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Transcript Q&A

After the Revolution: Prospects for Tunisia

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Sections of this transcript contain translations from remarks originally delivered in Arabic. The provided translation may differ from the live translation found in the audio recording.

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Claire Spencer:

We have about half an hour now for discussion, but I just wanted to kick off – having heard both of you – with questions about how, in concrete terms, some of these issues can be dealt with. You've given us, Mr President, a list of the challenges and particularly one I'll highlight is the very high level of graduate unemployment in Tunisia. And I know the latest figures show unemployment, which reached 19 per cent at the end of last year, has marginally come down to – I think the latest figures say 17.6 per cent. You rightly point out that the expectations, particularly in a divided Tunisia where the interior – where in fact the revolutions started last year – is very divided still from the coastal areas. How can those of us from outside the region actually envisage what is going on economically when frankly so much – and this is where I move to you – of the coverage of events in Tunisia focuses on potential insecurity, the fragility of the political situation, the extremists that you mentioned... how in concrete terms can dealing with the rise – if indeed it is a rise – of extremism, or at least containing extremism, actually go hand-in-hand with some visible progress on the economic side. So I'll start with you Dr Marzouki.

Moncef Marzouki (translation from Arabic):

The economic and political situation are both... the Tunisians have all the economic facilities to push the economy forward, but we still economic help from abroad. Whether the external sources or internal sources, all are waiting to have a stable political system. We cannot win the economic battle without us getting the political regime well-established. That's why we would like to speed up the settlement of the political situation; that's why, following the elections, we sought out the issue of forming governments. So we need the setup to deal with the economic situation now.

Luckily, regarding the economic situation, Tunisia has resources inside [and outside] the country. We have the educated people, we have support from Europe and political support from Libya and Algeria. All this gives Tunis the prospect of becoming a beacon in the area. The most important thing now is to speed up the political setup and then all these mechanisms will move forward.

Libya needs Tunisian labour. We estimate about 500,000 people could work there. The whole area is getting ready for big economic developments.

Claire Spencer:

Thank you very much. Sheikh Ghannouchi?

Rached Ghannouchi (translation from Arabic):

I support everything President Marzouki has said, that the path to peace and [political] settlement is the road to development. And because we live in a transitional stage, this represents some sort of disability. And in spite of the fact that there is some improvement in the economic situation, we received an economic situation that was below zero growth. Today, our indexes show economic growth three points above zero. As mentioned, unemployment has gone down a bit.

Tunisia is going through a dual situation. There are hundreds of thousands of graduates unemployed and there are thousands of workers who can't find a job. Before, there was some discrepancies between education and what the market actually needs. The market needs a certain type of worker and the universities were producing a different type of graduate. Therefore, there is some educational correction here so we can manage both what the market needs and what university graduates have.

But as for our prospects, it is not bad. As for the Tunisian revolution, it has the prospect to become a wealthy one through passing a constitution and by going through this transitional period, which we want to accomplish as soon as possible. After establishing the constitution and holding the general elections, then we have the prospects of this revolution becoming an icon of democracy in this area, if we can get through this transitional period and pass a constitution and have normal government, elected government.

We see that the agreement between the Islamists and the secularists is essential in this stage, and in the coming stages as well because development and democracy need good educational grounds and good understanding. And these kinds of basic grounds for understanding are important to eliminate this extremism of religion and other aspects. We can't have somebody trying to exclude other parties. Establishing [economic] development is one step towards getting rid of extremism in all forms.

Question 1:

Fascinating, this marriage between secular modernity and moderate Islam. Could I ask Sheikh Ghannouchi to be kind enough to say a little more – I understand what secular modernity is but what does he mean exactly by

Islamic identity? What are the aspects of Islamic identity in Tunisia which would be his distinct contribution?

Question 2:

I'll address this to Sheikh Ghannouchi since he spoke about democracy and faith. A recent article in *The Economist* cites Tunisia as one of several Muslim-majority countries which do not afford atheists much in the way of legal protection or official recognition. Do you regard atheists as equals and do you recognize that for them criticizing Islam may be an expression of conscience?

Question 3:

When events started in 2010, until earlier 2011, the debate was inland areas vs. coastal areas, poor people vs. rich people. Now, two years later, the debate is seculars vs. Islamists; even the Prize is about that. Any comment on how the debate changed from a social or economic debate to a religious debate?

Moncef Marzouki (translation from Arabic):

How did this debate change?

This debate goes on. It is true the revolution started from economic demands; throughout the revolution no religious banners were raised. The only banners to be raised were economic: 'we want development; we want dignity; we want freedom'. But certainly such slogans need to be translated on the political stage. Who can translate them? Who will fulfil these demands?

The revolutionary youth were certainly unable to lead the revolution as it was not a violent revolution; we rather wanted it to be an institutional revolution. This therefore had to be through elections. Therefore, a political formula was needed to translate this revolution. And the only political revolution that could translate this revolution was a political system that leaves aside the ideological disputes in order to focus solely on this problem. Had we remained in the ideological dispute then it would have been impossible to pay attention to economic issues. Further, the only political forces that could transcend this Islamist–secularist tension is a troika that says, 'Let us leave aside our ideological differences to focus on what unites us and be able to deal with socio-economic issues.' The essential issue today is that sides – i.e.

religious extremists represented by Jihadi Salafists and secular extremists represented by people who consider an Arabic Islamic identity to be heresy and taboo, while the others consider democracy heresy and taboo – these very people now want to go back to the ideological debate that we want to avoid in order to head directly to solving socio-economic issues. A troika is the solution out of the futility of this ideological debate. [Some] sides want us to go back to the ideological struggle and leave social and economic issues – but this is acceptable neither to society nor to rational sides.

Rached Ghannouchi (translation from Arabic):

What does an Arabic identity mean? It means that these people have a culture with values and history. This culture influences people's behaviour. We do not understand democracy as a mere mechanism to regulate differences. True, it is a mechanism for regulating differences. But there must [also] be a uniting cultural platform that makes a transition from one party to another a transition among analogous rather than contrasting sides. In other words, there [must] be a common platform of culture and values.

The issue of an Arabic Islamic identity has today become a priori to everyone in Tunisia. The last party calling itself a communist party in Tunisia this year – history will record in the future that the last party in Tunisia declaring itself a communist party, the Tunisian Workers' Party this year gave up its communist description and said it belonged to an Arabic Islamic current and Arabic Islamic culture. It is good for Tunisians to agree over the identity concept even if interpretation differs. To have a common platform, this is important for Tunisian unity and democracy. We differ over Islam interpretation, what Islam is and what Arabic identity is. Nevertheless, there is agreement in principle between all Tunisians that this is an Arabic Muslim people. Islam has no church that holds a monopoly over scripture interpretation. Public opinion ultimately is what determines what identity is and what Islam is -- public opinion, through debate, academic work and journalism. The parliament ultimately, by the decrees it will issue, will translate the Arabic Islamic identity, considering the absence of a church that has a monopoly over making pronouncements in the name of the Holy.

In this context, is there a scope for atheism? The Tunisian people are entirely Muslim, with a small Jewish minority, for thousands of years. There is a more than 2000-year-old synagogue on Djerba Island; this minority has full freedom, the country has no religious persecution. The Jewish minority is totally integrated in the Tunisian environment. There is a new Christian

minority as well with its own churches and work – the country knows no religious confrontation. Nor has anyone the right to ask whether you are a believer or atheist; to believe or not to believe is a personal matter. Therefore, we have no Inquisition and no one is planning to re-stage Inquisition to inquire whether people are religious or not – these are personal matters.

Question 4:

I've got quite a concrete question to ask you. I was wondering if you could give us some indication regarding the timeline for adopting a new constitution. And also, one more precise question: there have been some worry about the inclusion in the constitution of an article banning normalization of relations with Israel, and to both of you, I would like to seek views on that matter. Thank you.

Question 5:

President Marzouki, you alluded to regional integration in your presentation as being of paramount importance to economic development. Now, following any exchanges or conversations with your counterparts west of Tunisia, in Algeria and Morocco notably, do you see room or potential for a new, revived Arab Maghreb union that would allow for the countries to capitalize on comparative advantage and cooperate for the good of the countries? Thank you.

Question 6:

Could you please say more about your reservations about the Syrian National Coalition? And could you also make a comment about what you think the next stages of the Arab Spring are?

Moncef Marzouki (translation from Arabic):

For the timeline of the constitution: [after] the new year, perhaps in February or January, we are about to set up an independent commission for elections, an independent commission for media and an independent commission for the judiciary. These three commissions are essential for free, fair elections. We hope the elections will be held before summer. The head of government has mentioned June. The president of the constituent assembly has confirmed to me that they will try to finalize this quickly. Again, we must

quickly reach these elections to be able to dedicate ourselves to economic and social work, i.e. what people are waiting for us to do.

Concerning the issue of criminalizing or normalizing [relations with Israel], we differentiate between three issues. First, we are against any type of antisemitism as we consider it hideous racism that we refuse and reject. [Second,] we support the right of the Palestinian people and their struggle for a just peace. [Third,] we support peace but not surrender; we want a just peace for this region, we want the Palestinian people to have their rights within their own independent state with 1967 borders and Jerusalem as their capital, etc. I consider these non-negotiable. But the issue of criminalizing or normalizing has no place in our opinion in the constitution.

The Tunisian constitution is a constitution drafted to allow us to debate how to organize authority. Therefore, it is patronizing to include a foreign policy issue in such text. Moreover, if we agree to this, leftists may call for criminalizing liberalism while other parties may call for criminalizing atheism and so on, leading us to an unjustifiable criminalization cycle. Therefore, in my personal view this is a developable foreign policy issue that has no connection to our fight against antisemitism or our support for Palestinian people's rights; it is meant for patronizing and has no place within the constitution. I personally think it will not be included therein.

As for the Arab Maghreb union, in my view it is a sign of despotism that this Maghreb area is the least integrated area in the world. Integration in Latin America is about 20–30 per cent; in ASEAN in the Far East it is about 40 per cent; in Europe 80 per cent; while integration in the Maghreb area is two per cent. This disintegration and fragmentation forms one of the biggest poverty factors in our Maghreb countries. Therefore, establishing a Maghreb union is a necessity imposed by history, geography and shared interests. This realization has started to come back; it is one of the positive aspects of the Arab Spring. In Tunisia we are working with our utmost speed at establishing this union, which is as mentioned a necessity by geography and history. We hope that current disputes within this union will be overcome. In the coming years we hope to compensate for all lost time.

Rached Ghannouchi (translation from Arabic):

I accept the president's answer and consider it representative of the suitable position regarding the Palestinian issue and the normalization issue.

Concerning the Syrian Coalition, I consider what is happening in Syria a true revolution rather than mere gangs. There is a revolution; tens of thousands have sacrificed their lives for freedom, indicating a people determined to grab their freedom from a regime that is no less but more authoritarian than [Zine Al Abidine] Ben Ali's and [Hosni] Mubarak's. Therefore, this people has the right to revolt. Further, all freedom-believing people of conscience in the world need to support the Syrian people in their revolution. With all our resources, we support them, to get their freedom and rid themselves of this horrible dictatorship.

Question 7:

This question is for President Marzouki. Please clarify something for the record about the source of inspiration for the Arab Spring. Iranian officials including the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei are claiming that this is inspired by the Iranian revolution of 1979. And they call it 'Islamic awakening' against Western powers. Do you believe in that? And what is the state of relations between Tunisia and Iran, given the policy of Iran supporting Bashar Assad?

Question 8:

I was very pleased to hear you, Mr Ghannouchi – and the discussion I had with the president before this meeting – but this is nothing new, this is the soul of the Tunisian for centuries: the integration of Jews in Tunisia with their Muslim brothers. They are both Arabic. I am looking forward to bringing the delegation to Tunisia and again visit the Ghriba [synagogue] at the annual [pilgrimage]. I am wishing you well.

Question 9:

My question is about justice. There have been many debates among Tunisians about how we should be 'just', some of them arguing for an immediate and unconditional justice and others arguing for a more subtle version, accommodating some pressure groups and businessmen for the country to go along as we build the politics. So my question is: where do you both stand in that? And what are the difficulties in implementing what you need to do rather than what you stand for? Thank you.

Claire Spencer:

Thank you very much. I think the notion of justice is a good way to end the discussion.

Rached Ghannouchi (translation from Arabic):

Of course the concept of justice is a very broad one. However, the minimum level of justice is that the resources of the country are shared as such a way as to satisfy the needs of the people, such that there is no one who is poor, uneducated, without healthcare, without appropriate housing... we believe society cannot without social guarantees. Ennahdha's economic program has the title of 'social democracy' or 'social economy'. There is private property, but there is also state property and a cooperative sector... we do not believe that justice can be achieved in a society that only relies on encouraging personal initiative, but that there should be social guarantees for all citizens. We believe that Scandinavian systems represent a very inspiring model for us that combine democracy and a welfare system, and in Islam, the principle of *zakat* makes it the right of the poor person to some of the personal wealth of the rich. We believe in a mutually supportive society, not one where wealth is monopolized by a minority.

As for transitional justice, not the principles of socio-economic justice: transitional justice is how we deal with a legacy of past grievances. Do we deal with them by revenge? As the president mentioned, the Tunisian revolution is a peaceful revolution. Thus we have only 10 or 15 old officials in prison. As a peaceful revolution, there is no gallows or capital punishment. But this translates into neither the satisfaction of victims of grievances nor their cleansing. We have set up a ministry for transitional justice and human rights. It has carried out regular work. For it to be institutional, treating the past through institutions and a fair judiciary, there is now a transitional justice draft that has been proposed to the constituent assembly. In other words, there are no revenge tendencies; there must be accountability, disclosure of the past; a victim must be offered the opportunity to meet their abuser, the latter must be given the opportunity to apologize and seek forgiveness. The aim therefore is ultimately reconciliation, not revenge. Ultimately, the state oppression victims can be compensated, their damages recompensed if possible. But there are things that can be compensated. This is my view of transitional justice.

Moncef Marzouki (translation from Arabic):

The Tunisian revolution has no relationship with the Iranian revolution. This revolution essentially started with development and democracy mottos. Further, it aims to build a civil, not religious, state. This is proven by the fact that even our brothers in Ennahdha acknowledge that the project is to build a civil democratic state rather than a religious one. There is, therefore, a fundamental difference between the two revolutions. Further, our revolution is peaceful and not based on violence. As Sheikh [Ghannouchi] said, we set up no guillotines. Thus it is a totally different, totally unrelated revolution.

Concerning our position towards Iran, I talked to President [Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad at the Makkah Summit. I have also talked to Iranian delegates. Our position is clear. First, we support the right of states to possess civil nuclear knowledge; but we are a thousand times against transforming this into nuclear bomb manufacturing. Our aim for this entire Middle East region to be free of nuclear weapons. How can we then approve or recognize transforming knowledge-seeking into nuclear bomb manufacturing? In Tunisia we are totally against this.

Further, there is a central area of disagreement concerning Iran's relation with Syria. We support the Syrian people. We support the Syrian revolution. We want Bashar Assad to leave. We have said that he should leave even in the transitional justice phase; let him not stay if this would stop the bloodbath. What is constant, however, is that we have told our friends in Iran that their support to this tyrant endangers their interest and reputation throughout the Arab world; if they have interests in Syria, let them remember that they also have interests in the Arab world while the Arab nation altogether wants the end of this bloodthirsty tyrant. Iranians are very wrong to continue their support to him. First, this regime will fall and they will be, god forbid, responsible for the continuation of the bloodbath, a matter that will be recorded against them. I hope the Iranian leaders review their position concerning this absurd, unethical support to a dictator that will fall. He is in the full list of Arab dictators that must fall; nor will he evade his end, as all Arab dictators will be removed for civil democratic states. I hope that Tunisia will be the first and not be the last. Peace and God's mercy be upon you.

Claire Spencer:

Thank you very much. This brings this discussion to a close, and I won't even attempt to pull some of the ideas together of what promises to be a very rich, above all among Tunisians themselves. And I've always said in relation to

what's happened in Tunisia over the past year, if it ever falls silent again, as the silence which reigned in the public sphere in Tunisia during the era of Ben Ali, we should be worried. So perhaps the noisier the better. Let's hope that some of the consensus and conclusions you're striving to reach will be met in the near future.