



Indian Council of World Affairs
Sapru House, Barakhamba Road
New Delhi

25th Sapru House Lecture

by



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on

**"New Tunisia: An Emerging Democracy
in Age of Challenges and Global Threats"**

Sapru House, New Delhi
30 October 2017

**His Excellency Ambassador Nalin Surie, Director General of the Indian Council of World Affairs,
Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

I am particularly delighted and honored to join this vibrant audience, hosted by such a prestigious and worldly renown Institution: The Indian Council of World Affairs. I would like to seize this opportunity to express my most sincere thanks and appreciation to Ambassador Nalin Surie, Director General, for his kind invitation.

It is an immense pleasure for me to return to India, after over 30 years since I have finished my first diplomatic assignment in 1986 as a junior diplomat, to talk today about the emerging democracy in Tunisia in an age of global challenges and threats.

But let me start by congratulating Indian people for the tremendous progress achieved by their country India during the last 30 years in different areas particular ICTs, research development and innovation (R&D) and health. Besides being one the fastest growing economy in the World leading to better living standards of the Indian People, India represents today a voice of peace and stability in a time of uncertainty and instability. A source of inspiration to many countries around the globe, including Tunisia.

**Excellencies,
ladies and gentlemen;**

Before addressing the Tunisian democratic experience, let me first clarify the term “Arab Spring” that has been associated with Tunisia since 2011. At the risk of disappointing some of you, I will argue that that this is western media invention. The term was coined to the describe the revolutionary cascade of 2011, with reference to the Prague Spring, a brief moment of democratic optimism that was eventually harshly crushed.

This term, however, denotes some kind of wishful thinking, an idyllic representation of uprising and revolutions and a kind of monolithic perception of the Arab region that does into account individual experiences of different countries.

President Beji Caid Essebsi, then Prime Minister, clarified at the G8 summit in 2011, that there is no Arab spring as such but the beginning of a spring that could blossom in Tunisia. I am convinced that many now agree that this early diagnosis was accurate and pertinent. President Caid Essebsi prediction turn to be right because it was based on a realistic understanding of the conditions in different countries in the region, and the belief that there is no one model of democracies, and there are different ways to reach it.

The pass chosen by Tunisia might be the most transformative but, Tunisia does not seek to stand as model, nor to offer a unique template for change. Tunisia 4s revolution and

democratic process are the product of a singular experience and a combination of multiple home grown factors.

In 2010, conditions were ripe in Tunisia for a radical political transformation.

Furthermore, Tunisia is a country where the reformist tradition is deeply rooted in its society. The Tunisian reformist movement started as early as the beginning of the 19th century: slavery was abolished in 1846, before many western countries. A progressive Constitution was adopted as early as in 1861 which was then a unique feature in the Arab and Muslim world.

In the wake of its independence, the young Tunisian state opted for the generalization of education making it free and compulsory for boys and girls until the age of 16. The struggle in the early years of independence was to eradicate widespread illiteracy. Today, the major challenge for the current government is to provide jobs for unemployed young university graduates who grew up with the hope that education will help them improve their quality of life and that of their families.

Sixty-one years ago, in August 1956, just few months after independence, Tunisia promulgated "The Personal Status Code", a pioneering family law, granting women the right to divorce, prohibiting polygamy and putting men and women on a legal equal footing in contracting marriage. Since then, women's rights and gender equality are being consolidated.

Hence, in the late 2010, Tunisia assembled the ingredients of a major political change:

- 1- A largely educated youth;
- 2- A unique status for women, unparalleled in the Muslim and Arab world;
- 3- A large middle class,
- 4- An economic model that has shown its limits, leaving behind the interior regions, leading to major disparities
- 5- A locked political system that was unable to understand how strong was its people's need for change, and to meet the expectations particularly of a younger generation looking for jobs and a better life, as well as a greater participation in public affairs.

Indeed, on January 2011, Tunisian citizens resolutely and fearlessly led a non-violent social outburst that ended with toppling down the regime and paved the way to the building-up of a democratic transition. Two transparent and free general elections were organized in 2011 and 2014 and which allowed democratically-elected politicians to lead the country.

Mahatma Ghandi, India's Great Leader and Father of this Great Nation, rightly said, I quote **"The true democrat is he, who with purely nonviolent means, defends his liberty and, therefore, his country's and ultimately that of the whole of mankind"**.

**Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

The Tunisian democratic process is today irreversible as it consecrates the will of the representatives of the Tunisian people who achieved a breakthrough in the political process with the adoption in 2014 of a new modern Constitution that enshrines secular universal values and democratic standards and guarantees pluralism, basic freedoms, gender equality, freedom of religion and confirmed the abolishment of polygamy.

In choosing a civil Constitution and adopting this stance, Tunisia has proved that Islam and democratic values could co-exist together. Moreover, the spirit of Peace and Dialogue have indeed prevailed since January 2011. The Tunisian people and its political elite, since then were bound since then, were bound to respect the successive smooth transition changes and to seek compromises to make the Tunisian example a successful story through dialogue and non-violence.

In a way, this peaceful approach reminds us again of the non-violent struggle led by the Great Indian Leader and Father of the Nation Mahatma Ghandi who was instrumental in triggering a non-violent struggle to liberate India and to win the world's admiration for the peaceful and noble objectives he was preaching.

**Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

A vibrant civil society, led by a Quartet composed of the leaders of the Tunisian Trade Union UGTT, the Employer's Federation, the Bar Association and the League of Human Rights, acted wisely then as broker to build consensus and rally the Tunisian population around an ambitious plan to patch up conflicting political and ideological positions and managed successfully to avert any dangerous side-slipping leading to civil war.

This compromise is unprecedented in the region as it demonstrated undoubtedly that Islam and democracy can effectively coexist and that the Arab world is not congenitally immune to the universal values of freedom and democracy.

The newly-democratic Tunisia was awarded the 2015 the Nobel Peace Prize is a living proof that a Muslim country could claim a genuine place in the free and developed World. But the regional stakes and chaos in the region were threatening this successful experience and Tunisia was a target of terrorism by obscurantist and democracy-hating renegades who tried in vain, in 2015, to harm its tourism industry and undermine its cultural values. Tunisia rejected all forms of violence and foiled all terrorist attacks since 2015 and most of all managed to spare the country a bloodshed thanks to the determination and readiness of its forces and the support of its partners.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,**

On the economic level, although important progress has been achieved and the economy is showing real signs of recovery, we still have a long way to go because the focus has been emphasized more on politics. People's expectations are very high and especially among Youth who has to be at the core of the country's main challenges. Over the last six years or so, we understood that democracy has to deliver to the expectations of the young people. The government and the private sector should work closer to create conditions for a better social and economic situation; namely, create jobs, invest in technology, value-added products, generate income and manage wealth and, most of all, implement fiscal reforms so as to help the Government to finance development-oriented projects.

Tunisia has to rely more than ever on investing on education, human resources, services, new technologies and innovation in research etc. Newly-graduated university students are putting considerable pressure on the employment market and on the politicians' road map. This is a major challenge for us, as a Government of National Unity to take these inputs into account.

Today and more than ever, Tunisia needs support from all its partners, including India, to boost the governmental program especially because a potential investment in our economy, is also an investment in our democracy. To help mobilize international resources, the Government of Tunisia organized in November 2016, an international conference on investment (Tunisia 2020), along with four other co-sponsors (France, Qatar, Canada and the World Bank), which introduced to the High Dignitaries and foreign companies projects supposed to be financed by Public Private Partnership (PPP) and foreign countries within the framework of the 5-Year Development Program (2016-2020), estimated at approximately 60 billion US \$.

This program will certainly generate fresh opportunities for public and private sector investment in major areas and sectors, including infrastructure, technology, industry, energy, ICTs and green economy.

To convince potential investors in this program, Tunisia has undertaken major reforms aimed at streamlining the economy and boosting foreign investment for a strong and sustainable long-term development projects.

It is within this perspective and in order to achieve the plan's objectives, that the National Unity Government is implementing ambitious structural reforms to develop business environment in our country, improve its competitiveness, increase export capacity, develop priority sectors and achieve sustainable development through:

- 1- A New Public-private Partnerships (PPPs) law, voted in November 2015, and was designed to help the government mobilize funds for the implementation of major projects.
- 2- A new "Investment Law" that entered into force on January 2017, enhancing both the freedom to invest and the protection of investors, domestic and foreign alike.
- 3- A law on anti- corruption: to promote transparency, integrity, accountability and good governance principles, and curb corruption in the public and private sector.

- 4- A banking law to enforce the rules of good governance in national financial institutions;
- 5- A competition law: to upgrade the competitiveness of the national export-oriented products and meet the international standards.
- 6- A bankruptcy law: to simplify the legal framework of bankruptcy procedures.

**Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

The longstanding relations between Tunisia and India has always been warm and cordial because they are deeply rooted in shared ideals, values, mutual respect and trust, and steady stand against the evils of colonialism. India was one of the most devoted supporter of Tunisian struggle for independence since the early fifties. Indeed, in November 1952, the Late Minister and diplomate Taieb Slim was welcome in New Delhi as the representative of the Tunisian movement for independence.

India support for Tunisia sovereignty was ardent and constant. In his statement before the UN General Assembly on August 21, 1961, Mr. CS. Jha, the late Permanent Representative of India, said, and I quote: **“To my delegation it is clear that the status of Tunisia as a sovereign independent state and her membership of international community give her a position no way inferior to any other member of the UN, a position which does not admit of any infractions of her sovereignty except in accordance with her own free will and judgment.”**, end of quote.

And since the establishment of their diplomatic relations in 1958, our two countries have strived together to support peace and security around the World, and promote solidarity and co-development among nations under the Non-Alignment movement, the South-South Cooperation, the anti-Apartheid and the anti-colonial struggle.

A part from steadily deepening and strengthening their political ties under the leadership of the leaders Habib Bourguiba, Pandit Nehru, Tunisia and India also developed a productive bilateral cooperation in many key areas and sectors under several bilateral agreements signed between the two countries since the early sixties in key areas such as commerce, education, science, technology and culture.

The historical visits and constructive interactions, and the high-level Indian visits to Tunisia that took place in that period: Vice-President Zakir Hussain in July 1964, Indira Gandhi in April 1984, Prime Minister Narasimha Rao in 1992, has brought Tunisia and India further closer together, and cemented the warm and cordial relationship that our two friendly countries enjoy presently.

Healthy relations that are today at the core of the convergence of our countries' views on many regional and international issues, such as fight against terrorism, human rights promotion, global warming, international trade, and development.

In a couple of hours from now, I will be co-chairing with the Honorable Minister of External Affairs, Mrs. Sushma Swaraj, the 12th session of Tunisia-India Joint Committee Meeting. An opportunity to reviewed the entire scale of Tunisia-India relations, and identify the required measures and actions to further boost our bilateral engagement both at political leadership and official levels and to give a new dimension to our bilateral relations in priority sectors of mutual interest, including trade and investment promotion, tics, research and innovation, security, defense, agriculture, cyber-security, energy, renewable energy, pharmaceuticals, education, tourism, sciences and technology, and health. Tunisia India relations are excellent, and we are working to make them even better.

We will be also signing several MoUs to develop and diversity our cooperation and collaboration and to promote trade and investment between our two countries. We are looking forward to a promising Tunisian Indian partnership driven by our shared values and based on programs and oriented towards concrete results. This new partnership shall include coordinated long-term cooperation programs supporting people to people contacts, deepening cooperation on shared security challenges and preserving regional peace and stability.

And given their strong attachment to the United Nations' Charter and the principals of international law, and the convergence of their views on many regional and international issues, such as fight against terrorism, human rights promotion, global warming, international trade, Tunisia and India can hand in hand assume an active and constructive significantly contribute to the International Community's efforts to overcome the challenges of promoting peace and security around the World, and in boosting solidarity and co-development among Nations.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,**

These challenges, among many others are compounded with specific problems inherent to our region. The situation in Libya, in particular, is of utmost concern. Libya's woes are Tunisia's problems. We are deeply affected by the tragic and painful sufferings of our Libyan brothers. We are, at the same time, concerned about the security risks arising from the proliferation of lethal weapons, heavily-armed militias and the presence of scattered open-sky training camps for terrorist organizations.

We have no lessons to give and no democratic panacea to export. We are working hard, along with my brother counterparts from Algeria and Egypt, and, of course, all the Libyan parties to create an environment conducive to dialogue between all Libyans.

They have to sit around the table of negotiations to reach the suitable settlement to the Libyan crisis, taking into account their common destiny and agree on a road map for coexistence and stability. No foreign interference regardless of its motives will manage to bring peace to Libya.

These are the guiding principles of the “Libya initiative” launched by H.E President Beji Caid Essebsi, President of the Republic of Tunisia. It builds on previous understandings, particularly the Skhirat Agreement and seeks to open a new channel of dialogue between the Libyan parties under the United Nations’ supervision and on the basis of Libya's national unity and territorial integrity.

On a broader regional level, the outlook is unfortunately gloomy and alarming. In Irak, allied forces against DAESH are gaining ground and taking back cities from terrorists who committed atrocities in the name of Islam. The conflicting war in this region has unfortunately turned into an unprecedented humanitarian tragedy and brought only chaos and destruction.

On Syria, Tunisia supports all efforts by the international community to find a solution and enforce a global cease-fire under the U.N sponsorship in order to initiate and broker an inter-Syrian dialogue likely to appease the political tension.

The recent crisis within the Gulf Cooperation Council is yet another reminder of our region’s vulnerability and polarization. We, in Tunisia, cherish the brotherly and excellent relations with all countries of the GCC and we believe that the unity of this regional collaboration is an asset to the stability of the region and to all Arab causes.

By refraining from taking sides with any party, we are keen to express our attachment to the peaceful settlement of conflicts and rejection of discord and further fragmentation. We are confident that wisdom will ultimately prevail and mutual trust will be restored.

Amid this pessimistic outlook, the Palestinian cause continues to be at the core of the Arab concern and Tunisia abides by the peace process and the U.N relevant Resolutions, in order to give peace a chance and favor the two-state solution.

Tunisia reiterates accordingly its call to take into consideration the Arab Peace initiative which advocates the setup of an independent Palestinian State on the territories occupied in June 1967 with El Qods al Sharif as its Capital. The final and fair settlement of the Middle East conflict should be a prerequisite for the promotion of security, stability and prosperity in the whole region.

**Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen**

Tunisia and India are two peace-loving nations who share the same values and preach dialogue and mutual understanding amid regional and international turmoil which threaten democracy, progress, stability and security.

Before closing, let me reiterate my warmest thanks to all of you for taking part in this event and for His Excellency Ambassador Nalin Surie, for kindly offering me this opportunity to speak before a prestigious assistance and attendance.

I hope that the contents of my address will lead to a lively debate and stimulate exchange of views. I will be more than glad to share with you these thoughts and to reply to your questions.

Thank you for your attention.

