

Tunisia: Between Diplomatic Doctrine and Revolutionary Reality

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Tunisia, the birthplace of the 2011 revolutions, has much in common with its neighbour Libya. Tunisia and Libya have a long and rich shared history and following the revolutions in many ways an intertwined fate as a result of the deep relationships and ties between its peoples. What transpires on one side of the border often has an affect on the other side. Much of this pre-dates the revolution, and is outside of the grip of either state. The shared economies of borderland and transnational communities along the 461km land border have established strong intercommunal bonds but hang on their ability to trade outside of the state's control. Whilst the two countries also face common transnational threats: from Tunisian terrorist networks that employed Libya's terrain as a safe haven to mount attacks on their home country to the new shared threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the state of the official border has oscillated between openness and closedness since the 2011 revolution, reflecting the need to balance economic and national security imperatives.

Most importantly, the two countries are traversed by analogue - often imported - fault lines, such as the Turkish rivalry with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), leading actors on both sides to align with cross-border counterparts rather than along national lines. Yet, Tunisian diplomacy appears to have been stuck on the side-lines while the country's military took the path of least resistance: building a border fence.

The Endurance of the Bourguiba Doctrine

Prior to the revolution of 2011, Tunisian diplomacy had never dealt with conflicting domestic perspectives on foreign policy. Following Tunisia's independence in 1956, the state was characterised by a symbiosis that defined both its political character and its foreign policy. A highly centralised state apparatus, including its diplomatic branch, and a single party that had retained control over the state. The Tunisian revolution would change this. The emerging pluralist political forces in Tunisia enabled the emergence of a multipolar political landscape representing a variety of foreign policy perspectives and exerting conflicting pressures on Tunisia's diplomacy.

Despite various attempts made by post revolution political parties to influence and reshape Tunisia's foreign policy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, staffed by career civil servants sharing a strong organisational culture inherited from the previous regime, have been able to maintain relative arms length and autonomy from competing political factions.

It is in this context that the Tunisian diplomatic apparatus since 2011 has sought to perpetuate the country's post-independence foreign policy doctrine which is deeply ingrained in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Inherited from President Habib Bourguiba, this doctrine is characterised by the following principles: positive neutrality (manifest in the avoidance of conflict), non-interference - especially in the domestic affairs of other Maghreb countries - and the respect of international legality.

2011-2015: Diplomatic Paralysis

Following the overthrow of the Ben Ali regime, Tunisia welcomed Libya's first post Gaddafi democratic elections and enjoyed warm diplomatic relations with its first elected government in 2012. However, following the emergence of Khalifa Haftar in 2014 the Libyan civil war that produced rival administrations and parallel economic and security institutions would prove to be the first post Gaddafi challenge to Tunisian diplomacy. The continuation of the Bourguiba neutrality doctrine allowed the Tunisian government to avoid being dragged into a conflict which could have spilt over into Tunisia, during its own transition and fragile stability. However, the deeply Westphalian worldview underpinning this doctrine proved sorely problematic in a new post revolutionary environment.

Inherited from a Cold War context, Tunisia's foreign policy doctrine, not unlike its military doctrine, only accounts for a world of inter-state relations. It could not cope with Libya's fragmentation into hybrid state and non-state actors and the resulting intricate web of power relations and political divisions. Foreign policy doctrine turned into dogma, as Tunisia could not find indisputably legitimate interlocutors on the Libyan side as a result of the civil war. In 2014, at the peak of Libya's civil war the most relevant stakeholders to Tunisia's border security were local non-state actors across the Tunisian-Libyan border, the Tunisian government kept desperately looking for a Libyan state - or at least central institutions - to talk to.

As the Ministry of Foreign Affairs froze into a confused paralysis, informal Tunisian actors took matters into their own hands and filled the vacuum. Political parties, businesspeople and local officials from borderland communities - often with ties to smuggling networks and regional powers invested in the Libyan civil conflict - established or activated pre-existing relations on the Libyan side to deal with issues which would traditionally fall under the remit of Tunisian diplomacy such as border closures or the repatriation of hostages. Rather than mobilising those actors with cross-border ties, Tunisian diplomacy remained on the side-lines, uneasy with increased interference by actors pursuing agendas which did not necessarily conform to the state's policy objectives, but powerless to stop them.

If It Looks Like a State, Treat It as a State

In 2015, the formation of a Government of National Accord (GNA) following the UN brokered Skhirat Agreement came as a welcomed relief to Tunisian diplomacy.

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Regardless of its effectiveness, influence and legitimacy, the existence of an internationally recognised government in Libya provided an institutional framework, that Tunisian foreign policy could finally build a constructive relationship with.

This new state of affairs afforded Tunisian diplomacy the ability to shelter behind international legality – one of the fundamentals of the Bourguiba doctrine – rather than decisively taking sides in a bitter civil conflict as other regional actors had. However, Tunisia's recognition of a GNA whose legitimacy was disputed by various Libyan actors has been interpreted as a breach of Tunisia's neutrality, notably by Haftar's Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) which issued threats against the Tunisian government as it was attempting to wrestle control of the Ras Jedir border crossing.¹

While regional powers' recognition of the GNA did not prevent them from engaging with other Libyan factions irrespective of their legitimacy to advance their interests. Tunisia's conflict-insensitive 'state-to-state' approach led it to disregard important local actors on the Libyan side. Indeed, Haftar's challenge to the GNA resulted in a GNA that was consumed by domestic legality and a new round of diplomacy that diminished its effectiveness and influence on the ground. The GNA became limited and could not be a suitable interlocutor to solve bilaterally challenges and real-world problems Tunisia was facing.

In Pursuit of a Libyan-Libyan Solution

Timidly re-asserting that "we stick to international legitimacy" before adding that "such legitimacy is not eternal"² after having engaged in January 2020, President Kais Saied took act of the expiry of the GNA's mandate pursuant to the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA). In doing so, he steered diplomacy towards a more nuanced, pragmatic and proactive stance on the Libyan dossier.

Rather than passive neutrality, Tunisian diplomacy's renewed stance seeks a Libyan-Libyan political solution to the conflict in concert with their shared Algerian neighbour. However, this pursuit is met by challenges posed by both foreign and domestic interference. While Saied resisted Turkey's request to use the Tunisian territory to enable military assistance to the GNA during the Battle of Tripoli in 2019, tensions appeared between the Tunisian President and Ennahdha's leader and Chairman of the Parliament Rached Ghannouchi. Under the guise of parliamentary diplomacy, the latter stepped over the President's reserved domain by expressing support for Turkish intervention in Libya and congratulating Serraj for the recapture of al-Watyia airbase.

¹ Samir Hamdi, 'What does Haftar want with Tunisia?' 2 April 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200402-what-does-haftar-want-with-tunisia/>

² Watania 1 TV, 'Interview with the President of the Republic Kais Saied' 30 January 2020, <https://youtu.be/jImUcUsZcXc?t=1010>.

As long as the rivalry between the Turkish axis and the UAE-Russian axis, which translates into proxy warfare in Libya, continues to play out in Tunisian politics through alliances with polarised domestic factions, pressures from within and from without will threaten to derail the continuity of Tunisian diplomacy. The Bourguiba doctrine, still vivid in the Tunisian diplomatic corps, may act as a fixed-point attractor Tunisian foreign policy could fall back to. But the price to pay could very well be further sinking into irrelevance as other regional powers aggressively level-up their meddling into Libya.



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