Tunisian organizations and workers specializing in construction.

As for the personal initiative of Tunisian President Kais Saied to lead the process of reanimating relations and business cooperation with Libya on March 17, it is worth noting that in doing so he clearly pursued personal interests amid the internal instability that Tunisia has been experiencing lately. According to a World Bank study, Tunisia loses about $800 million annually because of the crisis in Libya. Tunisian citizens are suffering from economically deteriorating conditions and every day they are losing confidence in the current leadership and are holding rallies against the government, who is failing to fulfill its promises and ignores the problems of the population. Meanwhile, members of the Tunisian state apparatus cannot reach a consensus and keep discrediting each other. Prime Minister Hicham Mashishi fires ministers because of their incompetence, and the president calls on the head of the cabinet to resign because of corruption scandals. Parliament is dominated by the Ennahda party, which is affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood (banned in the Russian Federation) and which calls on the population for a mass march against Rashid al-Ghannushi, the head of parliament. In the opposition's opinion, this party endangers the republic's national security.

All these circumstances are pushing Tunisian President Kais Saied to change the government system: to gain more power in the country, including over the Cabinet of Ministers and other structures, he wants to change the parliamentary system of government to the presidential one. For this step, however, the country would have to go through a national referendum to grant additional rights to the president. And one of the winning aces for future voters could be the resumption of relations with Libya by Kais Saied and its assistance in resolving the Tunisian crisis.

It is worth noting that following the Tunisian President, Tunisian Prime Minister Hicham Mashishi announced his official visit to Libya on March 21, who also decided to use the "Libyan ace" in his game. Against this background, Tunisian businessmen have also stepped up: the head of the Tunisian Business Council, Anis al-Jaziri, said that soon Tunisian delegations will also arrive in Libya to restore trade and the first deals concluded will allow the start of supplies worth $1.5 billion.

In support of the steps already taken by President Kais Saied to reanimate trade and business cooperation with Libya, the head of the Libyan Presidential Council, Muhammad Yunus al-Manfi, has already announced the mutual desire of Tripoli to expand cooperation and increase trade turnover with Tunisia. He, in particular, stressed the importance of establishing a bilateral strategic partnership in the near future, and praised the efforts of the government of a friendly North African state to build strong relations.

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