

Summary of the discussions

What are the prospects for North Africa?

Wednesday, 17 February 2016, 5pm to 7pm

Hotel Bern, Zeughausgasse 9, 3011 Bern

With:

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Introduction by **Manuel BESSLER**, SDC Assistant Director General, Federal Council Delegate for Swiss Humanitarian Aid

Moderation by **Etienne DUVAL**, RTS – Radio Télévision Suisse

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This summary reflects the discussions during the event on 17th February. It does not reflect the opinion/position of the FDFA/SDC, nor are the statements attributable to individuals participating in the discussion.

Different trajectories

During its discussion of why the processes in the North African countries were so different, the panel came up with the following reasons:

- Different preconditions concerning the role and anchorage of civil society organisations (CSOs), and the role of the political elite;
- Involvement and impact of foreign actors;
- History before 2011; revolutions are always long historical processes and not a single event;
- The level of preexisting civil unrest, discontent and opposition;
- Inspiration/provocation by neighbouring countries in North Africa.

Focus on Tunisia and Egypt

- Demonstrations and civil unrest had been prevalent in **Tunisia** from the early 90s. In 2008 a successful national dialogue based on a spirit of compromise and consensus had created a link between the emerging political elite, civil society and the population. Their common goals were a constitution as well as parliamentary and presidential elections.
- The goals were achieved and the political transition was implemented. However, **Tunisia** remained in a fragile situation. Economic and social transitions were incomplete, and the weak economy and high (youth) unemployment rate jeopardised the political transition.
- The transition in **Tunisia** was threatened by economic and social challenges, the migration problem, and the situation in Libya, where change induced by an external intervention left behind a crumbling state.

- Compared to the Tunisian Ennahda, the **Egyptian** Muslim Brotherhood and the Freedom and Justice Party were not pragmatic, realistic or inclusive. They did not align with other parties during the transition process, but strived to rule Egypt alone (or with the army). The different ways in which the Islamists performed in Egypt and Tunisia affected the process following their takeover, with the army playing a vital role as political actor in Egypt.
- In **Egypt**, democratic procedures seemed to be fulfilled (elected president and parliament, constitution) but were not accompanied by democratic values: Mursi and Sisi relied on the exclusion of the opposition, the oppression of others, and disregard of freedom rights. No attention was paid to the demands of the revolution (dignity, freedom, social justice), and the factors that triggered it remained unresolved. The social movements were in a process of learning from mistakes of the past years and had to rethink their position on equal rights for all.

Comparison to the Balkans

- In the **Balkans**, the transition started with a fully-fledged war in a context characterised by non-legitimised elites, which turned to nationalism as alternative to legitimacy and a non-existing civil society or middle class that could counterweigh the top-down process. Different models developed thereafter but with the incentive of joining the EU as common denominator.

External actors

- In **Tunisia** a structured and lively civil society and elite existed. The Quartet included four independent organisations from the old and new power structures and with historic legitimacy. These elites accompanied the transition as political actors aiming to establish a democratic regime and not grabbing power and government.
- Regarding **Egypt** several Gulf countries opposed the revolution, fearing a transfer of the Islamic model and movement of the Muslim Brotherhood / Ennahda to their monarchies.
- Qatar supported the Muslim Brotherhood in Tunisia and Egypt. The rich Arab state has historically had an influence. However, the opaque money flow to North Africa has a negative impact.
- New elites and ruling classes can be the product of foreign interventions, i.e. in Kosovo.
- In the **Balkans** the transition started with wars and ended with international interventions by the US and NATO. External actors often imposed political arrangements and the drafting of constitutions without much legitimacy. In a second phase, the EU statebuilding and accession process produced different results in the Balkan countries.

Future

- **Tunisia** needs to share its experiences and achievements, such as the functioning of institutions and parliament, freedom rights, civil constitution and the division of power. Worldwide terrorism nevertheless threatens these achievements. Tunisia relies on international support through investment and tourism, and on the continuing socio-economic revolution.
- In **Egypt** the democratic process has been sacrificed for stability and support of the old regime/structures. Civil resistance is still coming from new actors, such as the youth and syndicates. Belief in change still exists.
- A stable democratic regime requires a number of conditions. While the outlook for **Tunisia** is optimistic, **Egypt** looks rather different in the short-term while in **Libya** a tribal solution may arise.
- Context matters and changes in the context, such as European interests or the migration crisis, will influence the future of the North African countries – just as the prospect of joining the EU influenced the Balkan states.
- Switzerland can support North Africa through bilateral political and economic relations and by sharing political experience and Switzerland's model of democracy, as well as by speaking out against violations of democratic values and human rights in the region.