

Tunisian Foreign Minister Habib ben Yahia

Oct 6, 1994



Brief Analysis

On October 6, 1994, Tunisian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Habib Ben Yahia, addressed The Washington Institute's Policy Forum on Tunisia's role in the Arab-Israeli peace process and the regional implications of developments in Algeria. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his off the record remarks.

Tunisia's Role in the Peace Process

Tunisia's recent agreement with Israel is not the first step it has made in the peace process; Tunisia actively embraced the peace process since it was first briefed by former Secretary of State James Baker on the Madrid formula after the Persian Gulf War, and worked behind the scenes to persuade reluctant parties to accept the Madrid invitation. Its efforts led the president of the Arab Maghreb Union's to accept the invitation to attend the Madrid conference despite Libya's rejectionist stance.

Tunisia's unique position as host of the Palestinians, and Arafat's trust of President Ben Ali, enabled the Tunisian government to encourage and facilitate the process that led to the Oslo agreement; Israelis and Palestinians met in Tunisia in October 1992, and Foreign Minister Ben Yahia went to Oslo before the talks began to prepare the ground.

The delay in reaching an official Tunisian-Israeli agreement is linked to the Tunisian role as a behind-the-scenes player; an earlier move would have hurt its credibility in inducing progress not only on the Palestinian track, but with the Gulf Cooperation Council countries as well. Now, the addition of Tunisia to the list of Arab states who have relations with Israel will push Syrian President Assad toward an agreement by making it easier for him to prepare the Syrian public for peace and, conservely, making it more difficult for him to resist and risk further isolation. Although Assad lacks a viable alternative to peace, should he decide not to proceed with productive negotiations, the process will go on without him.

Tunisia's View of Peace

Peace cannot exist in a milieu of poverty and misery, two ingredients of extremism. The peace process must thus be conducted concurrently with the processes of normalization and reconstruction. The Multilateral talks provide a forum for pursuing the other goals of peace: economic and social improvements in the region and security cooperation. The former will be addressed in the upcoming summit in Casablanca, which will focus on ideas such as a Middle East development bank. At the very least, the Casablanca conference signals a willingness among the participants to discuss the region's welfare. The working group on security reflects a realization that extremists in the Arab world pose common threats to Israel and moderate Arab states; these talks should evolve into a more permanent and comprehensive structure similar to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. Tunisia regards the Arab-Israeli breakthrough as an opportunity to secure an environment conducive to overall change.

The Crises in Algeria

Dialogue with the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) is naive in that it reflects a flawed notion that the group is different from other radical fundamentalist groups like Hezbollah and Hamas; in fact, these groups are similar in ideology, tactics, and sources of funds. FIS's practice of murdering intellectuals indicates its extreme position; this should not be ignored by the West. The dialogue is fruitless in that the violence has not subsided since the talks began. The situation has worsened since the Berbers were injected into the crisis, widening the scope of the fighting and increasing the threat of "Balkanization." Although the government and army are determined to contain the problem, the crisis could continue for a few years and is likely to escalate before improving.

Lessons from the Tunisian Experience and Policy Prescriptions

Tunisia successfully dealt with its internal fundamentalist threat through a general process of secularization and improvements in economic conditions. Clear demarcation lines were drawn between religious and civil life, and investments were made in women's rights, family planning, and a balanced educational system that places equal emphasis on scientific and religious learning. The result is a strong civil society resilient to extremism both from within and spilling over from the Algerian crisis. But, the conflict is not limited to Algeria or North Africa; fundamentalism is a global threat and should be dealt with as such. The United States and Europe must approach the threat with cohesion and coordination; a fragmented approach is doomed to failure.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Dan Blumenthal. ❖

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