

## Position Paper

# The Arab Maghreb and Current Regional Transformations

**Shafeeq Choucair**

25 Feb 2013





Al Jazeera Center for Studies organised a two-day conference entitled "The Arab Maghreb and Current Regional Transformations" Doha on 17-18 February 2013.

A select group of experts, academics, politicians and specialists in Maghreb affairs participated in the seminar, and discussed the effectiveness of the transformations in the Maghreb in light of the Arab Spring, and the possibility of activating the Arab Maghreb Union to address the challenges and obstacles that prevent the integration of its states at all levels and reflect the aspirations of the peoples and elites of the Maghreb regarding convergence and mutual support in face of challenges they confront.

The conference included nine sessions including the opening session that addressed political reforms, development projects, the implications of the Arab Spring on Maghreb countries, and the way to approach these matters from a political perspective, considering the crises they face locally, regionally and internationally. One session delved into the financial crisis and its regional impact, and the closing session was an open discussion on the future of the Arab Maghreb Union.

The conference opened with a speech by Ambassador Abdulla Al-Haj, a board member of Al Jazeera Network, in which he stressed that Al Jazeera would remain a platform for the expression of a variety of opinions in light of the changes taking place in Arab Spring and the region in general. This was confirmed by the director of Al Jazeera Center for Studies, Dr Salah Eddin Elzein. The conference was held to enrich open dialogue on issues of public concern, and in hopes that it would deepen dialogue and facilitate awareness of what is happening in the Maghreb region and its relations with its African and European neighbours.

## The Affairs and Concerns of the Arab Maghreb

Throughout the conference, participants agreed that there was a lack of political will among decision-makers in five nations – Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Mauritania – to activate the role of the Arab Maghreb Union. Tunisia and Libya, countries that witnessed revolutions, are still in the labour stage of their birth and are rebuilding their new regimes; the rest are busy confronting the effects of the spring in their own national contexts. This is being done with a bundle of reforms for their constituents regardless of whether these efforts are merely cosmetic (for the purpose of overcoming this stage) or real and effective and aim to make serious change.

It was agreed that the importance of the union to the peoples of the region and their political systems is unquestionable, especially on the economic front. Some participants saw this as an opportune entry to launch a path towards real unity since its political costs at this time are lower given the fears of the political regimes. Also, the feasibility and benefits thereof are certain because each Maghreb country has a comparative advantage over its counterparts and can promote integration. This would result in great profit, especially in the oil industry, manufacturing, labour supply and mineral wealth.

The crises challenging the Maghreb countries domestically were presented and discussed in the conference. In fact, there was a discussion about the problems of the Berbers and other minorities whose situations seem likely to become worse after the Arab Spring. The fall of some regimes revealed that these groups were severely affected in the previous era and had suffered from a systematic blockade that affected their social and cultural life, as was the case in Libya. Some speakers advised Maghreb rulers to give these challenges the attention they deserve in terms of care and justice, to prevent losing their citizens to foreign or extremist agendas.

Some stressed that the Islamist movements were neither a crisis nor part of one. They argued that rather, the movements represented the key elements of a resolution. It was also said that participants should convince others to accept Islamist movements as partners for the realisation of stability. The conference portrayed the pressing necessity to distinguish between Salafi trends based on violence and that call for or instigate it, and those that believe in a framework of law and order. Others warned that Islamist parties in power could end in the same manner nationalist movements had previously ended. They could drown in ideological conflict rather than achieve social, economic, political and security support for their people, and thus fall into the talons of dictatorship.

Most speakers regarded the Western Sahara issue, which has historically been an issue of contention between Algeria and Morocco, as the biggest impediment to the activation of the Arab Maghreb Union. The two sides deal with the issue with great sensitivity, but it is the main source of differences between the two countries and sometimes caused the

termination of relations and the closing of borders. Some considered these two countries responsible for the union's failure, and believe there is no way out but to address the problem and find a solution to it, or ignore it and not allow it to be an obstacle to cooperation between the two countries in other areas. There are other examples of cooperation between different countries or integration into regional blocs despite border disputes and other conflict between them. The European Union and China and Japan were mentioned as examples.



There is a paradox in Maghreb relations with Europe. Occasionally, the European Union prefers that Maghreb countries to deal it them as a cartel i.e. a single Arab Maghreb Union, specifically when it comes to issues of security and immigration, for its own interests. However, when it can acquire greater gains push Maghreb countries to compete by the provision of concessions in economic affairs and so on, it seeks to deal with each country separately.

Speakers were warned against the consequences of research and intellectual courses that exaggerate the divide between the Middle East and the Maghreb countries as if there was never any relationship between them despite the fact that the relationship between these regions is old and had existed even before Islam. The divisions that seek to find intellectual rationales for discrimination must be refuted. The recent revolutions proved that Arab peoples in the East and the West are one and the same. Thus, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's fall was celebrated in the entire Middle East as if it was it was symbolic of the fall of a Middle East tyrant. Some warned that Maghreb countries may pay the price for the fear of certain parties that the revolution will shift to the Middle East. Countries affected by the Arab Spring are trying to thwart the Tunisian and Libyan experiments fearing that these countries will stabilise and their effects will reach the Middle East (including Egypt).

With the changes caused by the recent revolutions in the Arab world, the possibility of bridge building between the Middle East and the Maghreb countries will depend on several factors, including: the form of the state in the Middle East and Maghreb countries, the nature of its relationship with the outside world and with its allies, and the ability of the state to reconstruct its economy and enhance opportunities for cooperation.

In discussing the crisis afflicting Tunisia, Lotfi Zitoun, political adviser to the prime minister, stressed that the official frameworks are not responsible for the current conflict in Tunisia; rather, he stated that the elections that produced a new governing coalition failed to create frameworks capable of tackling the challenges of the new stage. Zitoun admitted that some ministers had failed to fulfil their duties but that the irony was that the demand for change singled out others, especially those in sovereign ministries. This demonstrates that the conflict is ideological and emphasises the return of social demands raised by the revolution such as equitable distribution of wealth, social justice and a balance between the parties.

### **The Mali Crisis and its Consequences in the Maghreb**

The Mali crisis and its repercussions on the security of the Maghreb countries received particular attention in the conference due to the different aspects of its relations with these countries including the geographic proximity and the common two major ethnic groups, the Arabs and the Tuaregs, and most importantly, the common threat of armed cross-border Islamist groups in the region and beyond. Most of the armed Islamist groups in Mali originate from Maghreb countries or are linked to them, especially Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Also, their ambitions are not constrained by geographical or political boundaries. Some remarks showed that the absence of a unified Maghreb vision for managing the crisis in north Mali clearly reflects the differences in their positions regarding French military intervention.



In his speech on the African position, former Senegalese minister of foreign affairs Cheikh Tidiane Gadio stated that French intervention in Mali was necessary because the region covers a wide area and does not have a single radar, and that it has become a "stronghold for Al Qaeda, arms and drug trafficking and a theatre for criminal activities." He differentiated between targeting Al Qaeda and the manner in which the Tuaregs and Arabs should be dealt with, considering that the problem with the Tuaregs and Arabs is political and can be solved through dialogue, which is not the case for Al Qaeda. He also emphasised that African forces are incapable of promoting security and stability in the region and that they need all the assistance they can get.

Mali will face several challenges in the near future. The first is ending the military conflict as opposed to renewing it after the withdrawal of French troops. The second is achieving security in the northern region and obtaining the cooperation of neighbouring countries, especially Algeria. The last is launching political dialogue that will put the region in a better position especially regarding the Arab-Tuareg problem and marginalised groups whose voices must be heard.

### **Recommendations and Conclusions**

Two of the countries in the Maghreb have established new regimes (Tunisia and Libya), and thus the region has a genuine opportunity to establish democratic systems with peaceful transitions of power. Other Maghreb countries, like Mauritania, Algeria, and Morocco, should carry out a bundle of reforms to realise a peaceful and smooth transition allowing more freedoms, openness and democracy. There is no doubt that variation in the structures of governance requires greater effort to create mechanisms for resolving problems and coordinating positions. However, the Arab Spring proved that the peoples have a role to play in overcoming obstacles and bridging gaps, and their choices in mutual and complementary issues and integration will remain a strategic option. The future will no longer be able to marginalise the peoples' will as it had in the past.

Among the most important ambitions of the union is to form a common identity, use the region's surplus to support social stability, and produce a surplus of power to fortify its regional role and national security.

At a national level, Maghreb countries face several challenges including the shift from their current systems to open democratic systems, and transition from yield-based economies that are centrally managed and non-competitive to productive and competitive economic systems. They also have to search for solutions to issues of identity, religion, language, human rights and citizenship in a participatory manner that will strengthen the principle of tolerance and acceptance of others, fight corruption,

consecrate good governance, and provide and strengthen the elements of social, political and economic security that they need urgently.

Accordingly, several proposals were presented:

1. The necessity of expanding the efforts of civil society to bring the peoples of the region closer, activating cultural and social ties and actuating the role of the media and research centres to raise awareness of the importance of the Arab Maghreb Union.
2. Giving the Maghreb peoples more attention and educating them about the importance of the union through various means, as a positive perception of the activation of the union will come about if the peoples understand the gains they will acquire in terms of freedom, institution-building and the drafting of new contracts between ruler and ruled.
3. The Arab Maghreb Union was used and employed for many issues in the interests of the regimes and was not taken seriously by its member states for the benefit of their peoples. If these countries invest just minimal funds and effort, the returns for their political and social interests can be very large.
4. The first of the articles of the Arab Maghreb Union that can be encouraged and activated is the opening of borders and the guarantee of free movement for capital and individuals. This will be sufficient to connect the interests of the peoples. People are interesting in defending their interests, especially in confirming their identity and aspirations.
5. Focusing on the notion of exchange, rather than competition, among countries of the Maghreb, and taking advantage of the different features that distinguish each country, especially because they all face difficult economic challenges and must pursue cooperative economic policies to provide better social services and reduce unemployment (which was one of the most prominent causes of the Arab revolutions).
6. The necessity of developing a unified strategy to address common challenges in, for example, the field of sustainable development, desertification, water pollution problems and other pressing issues.
7. Finally, the Maghreb countries need to recognise that they desperately need to form a coalition and become a complementary bloc in a world where large entities control through important decisions and impose dependency on small entities.