

MAGHREB ROUNDTABLE SUMMARY

PARTICIPATING SCHOLARS

Messaoud Romdhani is a leading Tunisian human rights advocate and founding member of the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES), where he serves on the executive committee. He is also a member of the executive committee of EuroMed Rights and leads the Committee for the Respect of Liberties and Human Rights in Tunisia. In the aftermath of the 2011 Tunisian Revolution, he was a member of the body created to prepare for the first democratic elections following the revolution.

Mohammed Masbah is a research fellow at the Crown Center for Middle East Studies at Brandeis University and an associate fellow with the Middle East and North Africa Program at Chatham House. He was previously a nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Middle East Center and a fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) in Berlin. Dr. Masbah earned his Ph.D. in sociology from Mohammad V University in Rabat. ■

Social Protests in the Maghreb: The New Normal?

Six years after the Arab uprisings, a combination of poor governance, a lack of economic development, and a youth crisis continues to spur discontent and protests in the Maghreb, argued experts Messaoud Romdhani and Mohammed Masbah. Both Morocco and Tunisia witness hundreds of protests per month. How governments respond to protest movements will be a key factor affecting populations' relationships with the state moving forward. Romdhani, the co-founder and vice president of the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES), and Masbah, a research fellow at Brandeis University's Crown Center for Middle East Studies, both spoke at a CSIS Middle East Program Maghreb Roundtable titled "Social Protests in the Maghreb: The New Normal?" on February 16, 2017.

Tunisia has made important strides toward enshrining basic constitutional rights, including freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. Yet many Tunisians perceive that, since the Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali's dictatorship was overthrown in 2011, socioeconomic conditions have deteriorated rather than improved. The primary demands of the revolution—justice and dignity—have largely gone unmet, argued Romdhani. These unfulfilled expectations continue fueling protests across the country, he said, and the number of monthly protests has steadily increased in the last few years. In December 2016, Tunisia witnessed approximately 1,200 demonstrations of various sizes, compared to 900 in December 2015.

Bureaucratic barriers and the slow pace of reforms to Ben Ali-era systems of governance have complicated the state's ability to respond to these protests. Although Tunisia has embarked on an ambitious effort to transition to more representative government, the state continues to be plagued by weak political institutions, a bloated bureaucracy that drains public finances, and highly centralized decisionmaking structures that have helped alienate Tunisians from the marginalized southern and western regions. Moreover, many of the economic policies that sustained Ben Ali's autocratic rule remain in place, raising questions about the political elite's willingness to embrace change. According to Romdhani, protests will continue. New risks may appear as protests are becoming more violent and the government increasingly employs violence in responding to them.

CSIS MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM WORK ON THE MAGHREB

The CSIS Middle East Program examines changing political, economic, and security trends in the Maghreb—defined here as Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. The Program produces original research and analysis and convenes events that connect members of the policymaking community with practitioners and officials in the Maghreb in order to highlight issues of importance in the region to policymaking and business audiences. The program's current areas of focus include political transitions, drivers of radicalization and social unrest, government policies to shape religious identity, and violent non-state actors and extremist groups that operate across national boundaries. ■

In Morocco, King Mohammed VI's response to the protests that erupted on February 20th, 2011 gave many Moroccans hope for structural change. The king announced early elections and a new constitution was adopted. The king's approach was more reformist than the majority of political parties expected or demanded, according to Masbah. Yet, in spite of these steps, a "dysfunctional triangle" of youth crisis, governance challenges, and weak economic development is fueling protests in Morocco. The king recognizes the need to reform the administration and address these issues, but progress is slow. Widespread protests following the death of Mohsin Fikri in October 2016, in a case of alleged police brutality, demonstrate how abuses by the administration can trigger unrest. Masbah suggested that Moroccan citizens' increasing political awareness and access to information through social media empowers them to demonstrate.

Both speakers emphasized the relationship between economics and social protests in the two countries. Romdhani noted that Tunisia's revolution ushered in hopes of serious economic reform, but that in the six years since Ben Ali's ouster, Tunisia's economy stagnated and even declined. The national unemployment rate hovers around 16 percent, and is much higher in the underdeveloped interior regions. Among Tunisians who do participate in the workforce, underemployment is also endemic. Although the government has attempted to create jobs, Romdhani argued that many youth see few alternatives to working in the public sector, which can no longer sustainably absorb them. Romdhani asserted that underprivileged Tunisians' economic woes have fueled a wave of micro-protests at a local level that often go ignored by the government.

Unlike Tunisia, Morocco's macroeconomic indicators are steadily improving, and Morocco has seen a substantial increase in foreign direct investment since 2011. However, Masbah warned that the country's broadly positive economic performance obscures structural deficiencies that can hamper competition and private sector expansion. In particular, poor job security and meager benefits in the private sector have made it an unattractive option for Moroccan professionals, but public sector job opportunities are drying up. Tension in the job market has fueled protests calling for jobs and specific benefits throughout the country.

Intimately tied to Morocco's economic struggles is its growing youth crisis. The dearth of job prospects is especially acute for the young, and Masbah noted that 1.7 million Moroccan youths between the ages of 15 and 24 are neither employed nor enrolled in education or job training. Many have stopped searching for work. A university degree actually makes it harder to find a job, as enrollments grow but skills are poorly

matched to the needs of employers. Morocco boasts around 150,000 new college graduates every year, but the state can only employ some 20,000, and the private sector only a fraction more. Masbah predicted that the lack of job creation will continue to afflict Morocco's youth and fuel discontent.

Tunisia is witnessing its own youth crisis. The hopes and expectations of the revolution have faded and given way to frustration and despair, Romdhani observed. Many young Tunisians feel that the state is not listening to their concerns, fueling a sense of humiliation and despair. Youth emigration is one indicator of young people's exasperation, Romdhani said, noting that some 40,000 Tunisians have left the country since 2011, many by attempting to enter Europe illegally.

Both experts addressed the possible implications of rising levels of dissatisfaction, which include the continued spread of social protests and increased vulnerability to radicalization. They also suggested short-term steps that the governments could take to address grievances. Romdhani emphasized that most protests in Tunisia currently occur at the local level because many Tunisians do not connect their personal problems with the nation as a whole. As such, he did not expect the protests to coalesce into a national movement. Yet, he warned about the dangers of continued low-level dissent and endemic despair creating an environment where violent extremism finds new adherents. Romdhani suggested that facilitating dialogue between Tunisian officials and citizens at a local level would be a critical first step to address discontent.

In Morocco, Masbah stated that the administration largely tolerates the protests, even though they have increased in scale and geographic distribution since 2011. He suggested that unless the government makes more of an effort to address the structural problems that sparked protests six years ago, Moroccans' socioeconomic grievances will persist and the protests may continue to spread. Given the population's increasing political awareness, Masbah argued that the state could build support and credibility by increasing government transparency and accountability. ■

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