

**Address by H.E. Mr. Khemaies Jhinaoui,  
Minister of Foreign Affairs**

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**"Tunisia, from Democratic Transition  
to Economic Take-off"**

**Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Excellencies**

I am particularly delighted to address this forum and I would like to express my warmest thanks to Dr. Nobuo Tanaka, Chairman of the Sasakawa Peace Foundation for his Foundation's interest in Tunisia and for having offered me this opportunity.

I would like also to pay tribute to Mr. Yohei Sasakawa, Chairman of the Nippon Foundation, who has visited Tunisia last September, for his unrelenting commitment to the values of peace and global cooperation and for his Foundation's role in nursing innovative ideas and solutions for the challenges facing human society.

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 this is a western media invention. The term was coined to describe the revolutionary cascade of 2011, with reference to the "Prague Spring," a brief moment of democratic yearning that was eventually crushed by Soviet tanks. This term, however, denotes some kind of wishful thinking, an idyllic representation of uprisings and revolutions or a monolithic perception of the Arab region that does not account for individual experiences of different countries.

President Beji Caid Essebsi, then Prime Minister, explained at the G8 Deauville Summit in 2011, that there is no Arab Spring as such but the beginning of a spring that could blossom in Tunisia.

I am confident that many now agree that this early diagnosis was relevant and accurate. President Essebsi's prediction came true because it was premised on a realistic

understanding of different conditions in different countries in the region and on the belief that democratization has different paths.

The path chosen by Tunisia might be the most transformative, but Tunisia does not seek to stand as a model, nor to offer a unique template for change. Tunisia's 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. Key drivers of change and success factors include:

- 1- A largely educated and internet-enabled youth;
- 2- A unique status for women, unparalleled in the Muslim and Arab worlds;
- 3- A large middle class: more than an income range, the middle class represents a set of economic and political emancipative values and serves as an anchor of stability;
- 4- a rooted civic culture and a vibrant civil society which has developed through the pre-colonial, colonial, and independence eras and which grew discreetly throughout periods of authoritarianism and matured in the post-revolution years;
- 5- a reformist tradition with deep roots, stretching back to the middle of the 19th century;
- 6- a strong sense of shared nationhood and citizenship shaped by a unique historical experience and helped by the homogeneity of the population and lack of tribal and other forms of sectarian loyalties;
- 7- an economic model that has paid dividends for decades, but has reached its limits. Sharp regional disparities in growth, income and wealth, and failure to absorb the growing supply of university graduates created a widespread sense of economic disenfranchisement;
- 8- a locked political system plagued by corruption that lost touch with reality and was unable to accommodate expectations, particularly of a younger generation, for greater participation in public affairs.
- 9- the small size of the army and its traditional subordination to civilian rule. It was a deliberate choice, from the founding of modern Tunisia, not to invest heavily in building military capacities, but to allocate scarce resources to priority areas of human and economic development.

Considered individually, these attributes are not unique to Tunisia. It is the synergy of all these factors that accounts for the singularity of the Tunisian experience. In this sense, the whole is greater than the simple sum of its parts.

**Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Allow me to elaborate further on some of these attributes. I will single out key success factors that are quite often overlooked or understated: education, women emancipation and empowerment, reformism and civic culture.

Education: In the wake of 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 and equip people with literacy and professional skills. Providing universal education, regardless of social background, created qualified human resources and improved social mobility.

Today, the major challenge for the current government is to provide jobs for hundreds of thousands of unemployed young university graduates (320.000), who grew up with the hope that education will help them integrate the job market and improve their quality of life and that of their families.

Women: 61 years ago, in August 1956, just few months after independence, Tunisia promulgated "The Personal Status Code", a pioneering family law in the Arab and Muslim worlds, granting women the right to divorce, prohibiting polygamy and putting men and women on a legal equal footing in contracting marriage.

There's a tendency to see Tunisia as a beacon for women's rights in the Arab world, but that view is actually rather limited. Tunisia does better than many traditional western democracies at promoting gender equality.

Its electoral law mandates that women should comprise 50 per cent of political party candidates, still a rarity across Europe. And its percentage of female representation in parliament, at 31 per cent, is higher than the UK, Canada and the United States (30, 26 and 19 per cent).

Just recently, in July 2017, Tunisia adopted a landmark legislation on violence against women. The law introduces new criminal provisions and increases penalties for various forms of violence when committed within the family. It also criminalizes sexual harassment in public spaces, and the employment of children as domestic workers, and fines employers who intentionally discriminate against women in pay.

Giving a new momentum for this drive for reform, President Beji Caid Essebsi announced last August the creation of a Commission on Individual Freedoms and Equality. The Commission is to produce a report on reforms to advance individual liberties and gender equality, including in inheritance rights.

Since September this year, a woman has the right to choose her spouse regardless of his religion.

Reformism: Tunisia is a three-thousand-year nation with a rooted awareness of statehood and with a strong capacity of assimilation and renewal.

A solid reformist tradition, open to emancipative values has made Tunisia a pioneer among Arab countries. It was the first to abolish slavery in 1846 and the first to adopt a constitutional charter in 1857 and a progressive Constitution in 1861.

The mid-19th century witnessed, indeed, Tunisia's first steps towards modernization. Like the Emperor Meiji (1852 - 1912) in Japan, Ahmed Bey (1837-1855) in Tunisia and his Prime Minister Kheireddine Pacha embarked on an ambitious program to modernize the state and society through education and constitutional reform. While the Tunisian experience was abruptly cut short by colonial interference, the Japanese experience was able to run its course. Yet, the flame of reform and enlightenment was not blown out; it was transmitted to new generations of reformers from Tahar Haddad, who in the 1930s advocated women emancipation to Tahar Ben Achour (1879–1973), who built a bridge between the classical Islamic legal heritage and the needs of a modern world and to Habib Bourguiba, the founding father of modern Tunisia.

Civic Culture: Tunisian civic culture has been built over decades starting from the 19th-century reformist literature to Bourguiba's leadership of the national movement and of post-independence Tunisia.

This culture has been supported by independent organizations that counterbalanced authoritarianism and nourished a yearning for democracy and political participation.

The Tunisian General Labour Union, with a membership of half a million and a history going back to 1946, has acquired a large capacity of mobilization and a historic legitimacy because of its contribution to the national movement for independence, its social militancy and its support for democratic aspirations during the Bourguiba and Ben Ali eras.

Another movement with a similar role is the Human rights league, the first such organization in Africa and the Arab world, which has contributed largely to the anchoring of human rights values and culture.

Along with the Business federation and the Bar Associations, these organizations joined forces into a Quartet in 2013 to act as a consensus builder at a moment of political deadlock, tension and increasing skepticism about the outcome of the transitional process.

No one elected the National Dialogue Quartet, winner of the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize, to mediate between conflicting postures, but they nonetheless represented something real: the capacity of actors from outside formal politics to play a role in a moment of crisis and the desire of Tunisians to resolve their differences in a peaceful and constructive way.

## **Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Tunisia adopted in 2014 a new modernist Constitution. It enshrines universal values and democratic standards. It asserts the freedom of conscience, belief and worship, guarantees gender equality and provides for affirmative action in favor of women by requiring parity in elected offices. It further settles the debate on religion and politics by reasserting Tunisia's Arab and Islamic identity and by upholding, at the same time, that Tunisia is a civil state based on citizenship and the rule of law.

The Constitution paved the way for the first ever free and transparent parliamentary and presidential elections. By successfully holding General and presidential elections respectively on 26 October 2014 and 23 November 2014, Tunisia has demonstrated resilience and tenacity in the face of transitional challenges.

Consensus was the way Tunisians have chosen to overcome differences and find compromises between various political stakeholders, including the civil society. This consensual approach was rewarded by the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize to the Quartet of National Dialogue.

By opting for a unity government that includes a broad coalition of secular, Islamist and leftist parties, independents and trade union allies, Tunisia is persevering on the path of consensus to advance an agenda of economic reform and democratic consolidation.

## **Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

The National Unity Government has launched an ambitious program of reforms to bring public finances back on a sound footing, to support higher and inclusive growth and to enhance the competitiveness of the country for investors, through:

- 1- A new Public-private partnerships (PPPs) law, voted in November 2015, designed to improve the quality of infrastructure and help free up resources for other high priority spending on health and education.
- 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- An overhaul of the banking system and a revamping of the fiscal and tax policies have already entered into force.
- 4- A massive investment scheme amounting to over 60 billion US \$ was announced at an international investment conference held in Tunis at the end of November 2016. This scheme will certainly generate fresh opportunities for public and private sector investment in major areas and sectors, including infrastructure, technology, industry, energy, ITC and green economy.

Beyond urgent reforms, we have embarked on a radical rethinking of our growth model that will lead to a dual paradigm shift:

- 1- a shift from the public sector towards a competitive private sector as the main engine of growth and job creation.
- 2- upgrading into high-value-added processes and diversifying into technology-based and skill-intensive sectors.

Recent figures point to a steady and gradual improvement of macroeconomic indicators. GDP growth is expected to accelerate to 2.3% in 2017 while in the medium term, it will pick up to 2.8% in 2018 and 3.2% in 2019.

With these encouraging signs of economic recovery, Tunisia is determined to regain its position as an emerging economy in the region as Tunisia holds the assets to become an attractive hub with a diversified economy, qualified workforce and a strategic location in the heart of the Mediterranean linking two continents Africa and Europe.

## **Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

We are aware that we have to rely on our own potential, vision, and determination to devise and implement the right policies in order to achieve tangible outcomes. Yet, international support, as in many other transitional experiences could be instrumental in ensuring success.

Emerging democracies in Eastern and Central Europe, Asia and Southern America, have enjoyed in most cases significant economic and financial support. They have found in the US (Latin America), Japan (South East Asia) and the European Union (Eastern and central Europe) a driving force to help them consolidate their democratic transition and economic recovery.

A small investment could prevent failure and yield strong dividends. Tunisia, a small manageable country with an educated population and a relatively diversified economy, is well poised, with the support of major partners and friends, including Japan, to graduate,

at an affordable cost, as a narrative of inclusive democratic enlightenment and economic prosperity.

Conversely, failure in Tunisia will have far-reaching ramifications and will lead to further despair, loss of faith in democratic means and an exacerbation of radicalism in the region.

### **Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Tunisia's transitional challenges 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 concerned about the unnecessary sufferings of our Libyan brothers.

We are, at the same time concerned about the security risks arising from the proliferation of arms, conflicting militias and the training camps for terrorist organizations.

We have no lessons to give, no democratic commodity to export. We are working hard, however with all Libyan parties and other neighboring countries to create an environment conducive to dialogue between all Libyans.

This is the guiding principle of President Essebssi's initiative on Libya. It builds on previous understandings, particularly the Skheirat Agreement and seeks to open a new channel of dialogue between the Libyan parties under the United Nations supervision and on the basis of national unity and the territorial integrity of Libya.

On a broader regional scale, the landscape is also gloomy and alarming. In Yemen and in Syria, legitimate yearnings for democracy and freedom have turned into an unprecedented humanitarian tragedy and led to utter chaos and destruction.

### **Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

The rise into force of terrorist and extremist groups which found in the region's instability a window of opportunity in terms of arms, movement and recruitment is a major trans-border threat that requires a collective response and a unity of purpose.

The globalization of jihadism and its "uberization" and lethal creativity and barbarism proved time and again that no country is safe. Tunisia, France, Britain, Turkey, Sweden



and many others have all experienced the scourge of terrorism and its toll in human and economic terms.

We firmly believe that terrorism and its underlying ideologies have no future. We are confident that the message of tolerant and moderate Islam will ultimately win the battle of ideas and will cut off the supply sources of terrorists and their recruitment appeal. Economic deliverables, inclusive development and education are also powerful antidotes to extremism.

Over the last few years, our security capacities have been reinforced and readapted to this new type of asymmetric warfare. We have succeeded in containing terrorist threats, in curbing the capabilities of terrorist groups, destroying their cells and isolating those still in hiding. Tunisia is now as safe as any European country.

### **Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Immensely grateful to Japan for its long-standing support, Tunisia is eager to build a new win-win partnership with Japan to reinforce economic bonds and create a new investment momentum yielding opportunities for Tunisian and Japanese companies.

We have celebrated last year the 60th Anniversary of our diplomatic relations. Now, it is a moment of maturity and promise for our relations. We are looking forward to a long-term partnership driven by our shared values, based on mutual interests and oriented towards concrete results.

This new partnership shall include coordinated long-term cooperation programs supporting people to people contacts, deepening cooperation on security challenges and advancing regional peace and stability. I shall reaffirm, in this connection, that Tunisia stands firmly by Japan and condemns vigorously North Korea's bullying and irresponsible behavior.

Another central component to the partnership we are envisaging shall be the opening up of new perspectives for stronger trade exchanges, joint ventures and investments that could generate fresh opportunities for our respective business communities. The reform momentum that we are leading to overhaul the macroeconomic policy framework and to fully establish an open and business-friendly environment will help achieve such a vision.

Tunisia could also be of support to Japan in implementing its African policies, particularly through the TICAD process, or in expanding trade and infrastructure investment in the Arab world. We can join forces in projects in third countries where we have a good understanding of the cultural and business environments and where we have accumulated successful experiences.



**Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Before closing, let me reiterate my warmest thanks to all of you for taking part in this event and for Dr. Nobuo Tanaka, Chairman of the Sasakawa Peace Foundation who offered me this opportunity. I am looking forward to your questions and to a lively exchange.