

EU relations with Tunisia in the current regional context

2015/2273(INI) - 26/07/2016 - Committee report tabled for plenary, single reading

The Committee on Foreign Affairs adopted the own-initiative report by Fabio Massimo CASTALDO (EFDD, IT) on the EU relations with Tunisia in the current regional context.

Members recalled that the peaceful democratic transition process in Tunisia represents a successful example in the Arab world and its consolidation is paramount for the stability of the entire region. Therefore, they renew their commitment to the Tunisian people and the political transition process that began in 2011.

While supporting the consolidation of the democratic transition and foster investment and development in all sectors of the economy and society in the country, Members consider that it is imperative for Tunisia to implement adequate reforms aimed at boosting employment and developing sustainable and inclusive growth.

They stressed the importance of respect for human rights and the relaunch of the political process of integration in the framework of the Arab Maghreb Union.

I - Political reforms and Institutions: Members expressed support for the process of democratisation and for the Peoples Representative Assembly (PRA) given the challenge of enhancing stability in a volatile regional context while deepening democracy. They expressed support for a review of the needs of the PRA. The European Parliaments services should enhance the capacity-building support activities provided to the PRA.

Welcoming an enhanced dialogue between the EU and Tunisia, Members called for measures on:

- reforming public administration in the country;
- democratic transition and development in general;
- decentralisation and the empowerment of regions;
- monitoring respect for human rights, including the protection of women and children, gender equality and the protection of all victims of persecution and discrimination.

Members called for an EU and EP monitoring mission and election assistance for local elections (scheduled in October 2016). They called for support for gender-balanced policies and for the inclusion of young people in political life, especially regarding the promotion of youth participation in local elections.

As regards human rights, Members called for measures to prevent the use of torture and to abolish the death penalty.

The report called for a reform of the penal code which penalises homosexuality.

As regards civil liberties, Members called for a reform of the penal code to defend the freedom of expression and freedom of the press and media, freedom of expression online

II. Economic and social development: Members welcomed the Commissions proposal for macro-financial assistance of EUR 500 million. They also noted the launch of negotiations on an ambitious free trade agreement (DCFTA) between the EU and Tunisia.

They encouraged partnerships with other interested global and regional donor countries and organisations and, in particular, measures reducing regional disparities and promoting training and investment in agriculture, taking into account the specificities of local agriculture, IT, the social economy, the manufacturing sector, tourism and SMEs which would boost employment.

In order to address unemployment, especially for young people, Members called for deep reforms with a view to promoting quality education. They called on all parties to maintain a spirit of good cooperation in order to focus on reforms with a view to inclusive economic development for all territories of the country, including the less advanced and impoverished inland regions. The EU is called upon to step up its efforts against desertification in Tunisia and water shortages.

Measures are necessary to combat corruption.

The report expressed concerns regarding the sustainability of the Tunisian debt. It called for the conversion of Tunisian debt into investment projects, especially for building strategic infrastructures and reducing regional disparities. It called for further assistance for SMEs, notably access to financial support.

They also encouraged more North African regional cooperation on specific issues such as afforestation and water management, as well as greater socioeconomic integration, within the context sustainable development.

III. Security and defence: Members are deeply concerned about the immediate security spillover in Tunisia originating, among other reasons, from instability in Libya. They expressed concerns at the high number of Tunisian foreign fighters joining Daesh and other terrorist groups. They are particularly concerned about the situation in Libya and called on all parties in Libya to engage constructively with the Government of National Accord (GNA).

Members called on the Tunisian Government to set up a strategy to deal with returning foreign fighters, for example by coupling punitive and precautionary measures with deradicalisation and rehabilitation programmes. They recognise that terrorism is a shared challenge which requires a joint response and that cooperation between the EU and Tunisia in the field of security and the fight against terrorism has been stepped up recently.

They expressed its deepest concern about Law 22/2015 on counter-terrorism, adopted in July 2015 by Tunisia's Assembly of Representatives, which imposes the death penalty as a possible sentence for a range of terror offences. The Tunisian authorities are called upon to continue to observe the moratorium on the death penalty and although Tunisia is one of the countries that are most vulnerable to the terrorism threat,

states are obliged to fully respect human rights when fighting terrorism.

In parallel, Members welcomed the launch, in November 2015, of the EU programme of support for security sector reform in Tunisia. They called for the promotion of a logic of objectives, rather than mere support by policy instruments, within a clear strategic vision focusing on prevention.

IV. Mobility, research, education and culture: Members welcomed the EU and the Tunisia Mobility Partnership signed in March 2014. They recommended that Member States should show their solidarity with Tunisia by facilitating the issuing of visas for entrepreneurs, teachers, students, researchers, artists, etc.

They encouraged the EU to sign mobility partnerships with the partner countries in its southern neighbourhood in order to relax visa procedures in conjunction with readmission agreements. They called on the Commission, in cooperation with the Member States, to develop possibilities for circular migration schemes which would open up safe and legal routes for migrants.

Members condemned trafficking in human beings, most of the victims of which are women, and called on the Tunisian authorities to cooperate closely with Member States in order to tackle organised forms of illegal immigration.

Members underlined that Tunisia should become a full participant in the Erasmus + programme in order to develop further the exchange of university students. Partnerships should be developed among schools, universities and research centres or in the area of culture and sports.

Lastly, Members stated that the use of Arabic is necessary to ensure the involvement of civil society in EU-Tunisia relations, in particular in the context of the free trade agreement negotiations.