



Transcript

Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution: A Domino Effect across the Maghreb?

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Jane Kinninmont:

Hello and good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. It's great to see so many of you joining us today for this discussion on Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution and the domino effect across the Maghreb. Obviously, we've seen some domino effect already begin to happen.

This event will be an opportunity for us to take stock of how Tunisia has developed since the fall of Ben Ali. Obviously, the media spotlight has been moving on very quickly to other parts of the Arab world and this will be a good chance for us to focus on how Tunisia's developing, where it might go next, how might it evolve as perhaps a model for a well-functioning democracy in the region.

I will briefly introduce myself. I'm new here. My name's Jane Kinninmont. I've just joined Chatham House or strictly speaking, I start next week as the senior research fellow on the Middle East and North Africa programme so I look forward to meeting many of you.

Without further ado we can kick off with the panel session. Our first speaker, Francis Ghilès, is the senior research fellow at the Barcelona Centre for International Affairs but is kindly here in London today to join us and give us his thoughts on Tunisia and what it means for the rest of the region.

Francis Ghilès:

Thank you for inviting me. On the day after Ben Ali left Tunisia I had an article published in El Pais in Spain and I told a joke going around Tunis saying the plane which took Zine El Abidine Ben Ali off to Saudi Arabia stopped in Sharm-el-Sheik to take another customer. Now, I wasn't being prophetic but I thought the street in Tunis somehow was more politically savvy than we'd quite realised. All this is to say that in terms of domino theories, I'm not quite sure I'm prepared to predict anything.

I think that there are two or three points about what happened in Tunisia and Egypt and what's happening elsewhere. One; if we read this crisis through the lenses of the Iranian revolution in 1979 we will get it completely wrong. The world has moved on. It's a generation ago.

One; a lot of these people, in my experience in North Africa – but, I gather, in the Middle East as well – are far more individuals than they were 30 years ago. They may not be as individualistic as we are in the West. Nonetheless, the families are smaller, they think of their interests, what they like, what they

want to do. They're conscious of the lack of work and the fact that the future holds nothing for them. That is a major difference.

The second major difference is that political Islam no longer holds much attraction. Political Islam was defeated, in however murky the circumstances, in Algeria in the 1990s. Everybody in North Africa, and indeed the Middle East, knows what Iran is like but also everybody knows what Saudi Arabia's like and nobody desires to live in a country like Saudi Arabia.

Another point is that even in the depths of Algeria and Morocco, people refer to Turkey. This is forgotten. Turkey absolutely fascinates everybody of every age and the fact that Turkey is evolving in the way it is, where you can have moderate fundamentalists, or whatever you want to call the AKP party, democracy, economic growth, an army which is strong but which can somehow be held in check. This really fascinates people.

So I think there are a number of ingredients and, of course, there are other external ingredients. I think the major one is that the speech the American President made in Cairo over a year ago; the conclusion which was drawn from that was that the war on terror had come to an end. That doesn't mean to say we were not fighting terrorists but the war on terror had come to an end. We were into another agenda.

Now, obviously, in all these revolts there are common points; corruption, lack of jobs for younger people. There is the question of dignity. In Tunisia, where I went at the end of November and where I've just been for a week, the regime was so extraordinarily repressive in a petty, very nasty way.

To give you an example, if you opened a nice beauty salon in Tunis and it worked well, within a month or two somebody would come and see you and say, you need a bit of protection money. And if you said no two or three times, you suddenly found your sister had been raped at the street corner and you didn't know why and then after a few months it turned out that it was Madame's family keen on getting a percentage. It got to that level; everything.

Companies were pinched. The President's family were Mafiosi with the Italian Mafia. The son-in-law of Madame Ben-Ali was stealing yachts in the port of Ajaccio, the yacht of the head of the bank Banque Lazard, with the Italian Mafia. And the French do nothing. Our Minister of Foreign Affairs of France, of course, is holidaying in the middle of riots on private jets, buying property in Tunisia.

So this family were Mafiosi and in a broader sense, these countries in North Africa share something. There is an estimated \$150 billion of private savings from North Africa offshore, maybe 30 or 40 more, maybe 20 less. Who knows? The same amount as for Egypt. Now, the people who are putting their money abroad are clearly not the poorer people, they're the ruling classes. So the ruling classes don't believe in the future of their own country. Why should the younger ones believe in it, particularly when you consider that 50 percent of the population's under 30?

So if the people who rule these countries – all of them, with no exception – do not believe in the future of their country, I think we have a major problem and we've had this problem for a number of years. But it gets worse because North Africa is different from the Middle East in terms of the population bulge.

We have in North Africa a bulge in the next 15 years of people who are 20, 30 but the birth rate has collapsed in North Africa because of the influence of the North Africans who live in France and proximity with Europe so that in a Tunisian family you have 2.5 children today. So we have a bulge for ten, 15 years. This is a major problem.

In Egypt the birth rate has not gone down in the Middle East because the workers of Egypt go to the Gulf and to Saudi Arabia. In North Africa the influence is French, Belgian, European. So that is a difference.

The other difference between North Africa and Europe is that the links between the North Africans and the Europeans – of course, it goes through the French Maghreb axis but it's now spreading to Belgium, to Holland, everywhere – is that you have millions of people who are of North African origin who have French, Belgian passports.

Let us not forget that in France the young men of North African origin, half of them are married to or live with girls of European origin so the integration's already happening. That is a major difference with the Middle East. I'm not saying the Middle East is more or less important but it is a major difference.

Now, when we look at domino theories, I don't like domino theories because apart from this joke about Mr Mubarak, now we have Bahrain. I don't know who's going to blow up next. I notice that in Benghazi, which has been under curfew for six weeks, the trouble comes from supposedly fundamentalists. In fact, it comes from people who want their Berber identity who live in the mountains near Benghazi in the Jabal Akhdar and a few – about 12 or 13 years ago; my memory doesn't serve me perfectly well – they, Gadaffi,

wanted to stop this rebellion. But he didn't trust his own air force so he asked Algerian pilots to come and fly Libyan planes and bomb these people. So could something happen in Benghazi? I don't know, I don't know Libya well.

If I look at Algeria and Morocco, clearly Algeria is in a very brittle state. There have been revolts over an increase in prices of cooking oil and bread a few weeks ago. We know that Algeria has a diminished middle class because of everything that's happened in 15 years. We know Algeria's lost 600,000 people in the 90s because of the civil war.

We know also that in Algeria a lot of people don't want violence, even amongst the young ones. A lot of people are aware that if they descend into violence, it could be very violent but there are no social intermediaries because the rulers have actually effectively neutered all the relays in society. So what will happen?

Of course, Algeria's not Tunisia. Why? Because first, it's a big country. What goes on in the west doesn't go on in the east. There are all kinds of differences. There is money to buy out the population. There's \$150 billion in the kitty. But I think people are not just rebelling for reasons of bread. They're rebelling for dignity. They're rebelling because they want to be respected; they are sick and tired of being despised and being treated like nothing.

And this is interesting, I think, because it shows, at the end of the day, you listen to the Tunisians or the Egyptians speaking to the television cameras and what they want is exactly what the West wants. They want dignity, respect.

And finally, we've lived for years under this idea of clash of civilisations, of course Arab, Islam can't be like the west. But this reminds me of a Tunisian Prime Minister who wrote the first constitution in the Arab world in 1861, General Heredine. He was comparing notes with a western ambassador in 1861 and the ambassador said, it's very strange but the pontifical states, the states of the pope, are more behind. Tunisia around Tunis is more developed than the papal states. And Heredine said, well, no doubt the explanation is Islam, isn't it?

Well, the explanation is always Islam. No, it's not Islam and maybe today these people have entered modernity. They've shown that whatever the differences, they want the same things in the west and I think we'd better remember, even when we look at North Africa, that British and French imperialism actually thwarted the development of political parties, of

constitutions in the 1920s, 30s, 40s and now, after Arab nationalism, fundamentalism, we are coming full circle.

As I said, in Algeria, we don't know how this will play out. Morocco looks and probably is more stable but we have the same social phenomenon of unemployment, corruption, growing pressure on the media in the last two or three years. Torture which seemed to have vanished six or seven years ago is reappearing. This is well-documented in any number of reports.

And then we had an event in early November which was hardly covered here in the British press or in the French press. The capital city of the Western Sahara erupted in riots. Now, you can imagine that El Aaiún is well covered by security. They were totally taken unaware.

And so this happened. Everybody was left standing. I haven't followed the story since and exactly what did happen but I think all kinds of things can happen and we just don't know. Why do we not know, why does the media appear not to know, why do the politicians appear not to know?

I'll speak of France more than of Britain in this case. In France in the last 20 years the Middle Eastern studies at universities have collapsed. Compared to 20, 30 years ago in France the study of the Middle East has collapsed. There is no money, no interest and today we are left with very few instruments.

How many journalists go to North Africa today from France and don't speak a word of Arabic, they don't speak a word of Berber but, of course, they pontificate about Berbers in Algeria and life goes on. So then we have the journalists. I'm 66 and the only thing I can notice is that a whole generation of French, British, American journalists, some who started their career during the Algerian war of liberation, which was a very good school for journalists if ever there was one, and then followed after that and who knew these countries in depth – and of course, particularly Algeria in the last ten, 15 years because of terrorism – people didn't have access, it was too dangerous.

So the journalists who go out today, whatever their quality, just do not have the in-depth knowledge. They don't know the countryside. When you speak of Kasserine or Sidi Bouzid where the trouble started in Tunisia; I've been at least four, five times, I know how the farmers live in Kasserine. A lot of people go and have no idea that inland Tunisia is so poor. They look at Hamamet and Tunis but Tunisia's not Hamamet and Tunis. It is Kasserine, it is Sidi Bouzid, it is Gafsar.

Last year for one month the town of Gafsar and the phosphate mines in Redeyef nearby rose in rebellion with the women leading the revolt. There was not one word that I can make out in any leading British or French or Italian or Spanish newspaper. This went on for a month or six weeks. The repression was terrible; not one word that I can detect.

So it's one hour's flight from where we live but we don't know. So we have a number of problems. Then we have the question of the discourse following 11 September, the clash of civilisations; they're different from us, we're content with dictators because if we let go of these, God knows what we're going to get.

Well, I don't think it's going to be so simple and we are living on a discourse which I think has gone – which maybe was right ten years ago; I don't know, but it isn't today.

I don't think democracy will necessarily make things easier. First we have to understand what democracy is. In Tunisia you say, elections in six months. In six months' time, you can't invent political parties, you can't invent class interests, you've got to structure it. So I would say, for the west, first stop moralising and preaching because, particularly in view of our attitude of the governments towards the Palestinians in the last 20 years, I think no Arab believes a single word a western leader says. So the best thing is to say nothing or at least be modest.

Secondly, to monitor progress, if you will. In Tunisia, if they've cleaned up the judiciary and the police, which they are already doing, if they are looking for the ill-gotten goods of Mr Ben-Ali in a very legal way, which is what they're doing, if they do a certain number of things which show that they are progressing towards better government, that's fine. Don't insist on elections in six or nine months time because that's not the point. Just let's monitor it and not lecture.

Secondly, in the case of Algeria, comments on Algeria pose a problem because if you look at the demonstrations in Algiers – and maybe I'll finish on this because it's very interesting. Last Saturday there were demonstrations which are due to repeat themselves every Saturday and one of the leaders of it is Saad Saadi, who is leader of one of the two Berber parties, the RCD. But Saad Saadi is a joint venture between the French security service and the Algerian security service so if you wonder why the Algerians aren't following him, they know. But this guy's paraded on French television day in, day out. It

goes on and on and on and you just wonder, first, who's manipulating who, or whether we aren't completely idiotic.

And then you get Ali Bin Hajj, the former leader of the Front Islamique du Salut, who gets trotted out at this demonstration. The demonstrators literally kicked him out of the demonstration but why has he been brought in? Who's playing what game? Is it just to frighten the west; ooh, the fundamentalists, the fundamentalists? Well, in Algeria it won't be the fundamentalists. I don't know who it'll be but it won't be the fundamentalists because the Algerians have learnt in the 90s that the fundamentalists are not the answer to their problems.

So the world is changing. The world is new and, as I say, the question of domino theories; it sounds great. We have punditry, we have people like Daniel Pipes, who knows nothing about the Middle East or North Africa but who's pontificating on French television about Algeria. So you have to wonder what the hell is France... are they incompetent, are they being manipulated? I suspect it's just incompetence and stupidity but it's dangerous because there are plenty of people who do have a vague idea of what's going on in Algeria, or if they don't have an idea of what's going on in detail, they can at least avoid saying silly things.

We know the President of Algeria – whatever good he might have done in the past – is over 70 and in frail health. We know the head of security's over 70. He's been there for 21 years. What do the middle ranks of the army believe? We don't know. What do ordinary Algerians believe beyond the revolt? How many people know? Do they know themselves?

All this is a question of psychology. Once the Tunisians had broken their fear of the police, that was the end of the story. In Tunisia, there is an extraordinary film which was shown on the French programme. They got a team into Sidi Bouzid, where the trouble started on 17 December, two days before the fall of Ben-Ali. Who was leading the demonstrations? In front of the police with rifles, a young woman of 22 or 23 who had a law degree, absolutely fearless. And I suspect that it's people like that one should frankly bring to Chatham House or to some places in Paris or elsewhere, listen to what she has to say because these are the future generation. Whether they build democracy or not, who falls or doesn't fall or whatever, I don't know.

But I would finish on this note, particularly speaking at Chatham House. It's about time, when we talk about the Middle East and North Africa... I go to conferences and I listen. I think, I'm 66 and everybody's over 50 in the room.

Half the population's under 30. We never see anybody under 30 and we see very few women.

In Tunisia, women have had their equal rights since 1957. In Algeria, if Algeria did not fall into the hands of the fundamentalists in the 90s, it wasn't just because of the dirty war of the security forces. It was because the women of Algeria collectively and unconsciously said, we do not want Sharia. They went to work as lawyers, doctors, nurses, civil servants, dressed in European clothes, every day for years with the risk of being knifed at the bottom of the stairs in the block of flats where they lived. They were fearless.

Do we ever see these women in meetings in the west? No, they don't exist. So I think it's about time we looked at the reality of these countries and by so doing we might also further our interest, as Europeans, as British, as French, far more than by pontificating about elections and moralising because it was great to moralise in the 19th Century. Britain and France dominated the world so you can dress up what you do in a great moral tale, be it Christianity or whatever you want.

Today we no longer have that power, we no longer have that influence and if we look at how the Brazilians, the south-east Asians, the Chinese are conducting their foreign policy: interests. Why do we not conduct our foreign policy according to our interests? Maybe then we will understand particularly North Africa much better than many of us do today.

Jane Kinninmont:

There's a lot of food for thought there. We will be taking questions later on, once we've heard from the whole panel. Next I'd like to introduce Jon Marks, who many of you will know. He's the chairman of Cross-Border Information Limited and also an associate fellow here at Chatham House.

Jon Marks:

Thanks very much. On the collapse of study of the Maghreb, it is true, there was a long period; people who did doctorates on things like Algeria of my generation; there were remarkably few of us. But I would say, last year Michael Willis at Oxford got together a dozen PhD students working on doctorates just on Morocco in the UK and they had a competition on who had good enough research to participate. It was an absolutely fantastic, exhilarating day. There were people from all over the country. There were

remarkably few Brits. I think Claire Spencer and I were there just to look on as wizened, old artefacts of the Thatcher years when these things collapsed. But actually, just to say, Francis, there is some vim and vigour coming back into North African studies and interestingly, that's happening in the Anglo-Saxon world, which I think is a good thing.

Now, I know we don't have very much time to talk. We were given seven to ten minutes. So I thought I'd just talk about three subjects specifically on Tunisia.

And the first of the three subjects I thought I'd talk on is de-Ben-Ali-isation, which says something, in part, to do with the political culture of Tunisia and why I think one can be relatively optimistic. It was very good to hear Francis mentioning Heredine Pasha because we need to read our history and we need to look back to those years of constitution, of the end of the Ottoman empire and the early nationalist movements – indeed, all the way through Tunisian history where the idea of ad-Dastur, the constitution, has always been a defining factor in Bourguiba's parties before that and after.

And I think that's one of the really positive points that you could say about Tunisia; that there is a political culture that both has a sense of constitution and also a sense of administration. It's quite strange to see, after the demonstrations and whatever, if you go up to the Government offices at the top of the Medina in Tunis, and the graffiti grafittied over the walls and inside; you know, there are still those very tall cupboards left by the Ottomans and that really strong sense of Ottoman administration that you get only in Tunis, really, up by the Prime Minister's office and the Mufti's office and the Finance Minister's office.

The second point I'd make is that Tunisian political culture has always been rooted in a range of political and social forces. There's the interesting social contrasts, the fact that when Ben-Ali married his second wife, Leila, the now infamous Leila Trabelsi – as in where are you at the moment, Leila? – this really did not chime well with the big, bourgeois families of Tunis, as the Trabelsis came in and tried to take over the place.

But there's much more than that. There are a large number of groups and I'd point at just one, which would be the very long history of labour organisation in Tunisia, the really important role that the UGTT played right the way through the nationalist movement, through the Bourguiba period.

And indeed when those demonstrations happened, we saw the two phases of the Jasmine Revolution, the first the impoverished – as you made the point – of the marginalised areas – we saw Sidi Bouzid, obviously, Kasserine – the more marginalised populations coming out. But very soon in Tunis you actually also saw the guys with the big moustaches and heavy leather jackets that were out from the union organisations and then you saw the other part of Tunisia, whose social and economic indicators have been actually so much more impressive than many other places in the Arab world and where there were social forces at play that had just been cowed and tired by the Ben-Ali years that Francis was talking about before. So I think there is a stronger than in many places political culture in Tunisia and political groups that can come into play.

And the third point, coming on from that, is that it is a softer political culture. People always talked about *joie de vivre* in Tunisia and I think that you don't have in Tunisian history that level of the political violence that Francis was talking about in Algeria, that so marked Algerian politics. I can completely agree with that.

That indeed chimes with the way that people are responding and again, I totally agree with your point on Turkey and with the discourse of the Islamist party, very much identifying – in fact, totally strongly in every statement a senior member makes – identifying with the AKP party in Turkey. And again, I totally agree with your point about Turkey because if there is going to be a model, here is the place that finally managed to accommodate both Europe and a form of Islamist party within a constitutional framework that's slowly evolving its way out of a system that was essentially Praetorian but where the military still has a role. And those echoes are extremely familiar.

And I think that these factors are reflected in some of the efforts, sometimes stuttering, sometimes really quite powerful, that have happened as the Jasmine Revolution's unfolded and indeed, it's quite stunning to think that Tunisia is now falling off the news agenda only after a revolution that was actually launched when the unfortunate Mr Bouazizi immolated himself on 17 December.

I was looking at some economic numbers and suddenly realised that we're not actually out of the quarter in which the crisis actually began. It's quite a stunning thought. But there is a process in play. I agree with Francis that there is a real problem that we're seeing in Tunisia and in Egypt, where the demand for political change and reform which, in these highly personalised

regimes, has to revolve around a circulation of elites which you could argue would happen through a party system if parties could be created. Or, in fact, in Tunisia, parties exist but they need extraordinary reanimation and then what's going to happen with the ruling party, the RCD?

And also, of course, the personality; we still live in a culture and one of the reasons I was talking about the de-Ben-Ali-isation where the Zaim, the political big man, still fills many people's heads. The Jasmine Revolution, the events in Tahrir Square, what people are thinking about in Algiers, in Bahrain and, dare one say it, in many other places; Libya, perhaps Saudi Arabia; people are thinking about ridding themselves of the idea of the Zaim and that is a major issue.

If you look at Ben-Ali and the nature of his rule, it's really going to be deconstructing that that's important. Ben-Ali's rule, even more than Bourguiba, a man that he very much understood, I think, but then got haunted by the legacy of.

I remember hearing Ben-Ali speak in the autumn of 1987, when he returned to Tunisia as Interior Minister and I actually asked him at the time what he thought about Bourguiba and how he saw the way Bourguiba ruled. And he saw the fact that Bourguiba had been able to actually spread his tentacles all over the country, had been to every village two or three times. This is a classic sort of Ben-Ali reply.

And Ben-Ali took that much further and I think you can argue, as has been argued before – unfortunately, it's not originally my argument – that in fact, the state that Ben-Ali created and that eventually got so corrupt was almost the last hurrah in the Mediterranean of Mussolini's corporatist state, if you looked at the way women's groups were subsumed into the party structures, employers' federations subsumed into the party structures, the labour unions subsumed into the party structures.

The RCD had a membership of over two million people. If you wanted to get on in business – it was like living in a rotten borough, like I live in in the UK, in the 19th Century. If you didn't join the Masons, you had a problem doing business and the RCD was functioning like that. And actually undoing that sort of structure is going to be extremely hard.

But I do believe it's possible provided a degree of political stability can be held together and the one area I would say in the de-Ben-Ali-isation process that we're going to have to look at, depending or not whether the former President

lives or dies because the reports at the moment would suggest he's very ill but looking through the news flow this morning with an old newspaper's nose, I'm not at all sure how to look at that – was very difficult.

Restitution; I would say, given the kleptocratic nature of Ben-Ali family rule, restitution of funds is available as a lynchpin for a moral clean-up of the state and to get funds back into the state coffers. I've got two observations on this. One is that I think the international community, in the case of Tunisia and now of Egypt, has moved unusually quickly.

The second observation is that this is much to be welcomed. The fact is that there have to be disincentives for autocratic, kleptocratic rulers shifting huge amounts of funds out of the country. My one observation would be that this will create problems with people looking to leave from having been an authoritarian president.

In the old days there was a model that large amounts of money would shift outside the country – say, to Switzerland – you retired to the south of France and the casino at Monaco did very well. Now there's the possibility that that won't happen, your assets will be frozen and you'll return to the country in handcuffs.

Two observations on this, which I think is important and we can follow up. One is, it does strike me that looking at the lists of assets frozen in both Egypt and Tunisia, it looks rather like the lists have been drawn up by a Google search. Possibly they sent the interns down onto the computer to draw up the list and that probably shows the actual weakness of controls over the things that were going on.

The other point is that we have to beware, again, coming to the internet, which has been so powerful in allowing people to organise, we have to be very careful in the way we use it. The rumour that Leila Ben-Ali had spirited a tonne-and-a-half of gold out of the country just as her husband was leaving power gained extreme traction. I was in Paris a day or so after those reports came out and French officials were swearing blind that their intelligence services had an inside track on the issue.

We now know that in fact, what Mustapha Kamel Nabli, the new central bank governor and his audit of the gold – actually, physically going and having a look at it – has shown is in fact that all the gold that was reported in 2010 is there and there is 1.5 tonnes of gold outside the country but in fact, that's held for the Central Bank of Tunisia in the vaults of the Bank of England.

Now, that could itself launch a conspiracy theory so I look forward to logging on tomorrow. Just don't click 'Like' on my Facebook site for that one.

I was also going to talk about the economy but I don't have enough time so let's leave that for questions.

Jane Kinnemont:

Our third speaker is Dr Ramla Jarrar, who is from Tunisia, currently living in London, working as a partner at Ohal, part of WPP. She's also speaking today on behalf of Karama, a Tunisian NGO advocating democracy and development in Tunisia.

Ramla Jarrar:

Thank you. Hello, everybody. As has been said, I'm Tunisian and because the change started in Tunisia I am going to make a change from the panel. I'm going to stand up and make my speech and I will also read from a paper.

Thank you very much for inviting me today. I'm very delighted to be amongst you and to be allowed to give a testimonial from a Tunisian woman who was born, educated and raised in Tunisia. Only one month ago when Tunisians were asked about their identity, they wouldn't talk about their present. They would rather talk about their past, their history, the glories of Carthage, the Ottoman Empire and all the civilisations that were in Tunisia.

Unfortunately, we were not able to talk about our present because one can imagine that after 23 years of dark dictatorship, one's pride tends to fade and even disappear because we did not really have a present and we were not even looking forward to a bright future.

Never have the words of our Tunisian poet sounded as forceful as on 14 January when all the people of Tunisia went onto the streets and shouted loudly with one forceful and fearless voice, if one day a nation craves for living then Fate will answer the call, the darkness will then fade and the chains will break and fall.

Only one month later the same words resonated even louder and further to reach millions of people gathering for the same cause in the same spontaneous and leaderless movement in Tahrir Square in Egypt. From that historical moment, Tunisian identity will, is and will always resonate and reverberate with greatness and pride.

Today Tunisians can smell the scent of jasmine, enjoy the sun rays after they have shown to the whole world once again that we have made history and once again that we are a leader in the region. Let me remind you that Tunisia was the first Arab, Muslim country that dared abolish polygamy, slavery and also give the right to vote to women and yet again, Tunisia is the first Arab country that dared to brave a dictatorship, a regime that lasted for 23 years and that has been described as being one of the worst dictatorships in recent history.

After such a huge achievement comes the very heavy task of making a success of the revolution and our dearest hope is to see a real democracy in Tunisia, a thriving economy and a prosperous nation.

Today and more than ever, Tunisia needs everybody. It needs the support of everybody. It needs Tunisians, whether they are inside the country or abroad. As Tunisians living in the UK, our sense of duty took the form of the creation of this NGO that we called Karama and believe me, it was very hard in the beginning to find a word that captures the essence and the very nature of our revolution.

We couldn't agree more when we came up with the word Karama. Karama stands for dignity in Arabic and I think that really summarises the situation now in Tunisia. In fact, Tunisians in their aspiration for freedom, their plea for justice and their call against corruption, were only speaking for one thing and they were only expressing one single thing. It is simply their dignity.

Karama, in two words, is an advocacy for democracy and for continuous development in Tunisia. It is a group of Tunisians who have met really spontaneously in front of the Tunisian Embassy in London. One thing united them at that moment, on 14 January. What united them on that day was their love for their country and after the fall of the dictator on 14 January – which I think for us was the real Independence Day – after that date we've met on a daily basis in order to discuss what are the best and most efficient ways to help our country, hence the creation and birth of Karama.

Our aim is to avoid any misuse of the revolution and to emphasise its leaderless and spontaneous and also its non-religious nature. Our objective is also to support the civil society and the Government in Tunisia in their transition to a smooth democracy. For this we would like to work closely with the British Government in order to get your support, in order to get your help, in order to advise and help our country reach the democracy that we are longing for.

And we have been very lucky so far to be able to reach some of the UK officials and we are very grateful for that. We thank them very much for having responded to our call.

Last but not least, we aim at contributing to the economic development and to promote the opportunities that arise today in Tunisia and I'm very happy today to see that the British Government is really keen this time to be the first to go to the country, to visit the country after the revolution and to say that the British Government is willing to help Tunisia, because in the past, our economic relationships were more with France rather than with the UK. I'm really hopeful that we will see more and more foreign investment from the UK come into our country.

This is one of the things that we would like to realize with this association. Indeed, we want to encourage British people to know our country, to promote the opportunities that are now in Tunisia and I think that with all the reforms that the Government is set to make in Tunisia today, Tunisia will be a very good opportunity for investment and will definitely be a country that will be different from the neighbouring countries.

As Mr William Hague said recently during his visit to Tunisia – and let me tell you that this is the first visit of a British Foreign Minister to Tunisia in 23 years – Mr Hague said, we are witnessing a moment of opportunity here in Tunisia, an opportunity which should be seized rather than feared. Today, when Tunisians look at their present, they think ambition, they think solidarity and they think hope.

When they think about their future, they see a end that is set to succeed, a nation that is set to impress the west. Today when we are asked about our identity, we are proud to talk about our glorious past, our challenging present and our bright future.

So with these words, ladies and gentlemen, I will end my speech today. On behalf of Karama and all the Tunisian people, I would like to thank you very much from the bottom of my heart for this opportunity to talk about the Tunisian people and about my beloved country.

Before finishing, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to ask you please to observe a minute of silence for the martyrs of our revolution. Thank you very much.