



Mounting Interference:

Will Washington push the Tunisian president into restoring the parliament?

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Tunisian President Kais Saied received an American congressional delegation, led by Senators Chris Murphy and Jon Ossoff. In their two-day visit (from September 4 to September 5), the delegation met Saied in the Carthage presidential palace. They also met representatives of Tunisian civil society organizations as well as several MPs.

President Saied told Murphy and Ossoff that he will proceed with the constitutional reform he announced, and that he is particularly keen on suspending the constitution and amending the political system. This, he said, cannot be achieved unless he does away with the current parliament and calls early parliamentary elections.

Proceeding with the Exceptional Measures

The US congressional delegation visited Tunisia in a turbulent period full of important political changes, the most important of which are the following:

1- Extending the emergency measures: On August 25, president Saied issued a decree extending the exceptional measures he decided to take in July—namely, freezing the parliament and lifting MPs' immunity sine die. Besides, Saied did not announce a

clear road map to be followed after the measures are over.

2-Stressing on the importance of respecting human rights: Early in September, Saied met representatives of trade unions and civil society organizations, notably Tunisian Order of Lawyers, Tunisian Human Rights League, and UTICA. In the meeting, Saied stressed that he will proceed with the reform he started, and that he will never encroach on human rights and freedoms in any way. People will always be free to demonstrate, providing they do not break the law.

3- Disagreements over the extension of the measures from leaders of parties and trade unions: Some Tunisian parties are highly critical of extending the emergency measures. This oppositional attitude is also adopted by several civil society institutions, such as the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT).

The Tigray Crisis: The Ethiopian government's incessant attempts to resolve the internal conflict militarily, Future Briefs, Issue 596, 18 Sep 2021, Abu Dhabi, Future for Advanced Research & Studies.



These parties and entities affirm that President Saied must end the exceptional measures and announce a roadmap as soon as possible. By contrast, several parties and entities support the extension of the emergency measures, and even demand that the parliament be dissolved. This approach is best represented by the Tunisian Popular Current Party.

Significance of the American Visit

The congressional visit to Tunisia has special importance, as it marks a significant change in the American attitude towards what is happening in Tunisia:

1- The US growing interest in Tunisia: Since July 25, on which Saied announced the emergency measures, American officials have visited Tunisia twice. The first visit was on August 13, when Jon Finer, Deputy National Security Advisor, met Saied in Tunisia. This shows that Biden's administration is particularly interested in, even concerned about, the development of the Tunisian political crisis, and is closely watching via sending officials and politicians to Tunisia.

Certain press reports said that the American delegation included a psychiatrist to psychoanalyze Saied. On September 3, the American embassy in Tunisia stressed that the delegation consisted of top officials from the White House and the Defense Department. However, it did not try to rule out the possibility that one of these top officials may be a psychiatrist. This shows that the US administration is keen on studying Kais Saied to predict his future steps.

2- The US communication with Ennahda leaders:

The delegation also met several MPs and representatives of political parties (including members of Ennahda Movement) in the US embassy in Tunis, the Tunisian capital. This is unusual, as in the first visit, US officials only met the Tunisian president. This has important significance; it shows that Washington will not exclusively support president Saied, but, rather, will try to understand the Muslim brotherhood's point of view. In addition, the fact that the US delegation met MPs from the suspended parliament could mean that Washington may press Saied into restoring the parliament if he does not announce a clear roadmap and a call to early elections soon. Af-

ter all, it is not insignificant that US media did not use the words 'suspended' or 'frozen' (used in Tunisian media) in reference to the Tunisian parliament when covering the US delegation's visit to Tunisia. Besides, the US officials visiting Tunisia stressed, again, that Washington demands that President Saied return to the democratic path.

3- US keenness on stressing that Washington is unbiased:

The USA is obviously keen on stressing that it is adopting a neutral approach towards the Tunisian crisis. In this connection, Chris Murphy said: "We favor no party over another and we have zero interest in pushing one reform agenda over another. Those questions are for Tunisians to decide". This statement shows that the USA is keen on denying the accusation that it is seeking to support Al-Nahda Movement over the other political forces in Tunisia.

Variant Tunisian stances

Tunisian views have differed concerning US attitude to the crisis. For instance:

1- President Saied rejects the US pressure: In his meeting with the US delegation, president Saied tried to refute the Ennahda's accusation that he undermined democracy via his so-called coup. He said that the measures he took are perfectly legal since he actually invoked article 80 of the Tunisian constitution. He also said that these measures were taken with the aim of protecting Tunisia from encroaching attempts. This rejection of Ennahda's accusations implicitly means that Saied simply rejects American accusations and pressures as far as the political crisis in Tunisia is concerned.

2- Some parties and trade unions denounce US interference:

Certain parties and trade unions rejected American interference in Tunisian affairs, announcing that they will not discuss the situation with the USA. One of the most important of these is the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), the People's Movement and the Free Destourian Party. The latter even declined US embassy's invitation to meet the American delegation. In addition, the leftist Workers' Party organized a demonstration in Tunis to express rejection of US's attempts to interfere in Tunisia's internal affairs.



It is noteworthy that the Free Destourian Party and UGTT previously demanded that the president be clearer about the schedule and end of the exceptional measures. This makes their rejection of American interference highly significant, as it reveals that the USA is not particularly being honest when it stresses that it will not favour a certain party over another.

3- Ennahda seeks US help and support: The American delegation met some Ennahda representatives in the US embassy in Tunisia. As a result, anti-Ennahda political figures accused the movement of using American leverage to make Saied end the exceptional measures so that the situation should become as it was before July 25.


In return, Ennahda accused Saied of refusing to have a national dialogue with its leaders. Ennahda

also claimed that Saied's insistence on his approach will give a chance to foreign countries to interfere in Tunisia's internal affairs. This can be taken as an indication that Ennahda does not mind depending on USA's interference to bounce back into the political scene, regardless of people's resentment and rejection.


In a nutshell, the congressional visit shows that the USA desperately wants to have a say in the Tunisian crisis, since this enhances Washington's hegemony in the Maghreb and North Africa in general. Washington is seeking to convince President Saied to end the exceptional measures and to declare a roadmap that would bring back stability. US efforts have been disapproved by several political parties, which consider such efforts a sort of interference in Tunisia's internal affairs.

ABOUT FARAS

Future for Advanced Research and Studies (FARAS) is an independent think tank founded on April 4, 2014 in Abu Dhabi, U.A.E. FARAS seeks to enrich public dialogue, support decision-making and enhance academic research pertaining to future trends that currently constitute a real problem in the Middle East region. In light of instability and unpredictability, the overarching goal of FARAS is to help ward off future shocks regarding these developments.

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