Recent Attack in Tunisia or “There is No Prophet in His Own Country”

This year the Friday of 9th Ramadan became truly “burning” for Tunisia: 40 people were killed, many more wounded. In the holy month for all Muslims, in which “the Qur’an was revealed” (Al-Baqarah 2: 185), when the thoughts of believers are to be occupied with prayer, ISIL once again killed people in this once prosperous and secure country. All the fruits of the long-lasting rule of President Ben Ali have been undone.

According to the Prime Minister Habib Essid, the only result of the terrorist attack on June 26th was a decision to close 80 mosques not controlled by the State for inciting violence.

It is necessary to remember that the origins of Islamic fundamentalism in Tunisia have deep roots, and the fight against its manifestations was one of the priorities of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who was President of Tunisia in 1987–2011 and for 40 years prevented Tunisia from wallowing in radical Islam.

Thus, in 1972, an accomplice of the Egyptian “Muslim Brotherhood,” the Al-Gama’a al-Islamiyya organization, that stood for “religious cleansing” was established in Tunisia. The main methods of its work were propaganda and penetration of its supporters into all echelons of power. In 1981, the organization was divided into two parts – legal and illegal, but both remained under the supervision of Rashid al-Ghannouchi, who heads it today. Its legal part became known as the Movement of Islamic Orientation (the future Revival Party – “Al-Nahda”) and received strong support from the Prime Minister at the time, Mohamed Mzali.

Already at that time, being aware of the danger of radicalism to the country, Ben Ali, as Minister of the Interior, took extreme measures, and on April 28, 1986 conducted mass arrests of the most active members of the Movement, and on July 8th of the same year Mzali was removed from the Prime Minister position. In losing him the Islamists lost strong support, and began to prepare for the overthrow of the government, fueling the unrest caused by the sharply aggravated socio-economic situation in the country. However, their plans did not come to fruition: the power in the country passed to Ben Ali during the First Jasmine Revolution, who at that time was in the office of the Prime Minister just over a month, and resolved to take control of the country into his own hands on legal grounds under Art. 57 of the Constitution of Tunisia, not allowing the Islamists to come to power. Thus Tunisia avoided the fate of becoming another Islamic state in those years.

Islamist parties were outlawed immediately after Ben Ali came to power as president. But in this regard, the prohibition of the activities of Al-Nahda declaring social ideas enshrined in the Qur’an and Sunnah, and recognized by a significant part of Tunisian society was not viewed positively by the country’s population. The Islamist movement supported the leader Rashid al-Ghannouchi, who emigrated to France and went underground, without stopping the hidden power struggle. It is noteworthy that during the rule of Ben Ali the majority of Islamists were captives in Tunisian prisons.

For the purposes of de-Islamization, under the auspices of Minister Mohamed Charfi, they performed an education reform, which dealt a crushing blow to the Islamists. However, in 1999, by an act of clemency timed to coincide with
the presidential elections 600 supporters of Al-Nahda were released from Tunisian prisons. From this moment the Islamist movement began to gain momentum with renewed vigor, supported by Rashid al-Ghannouchi, who had been in exile in the UK since 1989. In 2009, his party called for a boycott of presidential elections.

After the overthrow of Ben Ali in 2011, the main opponent of Islamism in the country, the Al-Nahda party became one of the favorites in the elections to the Constituent Assembly, receiving 89 seats out of 217. At this point Tunisia fell under the growing influence of radical Islam. It rolled back to the religious traditions, the construction of new mosques attracted the immigrants from the Persian Gulf countries as preachers, men dressed in Muslim clothes, with beards and rosaries in their hands, are increasingly found in the streets. This equally applies to women, who have donned the traditional Muslim headscarf.

At that time, the authorities could not hold back the process. Advocates of Ben Ali fled the country after their leader, or found themselves in Tunisian prisons awaiting sentencing. The leadership of the country had no person as capable as Ben Ali to respond decisively in emergency situations. Suffice it to recall the lightning-fast suppression by Ben Ali of the riots in 1978 and 1984 that could have changed the course of Tunisia’s history.

Today, the leadership of Tunisia has been finally forced to resort to tough measures: during the week it is scheduled to close 80 mosques outside the government control. It is possible that this action might result in a new wave of discontent with the Islamists. But it is certain that many people of this country will remember the disgraced president Ben Ali, who provided well-being, stability and prosperity to Tunisian society for 40 years.

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