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TUNISIA: DO NOT TAKE IT FOR GRANTED

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Tunisia is one of the key partners for Italian and European politics in the southern Mediterranean. At least, it should be so. The perception, on the other hand, is that most European partners have forgotten Tunisia. The reason is simple: the country had a relatively peaceful “revolution” if compared with other North African countries and five years after taking its path towards democracy this seems to be successfully launched. Unlike Libya or Syria, Tunisia is at peace. Where there is peace, there is no need to plan for long-term policies.

In fact, this assumption is the exact negation of what a country like Italy should do to support democratic transitions in the Mediterranean. The underlying problem is the lack of understanding of the real risk that Tunisia runs. On the one hand, it has definitely made historic progress from the viewpoint of political and institutional transition. However, on the other, it continues to be affected by serious socio-economic problems and by a lack of political legitimacy for its representatives. These two factors are closely linked: the new governments have not yet been able to propose

concrete solutions to overcome regional disparities. Therefore, the population perceives them as an expression of the old system, albeit with a different face. It is exactly in this context that the current most serious threat to Tunisia arises: widespread radicalization. Confronted with a generalized political, generational and regional marginalization, many young people react by embracing the message and strategy of the Salafi jihadist groups, threatening to wreck democratic transition dreams. Thus, even a security problem emerges, since the process of radicalization has so far led to dozens of attacks in Tunisia and has the potential to impact on Europe and Italy itself as well.

Tunisia is a fragile democracy towards which Italy has duties to fulfill and opportunities to seize, if it chooses. Italy is the country’s second trade partner, with a value of about \$5.5 billion a year. More than 15% of all foreign investments in Tunisia are from Italy. To economic relations is added a historical link, which has its roots in the presence of thousands of Italians in Tunisia since the nineteenth century and before (in 1926, when Tunisia was already a French protectorate,

almost 90,000 Italians lived there, versus 70,000 French). This relationship also applies in reverse: today the Tunisian community in Italy is the second Tunisian community abroad, after the one in France. This explains why, in the Tunisian parliamentary system, three MPs are elected from Italy, within the constituencies reserved for residents abroad. Not to mention the geographical proximity and the presence of thousands of Italians in Tunisia every year for tourism. All these data should explain how important Tunisia is for Italy.

Yet Tunis pays the price of lying between the two “giants” of Italian interests in North Africa: Algeria and Libya. The first is an increasingly important ally as a hydrocarbon exporter and as an effective partner in counterterrorism. The second embodies the true dilemma of Italian foreign policy. In this context, Tunisia is often perceived as a minor partner. Even after the so-called Arab Spring, when interest towards Tunisia had risen (also because of the huge migration flows from Tunisia to Italy between 2011 and 2012), the small North African country has returned to playing a minor role in Italy’s Mediterranean agenda. Paradoxically, the fact that Tunisia has launched the first phase of its democratization process has led to lower commitment from European countries. Mistakenly, we tend to think that Tunisia has achieved its objectives and that it no longer needs the degree of support currently required by countries such as Libya or Egypt, for example. This misjudgment could cause us to lose a historic opportunity to revitalize North Africa, starting from strengthening the only country that is on its way and can lead the way for others. The risk is that, unless we promptly intervene, the wave of radicalization and terrorism that is affecting North Africa can overwhelm even the fragile Tunisian democracy.

The hoped-for Italian (and EU) commitment should

follow a dual track. On the one hand, we have to fight the effects of radicalization. This means a greater commitment to military cooperation. France, Germany, the US and Britain are already partly helping the Tunisian government in the fight against jihadism on various levels, from technological assistance to border patrols. On the other hand, the challenge is to eliminate the root-causes of radicalization. In this sense, it is necessary to support Tunisia in the identification of targeted programs for the socio-economic development of the country. The main objective must be to fight its enormous regional disparities and to promote development policies that create jobs and growth. In doing so, we should focus above all on local policies and decentralization. If, in fact, Tunisia faces problems in managing its peripheral areas, the answer must be given at the local level and not only at the central government level.

The main assumption is that the stability and the preservation of the democratic transition in Tunisia represents a direct interest even for Italy, which therefore should be more daring in terms of assistance and support to this country. To do so, our policies towards the southern Mediterranean should leave behind the logic of competition and look more at the long-term benefits for the entire region. The controversy over the extra olive oil shares that the European Union has allowed Tunisia to export tax-free in the common market over the next two years is emblematic. Olive oil exports represent 40% of all Tunisian agriculture exports and 10% of its total exports. Conversely, an additional 70,000 tons in the European market (which consumes 1.5 million tons) does not significantly alter the internal balance and would not compromise Italian producers’ interests. Nevertheless, in Italy, too, there have been protests against the European decision. Such an attitude shows a lack of

strategic vision and does nothing to concretely help Tunisia overcome its internal problems. On the other hand, to ensure the stability of the Mediterranean we have to consolidate countries like Tunisia, which is evolving but is still under pressure. Losing Tunisia would mean losing our match for the creation of an area of shared values and interests.