

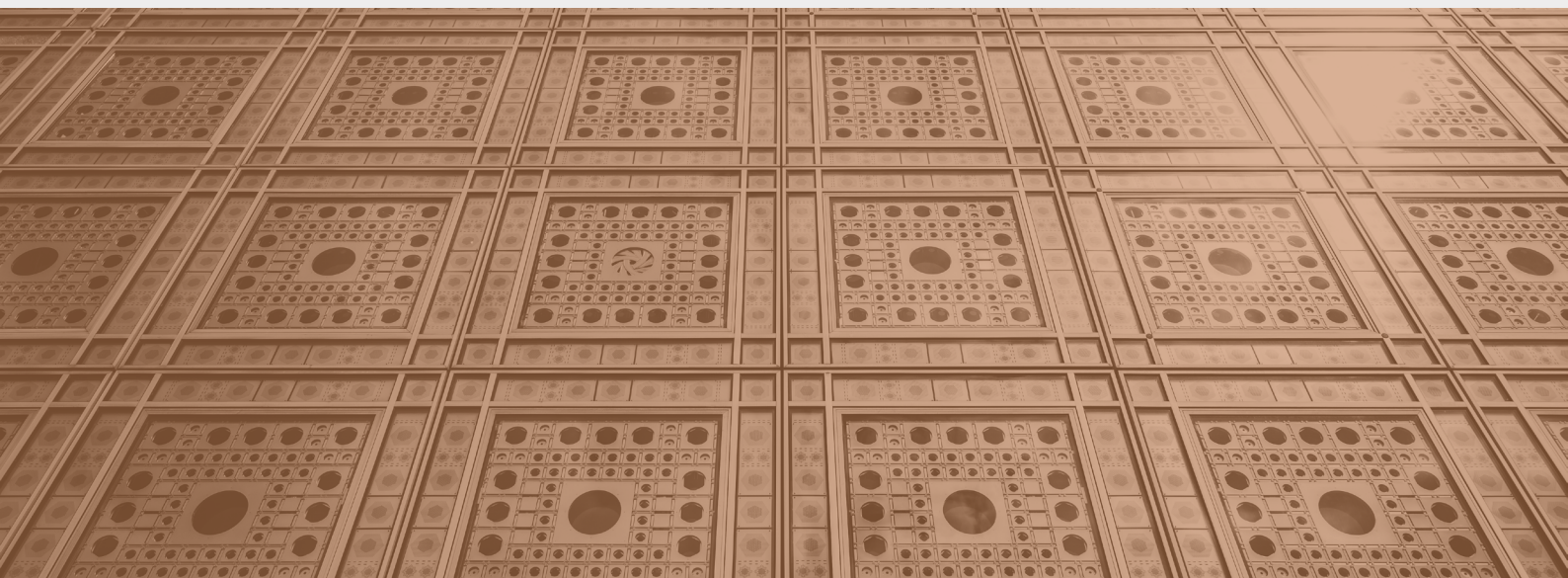


OBSERVATOIRE du Maghreb

THE NEW TUNISIAN ORDER

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AUTHOR'S PRESENTATION



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PRESENTATION OF THE OBSERVATORY

Under the direction of **Brahim Oumansour**, Associate Researcher at IRIS, the Maghreb Observatory aims to be a platform of expertise and analysis on the Maghreb to contribute to a better understanding of the political, social, economic, security and cultural developments in the countries that make up the Maghreb.

The Observatory aims to open a space for transdisciplinary debates and to organise conferences, round tables and colloquiums, within IRIS or in partnership with other French and foreign centres and institutions, with the objective of deciphering the crises and conflicts that are shaking the region, to explore avenues of evolution and to shed light on the geostrategic issues that arise from them.

The Maghreb Observatory is part of the Middle East / North Africa Programme of IRIS, directed by Didier Billion, Deputy Director of IRIS.



PROGRAMME
**MOYEN-ORIENT/
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The Middle East/North Africa research programme aims to decipher and put into perspective the changing political, economic, social and geopolitical realities in order to provide the keys to understanding and a framework for analysis and decision making for the benefit of the multiple actors involved in relations with the countries of the region concerned.

Its fields of intervention are multiple: animation of the strategic debate; realization of studies, reports and notes of consultancy; organization of conferences, colloquiums, seminars; tailor-made training.

The involution of the democratic institutions that had characterised the post-2011 Tunisia has reached a tipping point between the end of last year and the first months of 2023, a tumultuous time in which President Kais Saied has made his final push to establish a new order. The institutional overhaul operated by Saied has changed the face of Tunisia beyond recognition, dismantling step by step one of the most progressive constitutions of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and depoliticising the public space at the same time. Initially supported by a large fragment of the public opinion, Saied's authoritarian drift has indeed been associated with a political reset aimed at delegitimising the political opposition to the President's grand design. Its main pillars were the revision of the 2014 Constitution, achieved not without significant challenges with the referendum held last July; and general elections to renew a parliament first suspended and then dissolved during the constitutional crisis of March 2022.

AN EXERCISE OF CONSTITUTIONAL ENGINEERING

Part of the presidential roadmap announced in December 2021, both moves did not gain much traction as shown by the official turnout results announced by *Instance Supérieure Indépendante des Élections* (ISIE), whose same independence has been duly undermined by Saied himself with incisive changes to the elections law and the replacement of most of its members. The meagre 30.5% turnout for the referendum and, more importantly, the abysmal 8.8% for the first round of the general elections held on 17 December 2022 (followed by the 11% recorded in the second round on 29 January 2023) did not only show the widespread political apathy of ordinary Tunisians, still unable to make ends meet. It also confirmed the increasing distrust for a dysfunctional political system that is being deeply transfigured by Saied's constitutional engineering, informed to a top-down approach that is changing the institutional architecture of Tunisia without any significant input from the base, political parties, civil society organisations or other relevant actors.

Gone are the days of the National Dialogue Quartet that received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015. The same dialogue that has been pivotal in paving the way for the successful transition to the democratic experiment after the Jasmine revolution is now missing in action, obfuscated by a one-man show that carefully uses symbolism as a weapon of mass distraction. The new Revolution Day, in which the first round of general elections was held; and the Republic Day on which the referendum was carried out have been clearly used as fig leaves to conceal Saied's personalistic ruling, an approach not dissimilar from the absolutism of the founding father Habib Bourguiba and the autocracy of late President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. A simplistic answer to complex problems exacerbated by the state of exception

introduced by Saïd himself with his 2021 power grab, clearly informed to a rally-around-the-flag model that sees conspiracies everywhere, inside and outside the country.

A COUNTRY ADRIFT

That is the reason why the crackdown on the domestic opposition, resulting in the frequent arrests and questioning of political leaders, journalists and trade union representatives, is increasingly associated with nationalistic measures that risks sliding into xenophobia. The great replacement theory to which Saïd hinted in late February has won him praise of far-right parties that shares similar views in Europe, but also drew strong criticism from the African Union (AU) that condemned the racialised hate speech and expressed deep shock. More importantly, they finally put Tunisia on the radar of the international community, which has been mostly silent since the progressive concentration of power operated by Saïd. The uptick in migrant flows along the Central Mediterranean Route (with desperate Tunisian now leading the surge of arrivals in Italy) is creating discomfort in Brussels and Washington, finally worried about a country adrift in a Mediterranean region that has assumed strategic centrality in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

These concerns have pushed the High Representatives of the European Union (EU) for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Joseph Borrell Fontelles to consider a visit to Tunisia, recently condemned by the EU Parliament for its recent attacks against freedom of expression, associations and trade unions. Even the Biden administration, unusually shy in condemning the democratic backsliding under the rule of Saïd, has now come forward, expressing enormous concerns about Tunisia's trajectory in the past year and half, where the President's moves have deeply weakened the foundation principles of checks and balances. The US Secretary of State Antony Blinken also put the spotlight on the uncertain fate of the preliminary deal with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), warning of an economic collapse of Tunisia if an agreement is not reached soon. The future of the US\$1.98 staff-level agreement (reached in October) now hangs in balance after the Bretton Wood institution indefinitely postponed talks at the end of last year, just when Saïd was in Washington for the US-Africa Leaders summit.

INSULATE TUNISIA

On that occasion, the Tunisian president strongly rejected US criticism, an approach in line with the authoritarian stability model that is now creeping back to the region. The rejection of the external interferences in domestic affairs (which is reaching a climax these days with

reports of judicial authorities criminalising contact with western diplomats) shows how far have gone Saïed's efforts to insulate Tunisia according to a non-alignment stance that has visibly (re-)emerged after the start of the conflict in Ukraine to navigate the confrontation between Russia and the West. Neutrality openly professed by Algeria, Tunisia's cumbersome neighbour and main partner, whose President Abdelmajid Tebboune has recently embraced the conspiracy theories that make Tunisia the main target of an external plot. Confirming his support for Tunisia, Tebboune is clearly acting according to an anti-Moroccan perspective that has been reinforced after Saïed hosted the leader of the Polisario Front Brahim Ghali for the Eighth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD 8) in Tunis last summer.

In a region where the normalisation drive is causing frequent frictions and realignments, Tunisia's moves to strengthen diplomatic ties with Syria also reveal Saïed's ardent desire to not be left out from the establishment of a new regional order that clearly resembles the pre-Arab Spring era. A trend that works increasingly in favour of autocrats inside and outside the region and is likely to further decouple Tunisia from the West. The presence of observers from the Civil Chamber of the Russian Federation to monitor the first round of the general elections and the remarks of the ISIE President Farouk Bouasker that praised the 'privileged relations between Russia and Tunisia' were a worrying sign for the West, aware of the need to strike a delicate balance between its desire to stand for democratic integrity on one side; and the geopolitical imperative not to estrange its last few partners in a region where Moscow has gradually expanding its clout, from Libya to the Sahel.

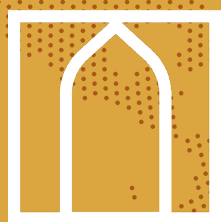
THE LAST CHANCE

In this context, the decision of the World Bank to suspend its cooperation program with Tunisia after Saïed's call on security forces and authorities to detain and deport migrants, spells trouble. It highlights the risks of further alienating a country in a deep crisis, pushing its leadership into the arms of systemic competitors like China and Russia, which have the advantage of not relying on political conditionality to affect change. Strings also attached by financial institutions like the IMF, which in exchange for its support requires drastic reforms that would inevitably affect the purchasing power of ordinary Tunisians, already shrank by the twin shock of the COVID-19 pandemic and the wheat shortage caused by the conflict in Ukraine. An explosive mix that puts Saïed between a rock and a hard place, with the President unable to openly commit to the blood, toil, sweat and tears plan imposed by the lender of last resort but surely aware that this might be his last chance to redress Tunisia's economy.

That leaves Saied in an uncomfortable position, increasingly cornered by a political opposition that has now gone far beyond the Islamist/secular divide that has characterised the political transition during the past decade. Alongside the establishment of the National Salvation Front including Ennahda; and the *Parti Destourien Libre* led by the increasingly popular Abir Moussi, other powerful forces are in motion. After the first few months in which it has adopted a wait and see approach, the *Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail* (UGTT) has finally made up its mind, taking advantage of the reforms urged by the IMF to adopt a confrontational stance against the President. The ability of the popular trade union to mobilise people might have suggested caution on the IMF terms to Saied, who, by the way, is still toying with his new Constitution. The dissolution of the municipal councils elected in 2018, recently announced by the President, paves the way for the direct democracy experiment that is supposed to give lifeblood to his political project.

Ostensibly portrayed as inspired by a bottom-up approach in which local and regional councils would have the primacy over an emasculated parliament, these new bodies look not dissimilar to the Basic People's Congresses of Muammar Gadhafi's Jamahiriya, a one-man rule not very much in disguise. A National Council of Regions and Districts is finally supposed to manifest itself at a later stage but while Saied's constitutional wizardry continues to produce magic, there are still no easy answers to Tunisia's economic woes, which are prone to cast a long shadow not only on Saied's nationalistic project but also on a region that after years of upheaval seems to finally see the light at the end of the tunnel. Indeed, the return to a precarious *status quo ante* imprinted on the authoritarian stability risks collapsing under the weight of the very same country that gave birth to the Arab Spring, creating shockwaves that would propagate across the Mediterranean and lay the basis for a new season of disorder.

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