Libya and Tunisia: Female Leaders and Female Role Models, to Increase Stability and Security

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INTRODUCTION

This report is the result of a workshop that was co-organized with the Union of the Mediterranean Universities (UNIMED)[1], that took place in Naples in July 2023, and was titled "Libya and Tunisia: Female Leaders and Female Role Models, to increase stability and security".

The workshop hosted a diverse group of women leaders from the region, who shared their insights and experience from different backgrounds such as government, academia and civil society and highlighted the positive role that women play in the region to promote and advance peace and security. Also a member of the Arab Women Organization (AWO)[2] attended the workshop.

In alignment with the NATO/EAPC Policy on Women, Peace and Security (2018) and Action Plan, the workshop supports NATO's efforts aimed at strengthening engagement with relevant civil society organisations, including women's rights organisations, to enhance NATO's understanding of how women perceive and are affected by various security challenges and how NATO's work can contribute to greater gender equality. The NATO Strategic Direction South Hub (NSD-S Hub) contributes to NATO's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda by engaging with civil society and academia from North Africa, the Middle East, the Sahel, the Sub-Sahara region and adjacent areas,, and by providing a platform for dialogue and exchange reflecting local views, knowledge and regional experience aimed at one common objective: contributing to security and stability, including by recognizing and amplifying the actions and contributions of women.

In its efforts to provide concrete and applicable insights for NATO leadership on how to engage women in peacebuilding processes, the NSD-S Hub in partnership with UNIMED organised this meeting to hear from women on their views on how to better engage and improve women's role in advancing security and peace in Libya and Tunisia. Notwithstanding the various contextual differences between the two countries, the workshop allowed the women to share successful experiences and bring out concrete examples and recommendations that could help the international community when engaging countries where women's involvement has been marginalised. This is why the 2022 Strategic Concept, which was endorsed at the Madrid Summit by Heads of State and Government of the NATO Allies, emphasises the cross-cutting importance of integrating the WPS agenda across the Alliance's three core tasks, and states that NATO will continue to advance gender equality as a reflection of its values.

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[1] UNIMED (Mediterranean Universities Union) is an association of 157 universities from 25 countries from the Mediterranean region and beyond, among which Tunisia and Libya.

Through its cooperation activities, UNIMED aims at strengthening the capacity building of the academic community, improving the universities' governance and quality, providing them with the appropriate tools and skills to develop an innovative and competitive wide range of studies.

[2] AWO is an intergovernmental organization established under the umbrella of the League of Arab States and headquartered in Egypt. www.arabwomenorg.org

The presence of UNIMED and the common goals with NATO to foster women's role to increase stability and security, is fully aligned with the recent "NATO 2030: United for a new Era" document which contains the following strong statement *"NATO must think more creatively about how it utilises partnerships in the South. Given the range of challenges and the geographical span, NATO cannot 'do it all' by itself. Therefore, NATO has to put itself at the centre of an informal system of overlapping organisations and bilateral/multilateral relationships to respond to threats and stabilise the region with other stakeholders"*, including an effort to *"Strengthen targeted Public Diplomacy efforts to raise and improve NATO's profile in populations of southern partners, including by establishing academic networks, scholarships, and fellowships"*.

Working on female empowerment requires a collective effort via strategic partnership among different actors, including the academic sector which plays a strategic role in promoting peace and security. At this regard UNIMED has the ability to easily involve representatives of the academic environment and youth, therefore the cooperation with them can represent an excellent opportunity to have an insight especially from those countries where the institutions are more fragile, thus turning the academic sector into a key stakeholder with whom to dialogue and create synergies around the existing challenges and viable solutions for the stability of the region.

BACKGROUND

Women in leadership positions make important contributions to development and sustainable peace, and although they remain significantly underrepresented in all aspects of decision-making, in Libya and Tunisia we can find good examples of women's representation at different levels. Both countries are facing a very challenging moment [3] and some women have found space for their voice. They can be an inspiration for the new generations. In Libya since 2020, 17 women, among 75 participants [4], have participated in the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum to build consensus on a unified governance framework and agreements to restore Libya's sovereignty and the democratic legitimacy of its institutions, including national elections initially scheduled for December 2021. Tunisia is seen as a leader in women's rights in the Arab world. However, some say electoral reforms introduced by President Kaïs Saied, the President of Tunisia since 2019, have made it more difficult for female candidates to run for office. At the same time, he has announced his commitment to women's representation, appointing the Arab world's first female Prime Minister, Najla Bouden Romdhane, and a woman as Chief of Staff, his closest and most powerful aide.

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[3] "Since the presidential measures to suspend the parliament –in Tunisia–, dismiss the government and draft a new constitution were enacted in 2021, socioeconomic conditions have continued to deteriorate" and "nine years after the fall of Muammar Qaddafi, Libya continues to struggle to end its violent conflict and build state institutions". United States Institute for Peace (Fact sheet "USIP work in Tunisia" and "USIP work in Libya" on www.usip.org).

[4] https://unsmil.unmissions.org/statement-libyan-women-participating-libyan-political-dialogue-forum

Panel 1: Tunisia

Two female speakers from Tunisia drew from their respective experiences within the political sphere as well as the academic/civil society sphere. They provided a comprehensive overview of the history and progression of women's rights in the country, and, in the context of the continued democratic transition.

The speakers noted that, from a gender equality perspective, Tunisia stands apart within the broader MENA region. They reiterated the importance of the Personal Status Code (PSC) enacted in 1956 following Tunisia's independence, which was the origin of a series of emancipating reforms for Tunisian women and which included provisions such as equal divorce rights for women and men, access to education and work, and control over their fertility.

Gender equality has been a guiding principle of the national transformation undertaken since 2011. Making reference to the Tunisian Constitution (2014), the speakers attributed the inclusion of provisions reiterating the principle of non-discrimination (art 21), and guarantees of equal opportunities between women and men "to have access to all levels of responsibilities in all domains" (art. 46) to the strong mobilisation of civil society, particularly women's associations who advocated for the inclusion of women's rights in the Constitution.

Despite high-level commitments and legal guarantees, continued political transition has revealed gaps between commitment and practice, raising concerns about reversals of hard fought equality gains.

Referring to data from the World Economic Forum's 2020 Global Gender Gap Report, it was highlighted that Tunisia ranked 124 out of a total of 153 countries in terms of gender equality – a drop from 90th in 2006. Tunisia's drop in ranking in specific areas over the same period was also noted:

- 97th to 142th place in terms of economic participation and job opportunities.
- 76th to 106th place in education.
- 53rd to 67th place in political participation.

Drawing particular attention to women's political participation, speakers noted that despite society's favourable attitude towards the presence of women in decision-making positions, the political sphere is still widely viewed by the general public as not appropriate for women. Speakers referred to a new electoral law passed by President Saied's Government in September 2021, which eliminated the principle of gender parity[5] in elected assembles and has had the effect of limiting the representation of women in the political sphere. The proportion of women at the head of political parties consequently remains low. In 2022, only 15% of MPs were female and there were no women elected in 8 regions. Further, female politicians have been subject to virtual discrimination, intimidation and violence. While in 2019 there was, for the first time,

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[5] Article 24 of the Loi organique n° 2014-16 du 26 mai 2014 relative aux élections at aux referendums states the following: «Les candidatures sont présentées sur la base du principe du parité entre femmes et hommes et a la règle d'alternance entre eux sur la liste».

institutional work undertaken on political violence against women in elections, there was no mention of this in the 2022 national report on combating violence against women.

Speakers concluded that concerns and challenges to women's rights and participation remain notwithstanding, there is strength to be drawn from deeply rooted legal foundations for women's rights and gender equality in Tunisia, as well as the country's strong history of civil society activism and mobilisation for women's rights. Reference was made to Najla Bouden's government, formed in October 2021, as the first Tunisian government to be presided over by a woman.

In terms of the way ahead and work still to be done, the speakers noted the following:

- There is still work to be done to change mind-sets; previous generations who advocated for women's rights and gender equality need to remain active, and they need to engage with the youth – young women and men – to encourage and mentor them to take on the advocacy role.

- Strategic goals for social change and democratic transition need to be set and allocated with sufficient resources.

- Gender equality needs to be institutionalised, particularly within frameworks for political participation. This needs to be supported by indicators and accountability mechanisms for follow-through.

- These efforts could be supported by an analysis of efforts over the past twelve years, taking into account various perspectives and sectors (judges, ministers, parliamentarians, economic actors, administrative decision-makers, journalists...) to identify lessons learned, what has worked and what has not, in terms of democratic transition and women's inclusion.

- Support for a systematic measurement of the level of implementation of laws, texts and legal and strategic tools adopted to fight discrimination and violence, as well as a study on the cost of inequality. This should involve men and consider the various social and economic elements.

Panel 2: Libya

The experience of the Libyan women was presented by four women speakers during the panel discussion. Through data and information derived from national sources, including a short survey as well as results of a qualitative research based on interviewing women activists and leaders, women speakers shed light on Libyan women experiences in supporting security and stability in Libya. They further provided insights on existing societal perceptions of women engagement and concluded with a set of recommendations for international actors. Women speakers highlighted that women have been greatly involved in security and stabilisation efforts through personal and community initiatives related to civic, political and Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) activities, whereby women constitute 41% of the volunteers in Libya with 7% of the registered Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) being led by women. Such efforts built mostly on creating linkages and engaging with local communities to establish "trust, promote social unity, address the roots causes

of conflicts, and contribute to stability through mediation, humanitarian and human security efforts." However, these efforts on the ground did not result in a better recognition among decision-makers of the contribution of women, nor did the efforts result in securing a place for women in official political dialogues or on negotiation tables. As it appears, women are more or less active in the informal sector (volunteering) but not at all included in the formal sector.

Such marginalisation of women, the women speakers argued, is related to the socio-cultural perceptions on the roles of women, which resonate the existing legal frameworks that discriminate against women in their right to equal citizenship. To this extent, the question on whether women "can prove their ability to establish peace and security" is perceived by many, to be restricted to their activism in civil society rather than in engaging with the military. In addition, some members of the CSOs perceive that "the positive roles that women can play and contribute to achieve peace" are mostly restricted to their role in organising awareness-raising and peace-promoting campaigns (51.1%). On the other hand, members of CSOs perceived that women's roles in reconciliation committees, official negotiation or dialogue committees are less critical.

Women speakers concluded that more efforts need to be exerted locally and internationally to ensure that women's initiatives and contribution to security and stabilization are factored in negotiations and peace building efforts. Some of their recommendations to the international community included:

1. Encourage – and put pressure on – Libyan actors to include women in all aspects and stages of the peace process, including negotiations, decision-making, and implementation. This can be accomplished through engagement with key stakeholders during visits and meetings with Libyan delegations.

2. Gender mainstreaming of documents, such as mutual, bilateral agreements, and memorandums of understanding (MoU) that would be signed by Libyan actors and international actors, to ensure gender perspectives.

3. Support efforts to reform the security sector in Libya, including training for security forces and assistance in building effective and accountable institutions, with a focus on gender equality and ensuring the participation of women in those military trainings.

4. Engage in dialogue with Libyan CSOs and women's groups to understand security challenges and promote the benefits of women's inclusion in peace and security processes.

5. Provide flexible, core funding for programs and initiatives that promote women's rights, education, training, and to participate in international events and provide support civil society organisations building up capacities.

6. Create alternative funding mechanisms, such as rapid response funds, that are accessible, flexible, and allow rapid, short-term support for urgent initiatives.

7. Monitor and report on the situation of women's rights, advocating for greater protection and awareness about challenges in conflict-affected in Libya.

CONCLUSIONS

Women constitute an important factor in establishing stability and security. On many occasions, decision-makers fail to hear women's voices and understand their perspectives on political and security matters, which eventually influence the establishment of sustainable peace and security.

The WPS agenda is a good reminder and framework that allows the international community to put in place mechanisms to listen to women and enhance their role in peacebuilding and anchoring long-term stability and security in the national and regional context.

From a WPS perspective despite Libya and Tunisia are characterized by different realities, in both countries universities can set a good example and promote gender equality best practice. Furthermore, they can play a fundamental role through youth engagement, encouraging and mentoring them to take on the advocacy role. Meanwhile international organizations (IOs) should adopt concrete commitments to guarantee the presence of women in peace negotiation processes and women's participation should be recognized as a structural component of the peace processes.

While in Libya women ask for greater support to reform the security sector, including the importance of ensuring women's participation in training and education programmes, in Tunisia women advocate for a change of mind-set – evolving beyond previous generations who advocated for women's rights and gender –. Experts from both countries emphasized the need to strengthen partnerships and cooperation between states and IOs, and stressed the need to support, empower and give voice to women's organizations such as the Arab Women Organization (AWO) and FemWise-Africa. The aim of these networks is primarily to strengthen the role of women in conflict prevention and mediation, through educational training programmes and trough a constant dialogue with international bodies.

Civil society, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), IOs and governmental organizations should work together to create the proper instruments for a monitoring and reporting programme on the situation of women's rights.

The NSD-S Hub will continue its effort to act as a "docking station" among different stakeholders, organizations and academia, making possible different entities discuss, and serving as a platform not only for sharing experiences but also for reflecting on the role that women and younger generations can play in situations of instability, crisis or conflict.

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