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THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE UNITED STATES TOWARDS TUNISIA IN THE CONTEXT OF CHALLENGES POSED BY THE ARAB SPRING

Katarzyna Czornik*

ABSTRACT

The Arab Spring, ignited by the act of self-immolation of a street vendor from Tunisia, was an unprecedented event in the Middle East and North Africa region. On the one hand, it brought hope of political change and pro-democratic movement in the Maghreb and Mashreq region. On the other hand, there were concerns whether the situation in that part of the world would be peaceful after the social rebellion ended and the power of some long-term dictators was taken away. The main aim of the article is to study how the Arab Spring influenced the nature and evolution of the relations between Tunisia and the U.S. with a particular focus on the U.S. position on the internal changes that took place in Tunisia after the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring, despite its ideas of freedom, liberalisation of political systems and democratisation of the Middle East and North Africa, seemed to be a concern for the U.S. administration that would have to face the dilemma it had tried to avoid for decades: whether to support the pro-democracy movements and people who want to overthrow the dictatorships in the name of democracy(?), or to support the old authoritarian regimes and, hence, contradict own ideas in the name of self-interest, thus maintaining the status quo and – to some extent – the secularism in the Middle East and North Africa region. Therefore, in hindsight, Tunisia seems to be a special case among the Arab Spring uprisings. On the one hand, the Arab Spring in Tunisia implied the overthrowing of the long-time dictator Ben Ali and temporarily strengthening of the fundamentalist forces. On the other hand, it made Tunisia serve as an example of a country where the desired changes took place without a bloody civil war and destabilisation, as was the case in other countries in the Middle East region under the influence of the Arab Spring.

Key words: Arab Spring, USA, Tunisia, terrorism, ISIS

Introduction

The main purpose of this article is to answer the question of the impact of the Arab Spring on the nature and evolution of the relations between Tunis and

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Washington, as well as to analyse the United States' position on the internal changes that took place in Tunisia as a result of the Arab Spring and the main implications and challenges of this phenomena, including the increasing threat of radical Islamic groups (e.g. the so-called Islamic State), seeking to destabilise the situation in the country.

This article discusses the objectives and effectiveness of the U.S. policy in the face of the Arab Spring in a country where the social rebellions started – Tunisia. This country was not chosen randomly. On the one hand, the Arab Spring in Tunisia implied the overthrowing of the long-time dictator **Ben Ali** and temporarily strengthening the fundamentalist forces. On the other hand, it made Tunisia serve as an example of a country where the desired changes took place without a bloody civil war and destabilisation, as had happened in other countries in the Middle East region under the influence of the Arab Spring.

The Arab Spring was an unprecedented event in the Middle East and North Africa. On the one hand, it brought hope of political change and pro-democratic movement in the Maghreb and Mashreq region. On the other hand, there were concerns whether the situation in that part of the world would be peaceful after the social rebellion ended and the power of some long-term dictators was taken away. The Arab Spring, with its ideas of freedom, liberalisation of political systems and democratisation, was in line with the main goals of subsequent U.S. administrations in that part of the world. Despite this, it still was a surprise and a challenge for the U.S. administration, which had not expected such a huge and intense wave of protests aimed at overthrowing regimes that had been effectively supported by Washington in the region for decades. The U.S. administration had to face a dilemma it had tried to avoid: whether to support the pro-democracy movements and the people who want to overthrow the dictatorships in the name of democracy, or to support the old authoritarian regimes and, hence, contradict their own ideas in the name of self-interest, thus maintaining the status quo and – to some extent – the secularism in the Middle East and North Africa region. Therefore, the White House had to adopt a careful strategy which would at the same time express its support for the freedom fighters in the countries of the Middle East and not harm the real long-term interests and objectives of the U.S. politics in this region.

1 Tunisia in the foreign policy of the United States before the Arab Spring

Before analysing the Washington's position on the events of 2010-2011, it is worth mentioning that Tunisia-United States relations date back as far as 1797. Tunisia was one of the first countries to recognise the United States of America as an independent state in the 18th Century. On 26 March 1799, the first treaty of friendship and trade was concluded between Tunisia and the United States. The first American consulate was established in Tunis on 20 January 1800. In September 1805, the president of the United States, **Thomas Jefferson**, hosted the first special envoy from Tunisia. During the next decades, the mutual relations had never been strategic in their nature, but had been friendly. In the 20th Century, during their fight for independence, the leaders of the national liberation movement in Tunisia maintained good relations with the United States. On 17 May 1956, the USA, as the first great power in the world, recognised Tunisia as a fully independent state. In March 1957, an agreement for U.S. economic and technical aid to Tunisia was signed in Tunis. Over the next 35 years (until 1994), the United States provided Tunisia with circa 1.4 billion dollars as part of the *United States Agency for International Development* (USAID), which offered Tunisia low-interest loans, grants, technical assistance and cooperation in the sphere of agricultural commodities trading. USAID also played a crucial role in helping to build the airports in Tunis-Carthage, establishing the Faculty of Economics and Political Science at the University of Tunis and in the implementation of many other large investment projects such as the Oued Nebhana Dam, the construction of pipelines and irrigation systems located in central Tunisia, highways and bridges throughout the country and improvements to water supply systems in Tunisian towns. In 1961, Tunisia became the first Arab country to host about 2 382 American volunteers from the Peace Corps (Tunisian-American Relations..., 2016).

Here it might be added that the cooperation between Tunisia and the United States within the Peace Corps, as well as the efforts of the USAID, were continued also after the Cold War. USAID has continued to finance projects implemented in Tunisia (also after the Arab Spring), including the technical assistance for Technopark Sfax, trainings aimed at the development of the Tunisian business sector – for small and medium-sized enterprises – and information technology and telecommunications development trainings. In May 2011, USAID opened an office in Tunisia in order to start a two-year project

promoting democracy in Tunisia, especially in the regions outside of the country's centre. The project cost 7 million dollars and included material and technical support for the organisations helping to develop a civil society and for local government institutions.

During the dictatorship of **Ben Ali**, the relations between the USA and Tunisia focused mainly on the security issues. Although Tunisia was an active member of NATO, it did not support the liberation of Kuwait campaign in 1991 nor the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Despite the relatively good relations, the U.S. administration permanently criticised **Ben Ali** for repressions against the opposition and rampant corruption. At the same time, however, given the gravity of bilateral relations, the United States continued to aid his regime economically and militarily. Since 1994, 65 American companies have invested 746 million dollars in Tunisia and employed 18 thousand people. In October 2002, the USA and Tunisia signed a bilateral trade and investment framework agreement (TIFA). TIFA, according to the Washington plans, was to be the first step in creating a free trade zone in the region (Agreement between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of Tunisia Concerning the Development of Trade and Investment Relations, 2002). In 2010, the U.S. exports to Tunisia totalled \$571 million and imports \$405 million (Agreement Between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of Tunisia Concerning the Development of Trade and Investment Relations, 2010). The USA supported Tunisia also by using measures of economic impact in the form of the Economic Support Funds (ESF). In 2008, the ESF funding amounted to \$1.2 million (Migdalovitz, 2009). In 2010, the Consular Section of the U.S. Embassy issued more than 4500 visas to Tunisian students (265), student exchanges (178), tourists and businessmen (4000), and Tunisians travelling to the USA (Tunisian American Cooperation, 2016). During the last 10 years, the U.S. Department of Defence has assigned Tunisia \$6.8 million as part of a broadly defined program of humanitarian aid¹. In addition, within the framework of the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), in August 2004, at

¹ This sum was allocated to projects such as: construction of a training centre for rural women in Makthar (\$500 thousand); construction of a centre of AIDS prevention in Tunis and conducting research there (\$400 thousand); construction of an integration centre for the blind in Sidi Thabet (\$350 thousand); materials and additional ambulances for the Tunisian Red Crescent on the Tunisian-Libyan border (\$152 thousand); construction of orphanages and a centre for single mothers in Kairouan (\$335 thousand); construction of a school for autistic children in La Marsa (\$135 thousand).

the U.S. Embassy in Tunis, a regional office was opened in order to support and coordinate MEPI activities across the Middle East and North Africa. The U.S. government secured the financing of Tunisia's participation in many bilateral and regional programs under the auspices of MEPI².

As far as the military aid and cooperation is concerned (Zajac, *Metody i środki oddziaływania USA w bliskowschodnim procesie pokojowym 1991-2000*, pp. 141-142), Tunisia received from the U.S. government \$8.5 million in 2006 as part of a Foreign Military Finance (FMF) program. In 2008, this amount was reduced to \$8.3 million, but in 2009, it was raised to \$12 million. The purpose of aid offered as part of FMF is the maintenance and modernisation of Tunisian armed forces, as well as the strengthening of military cooperation between Tunisia and the United States. The United States Department of Defence and the Tunisian Ministry of Defence have also cooperated by conducting bilateral military trainings and exercises. Therefore, Tunisia has also enjoyed the second instrument of U.S. support – the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program, the aim of which was to train Tunisian military officers³. As part of the Non-proliferation, Anti-Terrorism, Demining, and Related Programs (NADR), the U.S. financial support for Tunisia in 2008 amounted to \$100 thousand, in 2009 it was four times more and reached \$425 thousand and in 2010 it was \$300 thousand (Migdalovitz, 2009).

Military instruments used for the cooperation with Tunisia brought the results Washington wanted them to bring. Thanks to the support received, Tunisia became an important ally of the United States in the global war on terrorism. Since the beginning of the 20th Century, the United States Department of State has financed a number of anti-terrorist trainings for the Tunisian security services. More than 300 members of the Tunisian security services participated in the U.S. courses on security with subject matters including: crisis response, the fight against terrorism and crisis management at airports. It is also worth

² These included: Commercial Law Development Program; surveys of public opinion in the political process; participation in a program of cooperation and partnership between universities in Tunisia and academic centres in the USA (\$400 thousand); trainings for Tunisian entrepreneurs in the USA (MEET USA); creation of summer universities allowing Tunisians to study in the United States; implementation of a democracy supporting program and the Small Grants Program (Building Change), as well as offering young Tunisians internships in U.S. companies.

³ Since its implementation in 1980, IMET has trained more than 3 600 Tunisian officers. In 2005, 64 Tunisian military professionals were trained as part of the IMET program and the sum of money dedicated to this program then amounted to \$1.85 million. In 2008 and 2009, \$1.7 million was allocated to IMET, and \$2.3 million in 2010.

noting that the United States and Tunisia cooperated strongly through science and technology, too. In June 2004, the two countries signed an Agreement on Science and Technology Cooperation, the purpose of which was to establish a permanent, bilateral cooperation. Under this Agreement, the U.S. programs supporting the development of science and technology in Tunisia were implemented. One of the programs that is worth mentioning here is the U.S. National Weather Service National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration. Scientists from NASA/Goddard Space Flight Centre, the NOAA/National Weather Service, Department of the Interior's U.S. Geological Survey and the U.S. Department of Agriculture visited Tunisia in May and October 2005. As part of an educational project directed at Tunisian youth, a documentary film about those visits was made and Tunisian students were invited to NASA, the University of Maryland and the National Air and Space Institute. Tunisia was also an active partner of the United States in cultural endeavours and exchange. It benefited from the Fulbright Program, the International Visitor Program, as well as the Humphrey Fellowship Program (Tunisian American Cooperation, 2016).

From the perspective of the United States, **Ben Ali's** regime for over 20 years had guaranteed maintaining and developing economic relations with Tunisia, stability of the country and keeping the radical Islamist groups wanting to take over the country under control (Arieff, 2011). Therefore, there were many unknowns regarding the regime change and possible radicalisation of public mood, Islamisation of socio-political life or reorientation of Tunisia's foreign policy to be considered.

2 The position of the United States towards the challenges posed by the Arab Spring in Tunisia

The Arab Spring has begun in the middle of December 2010 by the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia. On 17 December 2010, **Mohammed Bouazizi**, a vegetables vendor from the streets of Sidi Bouzid, set himself on fire in a protest against the confiscation of his wares by the police and the humiliation that was then inflicted on him (Dziekan, 2001, pp. 353-354). This act of self-immolation became a symbol of the protest against the Tunisian government, the authoritarian regime of president **Ben Ali** who had held the office since 1987 (for 23 years), the restrictions against the opposition (Tunisia: Elections..., 2009) and other political parties (despite the appearance of pluralism, the

Democratic Constitutional Rally led by **Ben Ali** himself was a dominant force), the police having too much power (**Ben Ali** had a military background), the censorship and limited civil liberties, ubiquitous corruption and nepotism (thanks to numerous connections and interrelations, the country was governed by “the Family”), as well as the increasing unemployment, inflation and poverty rate (especially the pauperisation of peasants and workers). Therefore, similarly to other countries of the Middle East and North Africa, the social, economic and political determinants contributed to an outbreak of rioting in Tunisia (Anbarami, 2013). **Bouazizi**’s self-immolation is regarded as the direct cause of the Arab Spring in the whole Maghreb and Mashreq region (Zdanowski, 2011, pp. 12-13). However, in the case of Tunisia, there is an additional factor to be mentioned. The sudden deterioration of public mood and the outrage of people was in fact caused in early December 2010 when WikiLeaks disclosed the U.S. diplomatic cables that contained information on the relations between Washington and Tunis, as well as the analysis of the socio-political situation in Tunisia from the perspective of the United States. These documents revealed a widespread corruption of the Tunisian authorities at all levels, along with nepotism, violations of civil rights and freedoms and showed how much President **Ben Ali**’s administration was alienated from the social reality (Kozłowski, 2012, pp. 119-120). Social discontent was intensified after WikiLeaks released the material that confirmed the pathologies of Tunisian authorities causing an explosion and expansion of revolutionary mood both in Tunisia and in other countries of the region.

The events in Tunisia surprised the U.S. establishment with how violent and radical they were and how fast they spread. Also surprising was the popularity and enthusiasm the revolution gained among the people of Arab countries, Western elites and Western citizens. For years, Tunisia was perceived as one of the most stable, modern and even, to some extent, Europeanised countries in the Middle East and North Africa region (Lipa, 2013, pp. 52-56). The Arab Spring finally made the western policymakers realise that such perception was wrong and that the conclusions they had made were too far-fetched. Thus, the situation in Tunisia initially strongly alarmed the international community, both with its own being and the escalation of violence with which it was associated. For countries with interests in this part of the world – especially for the United States, but also for France, Italy and Germany – a possible regime change posed a risk of destabilisation, foreign policy reorientation and loss of influence in countries which until now had been regarded as clients or even political allies.

Barack Obama's administration reacted to the events of the Arab Spring in Tunisia as late as 7 January 2011, when the Tunisian ambassador to the United States was summoned and the United States officially expressed concerns regarding the intensification of the protests. The United States also called on President **Ben Ali** to respect civil rights and liberties, including the right to peaceful assembly. Four days later, the U.S. Department of State expressed deep concern about the use of excessive force by the government of Tunisia (Quinn, 2011). When on 14 January 2011 **Ben Ali** resigned from office and left the country (he fled to Saudi Arabia), the Democratic Constitutional Rally was banned and the new interim authorities announced political reforms and free elections to be held within six months. The President of the United States issued a statement in which he supported the political and social reforms. **Barack Obama** urged all the parties and the new authorities of Tunisia to the actual implementation of the promises made to the public, to carry out perfectly free and fair elections and respect the principles of democracy and human rights. The U.S. President condemned the use of violence against Tunisians giving anti-regime speeches, while expressing support for their courage in the fight for the universal rights of the individual. As he then stated, each nation has the right to introduce democracy in its own way. 'Those countries that respect the universal rights of their people are stronger and more successful than those that do not. I have no doubt that Tunisia's future will be brighter if it is guided by the voices of the Tunisian people' (Statement by the President on Events in Tunisia, 2011).

U.S. actions regarding the changes brought by the Arab Spring to Tunisia were not simply a mere statement of support. On 26 January 2011, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State, **Jeffrey Feltman**, visited Tunis and expressed full support for pro-democratic changes in Tunisia, called on the interim government to meet the expectations of the nation, but also offered international support and U.S. aid in the organisation of free elections. He stated the following: 'This is an exciting and unprecedented moment in Tunisia's history with great challenges but also great opportunities for the Tunisian people to chart their own course' (Rogin, 2011). It is worth mentioning in this context that **Feltman** also tried to distance the U.S. position on the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia from the official position of the U.S. administration adopted towards the mass anti-regime protests in other countries of the Middle East and North Africa, especially towards the events in Egypt (Milczanowski, Sawicka, 2013, pp. 45-50). An interesting analysis of this issue was presented by one of the most prominent

U.S. newspapers – *the New York Times*. Comparing and assessing the implications of the Arab Spring events in Egypt and Tunisia, the article indicated that those two countries followed two completely different paths. Egypt, dominated in turns by Islamists and military dictatorship, plunged into chaos. Tunisia, on the other hand, was faced with changes that could embark the country on the path of reforms and stabilisation of socio-political life. *The New York Times* pointed out that after overthrowing **Ben Ali**'s regime in 2011, the situation in Tunisia was relatively stable, the army remained under the control of the civilian authorities and the main political forces cooperated rather well. This state of affairs resulted, among other things, in a compromise on a new constitution, which guaranteed citizens a wide range of civil rights, although some provisions aroused considerable controversy (including those relating to the judicial system and the lack of guarantees of independence of courts and judges). The newspaper was also right to point out that despite the great success of the transformation, the authorities in Tunisia had a long way to go to achieve full stability or broader democratisation, especially in the context of the progressive re-islamisation of the Middle East and North Africa region.

It needs to be said that the Jasmine Revolution led to opposing views in the U.S. Congress on the issue of aiding Tunisia – a country going through a political transformation. Some congressmen opted for a strong support of the transformations in Tunisia, which they saw as an Arab state entering a path to democracy and economic stabilisation. Other congressmen argued that due to budget cuts, the United States should not subsidise the transformations in Tunisia and that the financial contributions should come from the private sector or from other donors. However, despite the differences of opinion among the members of the U.S. legislature, the **Obama** administration has taken real action to stabilise the situation and control the transformation of the post-revolutionary Tunisia, thus indirectly deciding to maintain and strengthen the U.S. influence in North Africa. Firstly, in 2011, the U.S. administration allocated about \$42 million as a non-military support of transformations in Tunisia⁴.

⁴ This sum was divided as follows: approximately \$23.3 million was allocated for the establishment of independent media, building Tunisian civil society, political pluralism, establishing the framework of the electoral system and the implementation of economic reforms; approximately \$10 million was allocated for the implementation of USAID initiatives, including \$5 million for the reform of the political and social initiatives, \$2 million for the operation of the USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives and \$3 million to support the electoral process; less than \$3 million was allocated to the

Secondly, in August 2011, the U.S. Department of Defence notified Congress about the project of aiding Tunisia with an amount of \$20.9 million for upgrading Tunisian military capabilities. The support would include providing equipment for the forces of various types, and this was associated with conducting operational exercises. Moreover, several international organisations that received significant financial support from the United States, under the influence of Washington, committed to support financially the transformations in Tunisia. The World Bank and African Development Bank committed to provide support to Tunisia in the amount of \$500 million each⁵. In addition, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development – which received financial support from the U.S. in the past – was considering extending the aid to North Africa, potentially including Tunisia. The United States also decided to continue the initiative of the U.S. Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP) – a regional interagency program helping countries of northern and western Africa to control their territory better, strengthening their ability to fight terrorism and maintaining regional cooperation. Tunisia is one of 11 countries participating in the TSCTP (Programs and Initiatives, 2015)⁶. Comparing the amount of aid that the United States granted Tunisia before and after the Arab Spring, its disproportionate increase after the Jasmine Revolution should be pointed out. Before the Arab Spring, the U.S. aid was basically limited to the military support. Since 2011, the United States has provided Tunisia with \$610 million of aid. This is 40 times the amount of aid provided by the United States to Tunisia in 2009 (Arieff, 2015)⁷.

When mentioning only a few elements of the economic support Tunisia has received from the United States since the events of the Jasmine Revolution in

International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) with the aim of supporting the judiciary and police reforms.

⁵ In May 2011, during the G8 summit, the countries decided to support Tunisia and Egypt with \$20 billion of assistance within 3 years. This amount was to be spent by the international financial organisations.

⁶ In 2013, Tunisia received a loan from the International Monetary Fund in the amount of \$175 billion, \$115 billion of which was already allocated before December 2014.

⁷ From the beginning of 2011 (until July 2012), the U.S. Department of State had given Tunisia more than \$300 million as broadly understood transformation and military support. In 2013, the Obama administration decided to give Tunisia a further \$36.6 million. It is worth noting that in September 2011, the State Department's Office for Middle East Transitions was established. It is led by Ambassador William Taylor, who manages the Middle East Response Fund/Middle East and North Africa Incentive Fund (MERF/MENA-IF). In 2012, the Office and Congress allocated \$185 million to MERF. In 2013, the administration of President Obama planned to spend another \$770 million for MENA-IF. Tunisia has also benefited from that money.

2011, the following should be listed: \$100 million provided in 2012 in order to pay off the foreign debt obligations by Tunis; \$85 million in loan guarantee granted in 2012 and 2014; \$80 million allocated to the Tunisian-American Enterprise Fund aimed at supporting the growth of Tunisia's entrepreneurs and accelerating economic reforms in the country; \$49 million allocated to MEPI with the intention of strengthening the civil society, the development of political parties, independent media, electoral processes and local entrepreneurship; \$16 million to help USAID with the Information and Communication Technologies Competitiveness Project (Arieff, Humud, 2015).

What is equally important is that in 2014, the U.S. Department of State also conducted activities within the framework of standardised assistance to Tunisia. This was because the U.S. administration perceived the results of parliamentary and presidential elections in Tunisia in 2014 as a success. The **Obama** administration asked Congress to give \$134 million to Tunisia in 2016 (Enduring U.S.-Tunisian..., 2015)⁸. The U.S. aid to Tunisia has also been increased within FMF from \$25 million in 2015 to \$62.5 million planned for 2016⁹. Tunisia also cooperated with NATO under the Operation Active Endeavour in the Mediterranean Sea launched after the terrorist attacks carried out on 11 September 2001. The aim of the operation was to protect civilian ships in the area of the Strait of Gibraltar against terrorist attacks. Tunis also worked within the framework of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue. In August 2014, during the United States-Africa Leaders' Summit in Washington, representatives of the U.S. administration declared that Tunisia would be one of the six African countries participating in the new Security Governance Initiative (SGI) program (Arieff, Humud, 2015)¹⁰.

Cooperation in the field of economy and military was also extended on the political level. This was manifested in numerous meetings at different levels and

⁸ Therefore, it proposed to increase the ESF from \$30 million set for 2015 to \$55 million proposed for 2016. Tunisia has become one of the largest U.S. trading partners in the region, which was related to, among other things, the implementation of TIFA and the agreement for the avoidance of double taxation. In 2013, the U.S. exports to Tunisia totalled \$870 million and imports \$749 million.

⁹ It should be added that in terms of military support, already in 2012 Washington had allocated \$29.5 million to Tunisia as part of the FMF and \$1.9 million as part of IMET. For 2013, respectively \$15 million and \$2.3 million were scheduled for Tunis.

¹⁰ In July 2014, the U.S. administration asked Congress for permission to sell Tunisians military products and services worth \$700 million, including 12 Black Hawk helicopters under the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) program. Tunis also expressed its intention to acquire from the United States at least two C 130J transport aircraft.

a number of bilateral declarations. The most important meeting took place in February 2014. On 18 February 2014, United States Secretary of State, **John Kerry**, visited Tunisia. He met with the Tunisian President and Prime Minister. After the talks, **Kerry** issued a statement reaffirming the U.S. commitment to assist Tunisia on its future path of democratic transition. **John Kerry** also emphasised the importance of the sense of security for the reforms to prosper. **Kerry** announced a new strategy of bilateral cooperation and continuation of the U.S.-Tunisia Strategic Dialogue (Remarks John Kerry Secretary of State, 2015). In order to further define the initiated strategic dialogue and the objectives of the new strategy in bilateral relations, the first meeting between the leaders of both countries took place in Washington DC on 2-4 April 2014 (Tunisian Prime Minister..., 2015). At the White House, President **Barack Obama** met with the Prime Minister of Tunisia, who also later met with Deputy Secretary of State **William Burns**. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Tunisia visiting Washington also spoke with **Burns**. In a joint statement, the officials once again reaffirmed continuous U.S. support for the political transformation in Tunisia, as well as the will to cooperate in order to improve Tunisia's economic, educational and cultural life and to guarantee the security of the country by combating terrorism (U.S.-Tunisia Joint Statement on Strategic Partnership, 2015).

The United States has been monitoring all the political events that took place in Tunisia. Important in this context were the presidential elections won by **Beji Caid Essebsi**. In response to this event, President **Barack Obama** congratulated **Essebsi** on his victory, emphasised the need to strengthen the strategic partnership with Tunisia and invited **Essebsi** to visit the United States (Readout of the President's Call with President Caid Essebsi of Tunisia, 2015).

On 21 May 2015, the new president of Tunisia met with President **Barack Obama** at the White House. **Essebsi** recognised the long-standing friendship between the United States and Tunisia, the U.S. commitment to reinforce Tunisian democracy, as well as the continuation and extension of the strategic partnership that was initiated a year earlier also with the new government of Tunisia. In the context of increasing problems with terrorism in Tunisia, the presidents stressed the need for U.S.-Tunisian cooperation in the field of security and acceleration of important economic reforms in Tunisia. What is important, the problems of the Middle East and North Africa region in the context of the events in Libya and the escalating terrorist threat in this part of the globe was also discussed during the meeting. Therefore, **Barack Obama** valued Tunisia as one of the most important non-NATO allies of the United States.

3 The position of the United States on the transformation of Tunisia after the Arab Spring and the attempts at Islamisation of Tunisia

Despite the support of Tunisia's transition to democracy and preventing the Islamisation of the socio-political sphere, the stability and secularity of the country after the wave of the Arab Spring could still be questioned. The international community was openly concerned about the outcome of the first parliamentary election. After a series of subsequent turbulent protests, the election to the Constituent Assembly was scheduled for 23 October 2011 (Elections in Tunisia..., 2015).

Uncertainty about the course of the Tunisian transition was therefore caused, among other things, by the signals of a possible Islamisation of the country after the legislative election. An important symbol of the fall of **Ben Ali's** regime and of the transformation that had begun was the return to the country on 30 January 2011 of the leader of the moderate Islamic political party the Ennahda Movement, **Rached Ghannouchi**, who for 22 years had lived in exile in France. The return of the supporter of the renaissance of Islam in public life repressed by **Ben Ali's** regime aroused concern not only in Washington but also among policy makers in Tunisia itself. Important questions were then raised about the future shape of relations between Tunisia and other members of the international community, including Washington – Tunisia's supporter. Questions about the course of foreign policy of Tunisia in the case of the Ennahda Movement winning the free election were also asked (Gerges, 2016, pp. 243).

According to the agreed schedule, the election of 23 October 2011 was the first democratic election to the Constituent Assembly of Tunisia. The moderate Islamic political party Ennahda Movement won the election by getting 37.04% of the votes. The party proclaimed the need to increase the importance of Islam in social and political life. Ennahda won 89 seats in the 217-seat parliament (41% of seats). Although Ennahda had won, the Islamists did not have an absolute majority that would allow them to introduce all of the announced changes to the constitutional system of Tunisia. It became necessary to form a coalition with two centre-left secular parties (Gamha, 2011). Therefore, the coalition formed by Ennahda Movement included two secular parties: Ettakatol (7.03% of the vote and 20 seats) and **Moncef Marzouki's** Congress for the Republic (8.71% of the vote and 29 seats) (Final Report on the Tunisian National Constituent Assembly Elections, 2011). Although on 12 December 2011 **Moncef Marzouki**

(known for his struggle for human rights) was elected Tunisia's new president by the Constituent Assembly, the real power was wielded by Prime Minister **Hamadi Jabali** from Ennahda Movement. It is worth noting that in July 2012, **Ben Ali** was sentenced *in absentia* by a military tribunal to life imprisonment for killing 43 protesters and wounding 97 during the revolt against his rule (Ghanem, 2016, pp. 23).

A victory of a pro-Islamic party in the parliamentary election in Tunisia was by no means in the interest of the United States. The election result, however, could not be questioned, since it was a sovereign decision of the Tunisian society. Therefore, on the election day, President **Barack Obama** and Secretary of State **Hillary Clinton** congratulated the Tunisians on their first free elections and encouraged the politicians to meet the challenges that stood before them: the forming of a government, the enactment of the new Constitution and the implementation of democratic principles – equal rights for all citizens (Statement by the President on Elections in Tunisia, 2011).

The important fact, however, was that both Ennahda Movement and other parties officially announced the continuation of the moderate foreign policy course, which had been adopted by **Ben Ali**. Tunisian leaders emphasised that to maintain the previously signed contracts in force and to develop western investments in Tunisia was in the interest of the state. The **Obama** administration was pleased to acknowledge such statements and emphasised the importance of Tunisia's transformation for the whole region. The White House also explained that the United States accept any free choice of the Tunisian people and would work with the new Tunisian authorities, regardless of their ideological views. The United States wanted Tunisia to be its next ally in the region, especially when there had been radical tendencies in countries of the region caused by the wave of the Arab Spring. Washington wished to have long-lasting influence over Tunisia. In order to achieve this goal, U.S. officials at various levels of the government, including Deputy Secretary of State **William Joseph Burns** and Secretary of State **Hillary Clinton**, paid numerous visits to Tunisia. In early October 2011, the then interim Prime Minister of Tunisia **Caïd Essebsi** visited the White House. During the meeting with the U.S. President, **Essebsi** was assured of U.S. support for the transformation, which was initiated in the region by Tunisians and he was promised that the United States would continue to aid the modernisation of the political and economic situation of Tunisia (Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Essebsi After Bilateral Meeting, 2011). In February 2012, in the U.S. Congress, Secretary of

State **Hillary Clinton**, in turn, expressed her support for the U.S.-Tunisian negotiations on establishing a free trade agreement.

The fact remains, therefore, that the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia brought a lot of positive changes and was more moderate than in other countries of the Middle East and North Africa region (Egypt, Libya and Syria) (Lesch, 2013, pp. 150-161). However, also in this country one of the consequences of the events of the Arab Spring was an increase in the influence of small but dynamically operating groups of Islamic extremists, including radical Salafists (Danecki, 2002, pp. 53-54) who primarily demonstrated their attachment to the traditional profession of Islam, demanded increase in the role of Islam in public life and expressed their contempt for the United States¹¹. The Salafists had become a party in the sectarian conflict which was escalating in Tunisia after the Arab Spring. An increasing activity of the terrorist group Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) – the regional branch of Al-Qaeda – was then observed, and this implied a high level of terrorist threat in Tunisia (Arieff, 2012).

The implication of the increasing anti-Americanism of the radical groups strengthening their positions in Tunisia was the attack of radical Islamists on the U.S. embassy in Tunis on 14 September 2012. This attack was a response to the posting of a film offensive to Muslims titled “The Innocence of Muslims” on the Internet (Balustein, 2013). During the protests, the American school in Tunis was torched¹². The Ansar al-Sharia organisation was accused of the attack and, consequently, designated as a terrorist organisation. To maintain good relations with the United States, the then president of Tunisia emphasised that these incidents were not an expression of rebellion and anti-Americanism of the whole nation, but of a small group (Batrawy, Keath, 2012). The attack on the U.S. embassy in Tunis had led to a temporary cooling of bilateral relations. The United States criticised the inadequate protection of the embassy by Tunisian security forces, as well as the way the case was investigated. In November 2013, FBI Director **James Comey** identified Tunisia and Libya as two countries where AQIM and its allies pose a threat to the United States, its interests in the region, as well as to other Western countries, especially to their embassies, hotels and diplomatic outposts. In March 2014, the U.S. Department of State

¹¹ Jacob Walles has been the U.S. ambassador to Tunisia since 24 July 2012.

¹² 3 people died and 29 were injured in the riots. The police arrested 73 people, most of whom were released for lack of evidence.

officially warned against the dangers arising from travelling to Tunisia (Arieff, Humud, 2015).

It should be noted, however, that the Ennahda Movement, despite its quite moderate and conciliatory policy, tried to base Tunisian law on the principles of Sharia, which was in agreement with the doctrine of radical Salafists. Salafists living in Tunisia were not a uniform group, but they were integrated by their ideological aversion to democracy and they perceived elections as contrary to the values of Islam. Therefore, their goals corresponded to what was proclaimed by the Ennahda Movement, but their methods of achieving those goals were much more radical. They were willing to introduce the Sharia law even by force. Although the demands and attempts made by the Ennahda Movement to radicalise the politics were expressly rejected by the leftist and secular parties forming the Tunisian parliament, they still led to another outbreak of violent social protests. At the beginning of February 2013, **Chokri Belaid** was murdered. **Belaid** was a charismatic leftist politician who had first opposed **Ben Ali**'s regime and then the Islamisation of the country. The death of the Democratic Patriots' Movement leader, a party which was in opposition to the ruling party, became a direct cause of the outbreak of violent social unrest. Tunisian society was unhappy with the intensified efforts of Islamisation of the country (Legge, 2013). Because of the protests, several offices of the Ennahda Movement were set on fire and Prime Minister **Jebali** resigned from office. He was replaced by a technocratic government with **Ali Laarayedh** of the Ennahda Movement party as Prime Minister. This government remained in control until January 2014 when the Ennahda Movement was eventually removed from power.

It must therefore be emphasised that 2014 was a breakthrough year for the socio-political life in Tunisia, since it was the year in which parliamentary and presidential elections were held. In January 2014, also a new Constitution of Tunisia was adopted.

The parliamentary election was held in late October 2014. Voter turnout of 66% in the parliamentary election was very high. The election, with a majority of 37.56% of the votes (86 seats out of 217 seats), was won by Nidaa Tounes party founded by **Beji Caid Essebsi**. Nidaa Tounes had no particular political profile and its program was based on the rejection of Islamisation of the country and the pursuit of economic recovery and national security. The Ennahda Movement came second in the election with 27.79% of the votes (69 seats), which meant its public support was 10% lower than in 2011. In the third place

was the Free Patriotic Union with only 4.13% of the votes (16 seats)¹³. The results of the parliamentary elections could indicate that Tunisian society was tired of the Islamisation attempts and preferred secular, left-wing, or an even more liberal approach. This resulted from the necessity to stabilise the situation in the country, improve the living conditions, and reduce unemployment and poverty.

On 23 November 2014, first round of the presidential election was held. Being the first presidential election since the Jasmine Revolution and the overthrowing of **Ben Ali**'s regime added to its significance. Before the election, Ennahda announced that it would not put forth a presidential candidate, therefore, the incumbent President **Moncef Marzouki** became the most serious competitor for Nidaa Tounes' **Essebsi**. On 30 October 2014, the final list of 27 candidates was announced, as 42 candidates had been rejected. Many of the candidates were nonpartisan. During the election campaign, **Essebsi** presented himself as an experienced technocrat able to restore the stability of Tunisia. The results of the first round of election, with a turnout of 62%, were as follows: **Beji Caid Essebsi** (Nidaa Tounes) – 39.46%; **Mounecef Marzouki** (Congress for the Republic) – 33.43%; **Hamma Hammami** (Popular Front) – 7.82%; **Mohamed Hechmi Hamdi** (Current of Love) – 5.75% (Election Guide..., 2015).

In accordance with the electoral law in Tunisia, at the end of December 2014 a second round of presidential election was carried out. **Essebsi** won the election with 56% of the votes. In January 2015, the new president of Tunisia entrusted **Habib Essid** with the mission of forming a new government. **Essid** was a former Minister of Interior and had already held official positions in the state during the regime of **Ben Ali**.

President **Barack Obama** in response to the results of the presidential election in Tunisia congratulated **Essebsi** on his victory in a telephone conversation and invited him to visit the White House. The U.S. President praised the Tunisians for their ability to find a peaceful compromise during the historic, four-year transformation. **Barack Obama** stressed the fact that the United States want to strengthen and expand the strategic partnerships with Tunisia, and are ready to help the new government in their efforts to meet the expectations of all Tunisians (Readout of the President's Call with President **Caid Essebsi** of Tunisia, 2015). In the new National Security Strategy

¹³ The following parties came next: Popular Front – 3.64% (15 seats), Afek Tounes – 3.0% (8 seats) and Congress for the Republic – 2.05% (4 seats).

announced in February 2015, President of the United States referred to the situation in North Africa by clearly stating: 'We will work with Tunisia to further progress on building democratic institutions and strengthening its economy' (National Security Strategy, 2015). Washington perceived Tunis (as is evidenced by the statements of several prominent members of the U.S. establishment) as a model of pro-democratic changes after the Arab Spring for the countries of the Middle East and North Africa region.

In the beginning of 2015, Tunisia was perceived by members of the international community as a country on its way to stabilisation. However, subsequent events in that country shattered the sense of security of Tunisians and this perception was changed. The actions against the Islamisation of the state were interpreted by the representatives of radical terrorist organisations operating in Tunisia, as well as by the fighters of the so-called Islamic State, as pro-Western (pro-American) actions, and thus threatening the traditional values of Islam. Between January and July 2015, there were some very dramatic terrorist attacks in Tunisia. The purpose of these attacks was to harm the government's cooperation with the West, stop the transformation of the country, intimidate the Tunisian society and, therefore, convince the people to leave the path of secularisation. These attacks were also aimed at tourism – which is an important element in the development of the services sector of the Tunisian economy – and decreasing the number of foreign tourists and investors coming to Tunisia. It is even more important considering the fact that thanks to a well-developed tourism industry Tunisia had a chance for a rapid economic development. Economic stagnation and worsening of the living conditions of Tunisians would result in a decrease of the social support for the transformation of the state and shift it to those proclaiming the populist slogans of prosperity through the Islamisation of socio-political life.

The first terrorist attack took place on 10 January 2015 in a cafe in the Alawite district of Jabal Moshen. As a result of the attack, about 20 people were injured and 9 were killed, including two suicide bombers from the paramilitary armed group linked to al-Qaeda in Syria, Al-Nusra Front. Another attack occurred on 18 March 2015. The terrorists of the so-called Islamic State made a daring attack on the Bardo Museum in Tunis, after an unsuccessful attempt to

break into the building of the Tunisian parliament (Boot, 2015)¹⁴. On 26 June 2015, the militants of the so-called Islamic State attacked again, this time on the beach at the tourist resort at Port El Kantaoui, located about 10 km north of the seaside resort of Sousse¹⁵.

This act of terrorism was the last attack on the objects, citizens and foreigners residing in Tunisia in the current year, but it was also most severe in consequences. As a result of this attack, Tunisia was recognised by most Western countries as an internally destabilised country dangerous for tourists. Many travel agencies cancelled flights to Tunisia, including TUI, Itaka, Rainbow Tours and Sun&Fun Holidays. In addition, Tunisia itself took action to combat terrorism in the country. The Prime Minister of Tunisia, **Habib Essid**, announced publicly that the government planned to close 80 mosques in which terrorist attacks were initiated. He also announced the mobilisation of all reservists for active military duty and their distribution throughout the country in order to raise the level of security. Moreover, on 4 July 2015 President **Essebi** announced a 30-day state of emergency in all of Tunisia. In the night from 24 July to 25 July 2015, Tunisian parliament passed a new anti-terrorism law strengthening and expanding resources at the government's disposal in the fight against jihadists. 174 deputies voted for the bill, 10 abstained. No one voted against the bill. Under the new law, the police and security services were granted broad powers, such as the right to hold a suspect in custody without access to a lawyer for 15 days, and the possibility of tapping telephone conversations on a scale greater than ever before. By passing the bill, the members of the Tunisian legislative branch tried to quickly and effectively respond to the increasing terrorist threats in Tunisia, strengthen citizens' sense of security and reduce the shortcomings and weaknesses of the Tunisian security forces that were exposed by the attacks.

¹⁴ The victims of the attack were mainly foreigners. As a result of the attack, 23 were killed and 22 were injured. Among the dead were citizens of Japan, Italy, Colombia, Spain, Australia, France, Great Britain, Belgium, Russia and Poland.

¹⁵ As a result of the attack, 39 were killed and 36 were injured. A terrorist disguised as a tourist took out a weapon concealed in a beach umbrella and fired at the tourists on the beach and then at those at the hotel. Among the dead were citizens of Great Britain, Ireland, Russia, Portugal, Germany and Belgium.

Conclusion

In this context, it is worth answering the question of why this success, and to some extent also symbol, which was achieved after the removal from power of Islamists in legitimate parliamentary and presidential elections was possible only in Tunisia, and not in other Arab countries? Analysing the political situation in Tunisia at the end of 2014/beginning of 2015, it should be stated that it represented the result of a number of conditions which must be looked at in a long-term and multifaceted perspective.

These determinants, which enabled the success of people openly proclaiming the need for rejection of Islamisation of the state, are in fact characteristic only for Tunisia. At least nine such conditions of an internal nature can be listed: 1) Secular traditions (controlling the mosques and recognising Islamic fundamentalism as a major threat to the security and stability of the country both by the first president **Habib Bourguiba** and **Ben Ali**); 2) the state army has never interfered in political matters in the history of the country (as opposed to Egypt); 3) a relatively high level of education of Tunisian people; 4) a moderate income inequality; 5) strong trade unions; 6) a developed middle class; 7) a developed civil society; 8) a homogeneous society in terms of ethnicity; 9) a balance between the supporters of secularism and Islamists (Gurses, 2015).

All these circumstances rarely occur in other countries of the Middle East and North Africa region, let alone in combination and compatibility. It should be added that the financial support Tunisia received during the Arab Spring from Western countries (including the USA) and international organisations had also a positive effect on the processes of building a civil society in Tunisia and the secularisation of the government and the state.

In hindsight, it can be said that one of the results of the Arab Spring anti-regime uprisings both in Tunisia and in other countries of the region, is the growth in popularity of Islamist groups among the Arab people, which is not in the interests of the United States. Taking over the power by the Islamists – despite the official statements of the U.S. ruling elite that they would accept any ideological option in the Middle East as long as it comes to power in democratic elections – threatens the U.S. interests in the region. Radical Islamist groups promote values different from those promoted by the West, they are anti-American and demand the building of a theocratic state. American interests are also threatened by the increasing activity of Islamist terrorist groups, including

regional cells of Al-Qaeda (Al-Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula – AQAP – in Yemen or AQIM in Tunisia) which somehow on the wave of the Arab Spring are gaining masses of new fighters and reinforcing themselves militarily. The activity of the militants of the so-called Islamic State were of particular threat to U.S. interests in the region of the Middle East and North Africa.

Therefore, when analysing the current situation in Tunisia, including the 2015 terrorist attacks and the growing asymmetric threats, it should be considered whether the Arab Spring in Tunisia actually was successful, and whether Tunisia can serve as a model of a state which, thanks to the will and the increasing awareness of Tunisians themselves and the external assistance (including the United States), entered the path of democratic transformation and building a civil society.

It seems, however, that it is worth venturing a statement that from among the countries in which the events of the Arab Spring took place and brought significant changes, Tunisia was largely successful. In Tunisia, there was no ethnic nor religious civil war, unlike in the case of Syria or Libya. Neither was Tunisia controlled by Islamists, as in the case of Egypt. Moreover, it is not a country in which, despite the protests, the authoritarian regime would prevail, as in the case of Saudi Arabia. However, the problem which should be noted is the fact that many young Tunisians have left to fight in the name of jihad in the Islamic State (Griffin, 2016, pp. 39-50). Tunisia is in fact one of those countries which provides the largest number of volunteers to Syria and Iraq to fight in the name of the principles enunciated by the founders of the so-called Islamic State. Tunisian authorities estimated that in 2011-2014 the so-called Islamic State had attracted about 2 400 potential jihadists from Tunisia. Therefore, the radical Islamists are currently the greatest threat to the stability and socio-economic and political development of Tunisia. From the point of view of maintaining Tunisia's stability and security, both internal and external, the support the terrorist groups receive from other countries in the region is also dangerous. Especially worrying for Tunisians is Qatar's support for many radical Salafi movements. Also worrying is the internal situation in Tunisia. The difficult economic situation is aggravated by the unemployment rate of up to 17% (even up to 35% among young people). Furthermore, Tunisia has extensive government bureaucracy, which does not help in fighting against the pathology of power.

To speak of Tunisia as a country that has passed through the period of the Arab Spring and its transformation successfully, a permanent interest in Tunisia

by Western countries, including the United States, is required. Without support (especially economic), Tunisia will not be able to cope with the rising economic problems and this will become a factor in the strengthening of the radical groups of Tunisian society disappointed by the unfulfilled promises of reforms, as well as by the attitude of the West. A destabilised Tunisia vulnerable to terrorist attacks is in the interests of the jihadists, but it is not in the U.S. interests in the region of the Middle East and North Africa.

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