

Transcript of GFDD's third Global Roundtable with His Excellency, Ghazi Jomaa, Permanent Representative of Tunisia to the United Nations.

Natasha Despotovic: (GFDD Executive Director)

Question #1

Tunisia was the starting point for these huge changes and wave of revolutions happening in North Africa and the Middle East, so the first question for us is how do you think the current situation in Libya is going to affect Tunisia. We have heard how many Libyans have tried to enter into Tunisia and we know that Tunisia and Libya have strong economic ties, so what are the implications for your country?

Ambassador Jomaa: (Republic of Tunisia)

Response #1

In terms of trade with our neighbor Libya, [the political unrest] is very [critical], and in terms of movement of persons it is also very important. Every year one and a half million Libyans cross the border for tourism and various other reasons. And in terms of our security, it is difficult when you get a huge amount of refugees at the same time, as this makes things harder to deal with.

Natasha Despotovic: (GFDD Executive Director)

Question #2

Do you foresee what is happening in Libya now as a long or short term situation?

Ambassador Jomaa: (Republic of Tunisia)

Response #2

It's anyone's guess about that because if you see about the revolution in Tunisia, it went smoothly but not in Libya, so that's why we are entering into a phase that no body can guess.

Natasha Despotovic: (GFDD Executive Director)

Question #3

Could you talk a little about the challenges that Tunisia has had since the President left in January, as it seems to be entering into a new era.

Ambassador Jomaa: (Republic of Tunisia)

Response #3

We have had only two Presidents since our independence in 1956 and that has been the biggest challenge. Because, as you said quite rightly, Tunisia is full of well educated people, 75% of them are in the middle class who are aspiring to democracy, liberty and to dignity. Since the revolution we are definitely on the right track politically, but when you have educated people who aspire to these goals they need jobs. So there are challenges with employment and you can't cope with it all at once, so the priority right now is on establishing the security of the country, and putting it on the right political track. The government is setting the fundamentals for democracy by electing on the July 24th a constituent assembly, which will rule the country on an interim basis and prepare the groundwork for a new constitution. After that, we can see what regime we want to have, either presidential, or parliamentary or somewhere in between. But the first thing is to rule by democracy and have liberty for everyone. That was always the biggest problem, because socially and economically speaking the country was doing very well, according to World Bank and IMF.

If you look at the 3000 years of history, you understand what it means to be Tunisian, it is very open to the Mediterranean and to the West and has aspirations for democracy. Of course they had to wait because after independence in 1956 the first task was to fight poverty and educate the people. But after people get educated they aspire to more. And that's the reason why this revolution came about suddenly without leaders, it was from the people, young, and old alike, who saw what was happening and came out and said enough is enough.

The next challenge after that is the economy because we have a lot of graduates of universities looking for employment and if we want to reach a balance on employment we need to grow by 7-8% a year but it's a challenge particularly in this difficult time. I hope we can cope with the challenge as we

think that because of this revolution Tunisia will attract more investment. Plus, we have cut a lot of corruption with the departure of the previous President and his family.

Yamile Eusebio (Director, New York Office)

Question #4

Tunisia is one of Africa's most popular tourist destinations with over 5 million visitors each year and was rated the most competitive tourist destination in Africa in 2007 by the World Economic Forum. Tunisia is highly dependent on its tourist industry, so what is the government doing to strengthen and develop it?

Ambassador Jooma: (Republic of Tunisia)

Response #4

Tourism accounts for almost 7% of our GDP. We have been successful in that, first because of the beauty of the country, and our 3000 year history and considered as the cradle of civilization. In such a small country in a few short hours of driving around you can see influences from different periods of history from the Phoenicians, to the Romans, Arabs, and Muslims.

Also it has been a government policy ever since independence to set a strategy to develop tourism. Due to its long history, it has always remained open and receptive to the outside world, and that's why tourism developed well in Tunisia. We have reached a certain point in our tourism and now we are developing it even more. It used to be known for the beaches, sand and sun, but we are opening up into a new sector which is called "health tourism", and people may not know this but Tunisia is the second country in the world after France that has clinical health spas. We are also opening up to "green tourism", and "conference tourism".

Kerry Stefancyk: (Fellows Program Manager)

Question #5

According to the MDG monitor it appears that Tunisia is on track to meet 6 of the 8 Millenium Development Goals by 2015, however there is little information about HIV Aids, Malaria and other diseases. Could you comment on how the country is taking steps to make strides in this area.

Ambassador Jooma: (Republic of Tunisia)

Response #5

I will say we have met seven of the eight and I will come back to the eighth one shortly.

But out of the six goals you mentioned, I can assure you that we already met them by mid-term. Malaria has not existed for a long time in Tunisia which is why there is no specific information, and for the HIV and we have data but it not wide scale problem in Tunisia.

There is one goal which there is some debate over and that's to do with Child Mortality. This is one that they say we did not reach yet. However, as UN Ambassador, I challenge that because the figure is based on UNFPA figures and they are not correct.

According to an expert study by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation you see that their figures are 3 times as much as the Gates' report. When we challenged it they said yes there are two different ways to calculate statistics and when you look at UNFPA, the figures look odd. For example if a women is pregnant and killed in an accident, they will document it as child mortality statistic. They have said that they will be revising that and correcting that so and I think by 2015 we can reach that goal.

Margaret Hayward: (Communications and Outreach Manager)

Question #6

Women's rights in Tunisia are among the most advanced in the Arab World and they enjoy representation in all spheres of life. How do you foresee the situation of women in Tunisia now that there is a new government, and what role does the worldwide Islamic fundamentalist movement play in regards to the future of women's rights in your country?

Ambassador Jooma: (Republic of Tunisia)

Response #6

This is one of Tunisia's biggest achievements, the status of women. And the Tunisians have been able to achieve it as there was a push for it after the independence, and it became an accepted process. And you also have to look at the history of Tunisia because this reform started centuries ago with women's movements, so we were well prepared for that. Even the recognized Islamist parties movement in Tunisia can't challenge that achievement and they have committed themselves to respecting women's rights.

What is the impact? I think there is an impact but we do not aim to "sell it". But you see movements in other countries, like Morocco, or Algeria have used Tunisia as a prime example. It will come to other countries with time.

Ambassador Francis Lorenzo: (Dominican Republic)

Question #7

Can you elaborate more about the success Tunisia has had with Information and Communications Technology?

Ambassador Jooma: (Republic of Tunisia)

Response #7

The government invested in ICT's. Our population is very young, and as a small country, we can't invest into heavy industries, and so you have to find your niche. In Tunisia we have a lot of young educated people and that's why we are developing ICT. And it was successful from the beginning, and if you see how the revolution unfolded in Tunisia it was due to technology and social media sites. So we will continue to invest in ICTs.

Ambassador Francis Lorenzo: (Dominican Republic)

Question #8

When one talks about attracting investment opportunities and partnerships with the private sector, do you think that after the election process, a new legal framework is going to be established.

Ambassador Jooma: (Republic of Tunisia)

Response #8

Already there is a liberal legal framework but as you rightly said, after the election after the political stability and the accountability of the judicial system, Tunisia will be in a stronger position because when you can ensure there is no more corruption, that will be best for the investor. And we have a lot of new investors coming in, especially Tunisians living abroad who are investing not only in the economy but in the future of the country. And you are right, this step of democracy, liberty and especially accountability are key elements.