

## Contemporary Tunisia: Promoting Mediterranean dialogue

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### **For the record: A long-term commitment to cooperation**

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### **European Union: Pioneering agreement with EU opens doors**

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### **Partnership: Forging regional links in the Mediterranean**

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Early in December, Tunisia will be host to a first-ever summit that will debate issues of common concern to 10 countries in the western Mediterranean. Foreign ministers and heads of state from the participating nations attending the First Dialogue Summit 5+5 in Tunis Dec. 5-6 will address questions relating to security and stability as well as social, political and economic developments in the area.

The 5+5 Dialogue cooperation process, also known as the Forum for Dialogue in the Western Mediterranean, involves the five members of the Arab Maghreb Union - Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia - and five southern European countries: Italy, France, Malta, Portugal and Spain. The summit, organized at Tunisia's initiative, is considered a milestone in the evolution of this specific and informal forum. Founded 13 years ago, it launched the first subregional dialogue of its kind in the Mediterranean basin.

Common interests Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali notes that his country has long been an enthusiastic supporter of a stronger Arab Maghreb Union. "Tunisia has always been anxious to enhance its relations with the Euro-Mediterranean area in order to promote active cooperation among countries on the two shores of the Mediterranean based on mutual benefits, common interests and the consolidation of security and stability in the region," he says. "We hope this summit will mark a new stage in strengthening the sectors of dialogue, cooperation and solidarity among the various concerned parties."

The 5+5 Dialogue was started in Rome in October 1990 in order to promote effective consultation among the foreign affairs ministers of the 10 participating countries. The founding declaration posited that the combined and shared experience of European and North African participants - complementing existing dialogue between the European Union and the Arab Maghreb Union - could contribute to reducing tensions and promoting economic, social and cultural prosperity in the region.

One goal was the creation of "an area of peace, cooperation and stability" in the Mediterranean basin. Founders underlined the comprehensive character of the dialogue and noted its potential contribution to economic development. Regular meetings, intense consultations and an exchange of viewpoints, they hoped, would produce solutions to an array of common concerns.

Indeed, a summit meeting of heads of state and government was first proposed at a ministerial meeting in Algiers in 1991. But the group was dormant for nearly a decade, primarily because of the crisis between Libya and France following the Lockerbie bombing and the continuation of conflict in the Western Sahara.

A third ministerial conference was not held until representatives met in Lisbon in January 2001. That consultation, following a preparatory meeting by senior officials in Tunis, stressed the importance of reactivating Dialogue 5+5 as a forum for cooperation between Europe and the Maghreb. It was succeeded by a fourth ministerial conference in Tripoli in May 2002 and two more discussions at the ministerial level in France earlier this year.

This year, participating ministers have discussed regional developments and their repercussions on security, economic cooperation and migration in the western Mediterranean. They have also addressed the situation in Iraq and the Middle East

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peace process.

Development issues Acknowledging the huge development disparity between the countries of the northern and southern Mediterranean, the group has reasserted its determination to create the kind of regional solidarity that could address development imbalances that increasingly threaten both stability and prosperity. A number of work groups were formed during the past three years to explore specific themes, such as South-South and North-South commercial exchanges and investment promotion.

The member states have also launched a number of programs and projects to enhance economic development at the regional level. They have created a Mediterranean database for the exchange of industrial and commercial information among the member countries, and have voiced their support of establishing a financial institution for the Mediterranean region.

For the Maghreb countries, the member states have also explored solutions to the problem of foreign debt and produced the legal framework necessary to implement technology-transfer projects.

The people side There has also been action on the social and cultural fronts. Member countries have studied the question of migration and attempted to improve cultural, scientific and technical cooperation, encouraging contact among universities and scientific, cultural and educational institutions.

The revival effort has been so successful that other Mediterranean countries, like Egypt, have expressed interest in joining the 5+5 Dialogue. JOEL STRATTE - McClUREValbonne, France

## For the record: A long-term commitment to cooperation

Wednesday, December 3, 2003

President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who took Tunisia's highest office in 1987 and has announced that he will seek a fourth five-year term next year, has been a firm supporter of Dialogue 5+5, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and other pan-Mediterranean activities. His remarks on this activity, collected here, illustrate Tunisia's long-term efforts to participate in the process of forging increased cooperation in the region:

"The Euro-Mediterranean dimension is an essential element in the policies of our country and its relations with other countries." January 1993 "We are convinced that the contract between our country and the European Union in the commercial, industrial, technological and cultural domains will further inspire political and social dialogue." October 1995 "The signing of the partnership contract with the European Union was a strategic, political and economic choice that gave concrete expression to our determination to become an active part of the world economy and to open ourselves to the European and Mediterranean region. We cannot stress too much the necessity for technical and technological cooperation with the European Union to make this agreement the best possible illustration of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation."

November 1995 "Our country is anxious to intensify dialogue with its European partners on the levels of governments, parliamentary institutions and national organizations, in order to achieve fruitful interaction and prepare the ground for sound cultural understanding in a context of equality and mutual respect." February 1998 "We are relying on cooperation with our European partners to help us in our efforts to upgrade our country's economy, improve the efficiency and competitiveness of our economic enterprises and act together for the expansion of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation." August 1998 "We are seeking to further reinforce our time-honored geographical and historical relations with our European partners." August 2000 "Tunisia has sought to strengthen the ties of friendship and cooperation with European countries that are not members of the European Union."

August 2001 "We have striven to set up an exemplary model for balanced relations of cooperation between the north and south of the Mediterranean through the signing of an Association Agreement with the European Union - the first of its kind in our region." February 2002 "Tunisia has shown resolve in placing its relations with the EU within a comprehensive approach founded on cooperation, interdependent interests and equity, and based on mutual respect and constructive dialogue." September 2002 JOEL STRATTE-McCLURE

## European Union: Pioneering agreement with EU opens doors

Wednesday, December 3, 2003

Tunisia entered the European mainstream in 1995, when it became the first country south of the Mediterranean to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union (AAEU). Progressively implemented since 1996, the pact called for the gradual removal of all tariffs on industrial goods and the creation of a nonagricultural free-trade zone by 2008.

The government's emphasis on the AAEU has been a key aspect of Tunisia's overall evolution since 1987, when President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali began serving his first term in office.

"The free-trade zone with the European Union has enabled Tunisia to improve the performance of its economy and to step up its development," says President Ben Ali, who has progressively created a market economy since he assumed office. "We consider our association with the European Union as a strategic option that contributes to the reinforcement of security and stability in our Mediterranean area."

Major trade conduit Over three-quarters of Tunisia's trade is currently with the European Union, and the EU is the source of nearly two-thirds of the capital that flows into the country, mostly in the form of direct investment. About 60 percent of all Tunisian imports from the European Union are now wholly exempt from customs duties, while duties for the rest of imports from the EU have declined substantially.

During the past 15 years, often with the assistance of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, initiatives by the Ben Ali government have modernized industry, promoted the private sector and reformed the financial and fiscal systems. They have also created export-led economic growth, increased foreign investment, stimulated infrastructure improvements, boosted corporate productivity, hastened social development and, increasingly, solidified links with Europe.

Says Abdelhamid Triki, director general of economic forecasting at the Ministry of Economic Development and International Cooperation: "Our pragmatic and progressive reforms over the past 15 years have enabled us to reduce debt, diversify the economy and successfully integrate into the world market."

There are now some 2,500 international companies with investments and operations in Tunisia. Services account for almost 50 percent of economic activity, followed by manufacturing (18 percent), agriculture and fishing (13 percent), and energy and mining.

Though direct investment in the energy sector is still important, foreign companies during the past decade have increasingly concentrated on export-oriented manufacturing, especially textiles and footwear. France continues to be the main source of foreign investment. Companies with activities in Tunisia include British Gas, Alcatel, Danone, Fiat, Nabisco, Nestlé, Siemens and Sony.

The 10th national economic plan, which runs through 2006, endorses a more competitive and diversified economy. It focuses on globalization, across-the-board investment and increased international trade for this country of almost 10 million.

Says President Ben Ali: "It is our hope that the association agreement with the European Union will make it possible to set up a zone of free exchange of goods and services and free movement of capital, with clear facilities for the movement of

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people in both directions, so as to achieve real economic integration by the end of this decade." JOEL STRATTE-McCLURE

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Said Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali earlier this year: "Our determination to consolidate relations with the countries of the western part of Southern Europe does not go against our relations within other, broader forums. Rather, we consider it a prelude to wider cooperation between the Arab Maghreb Union and the European Union - and also to the resumption of Arab-European dialogue."

Active partner Tunisia is an active participant in the more comprehensive Euro - Mediterranean Partnership. Also known as the Barcelona Process, it resulted from a conference of the foreign ministers of 15 member states of the European Union and 12 Mediterranean partners in November 1995 in Barcelona.

That body, which is concluding its sixth annual meeting in Naples on Dec. 3, is significantly boosting bilateral, multilateral and regional cooperation. Other non - European partners include Algeria, Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Malta, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Syria and Turkey. Libya currently has observer status at certain meetings.

One outcome of the meeting in Naples has been a message of solidarity between the EU and its southern neighbors. The group reaffirmed its members' joint desire to reinforce security and stability in the region "to ensure that extreme fundamentalism and terrorism are not allowed to get in the way of progress and political reform."

The Barcelona Process has set 2010 as the deadline for the progressive creation of a Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Area. It is backing a partnership that provides substantial EU financial support for the ongoing economic transition in the partner states. Meetings of foreign affairs ministers and senior officials have already dealt with various political and security questions, while sector -based groups have discussed agriculture, commerce, the environment, health, industry, transport and other areas.

Tunisia, which eight years ago became the first partner country to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union (AAEU), has long spearheaded cooperation that has spurred comprehensive domestic economic reforms. Although it represents only about 4 percent of the region's population, Tunisia has received 14 percent of the financial support allocated to the countries of the southern Mediterranean. Consequently, many analysts and researchers consider it a model of economic and financial cooperation with the EU.

Tunisia has helped define the Euro-Mediterranean charter for peace and stability as well as lay the foundations for an effective political dialogue among the concerned members. Its delegates, who currently preside over the Arab countries of the Barcelona Process, seek to forge a unified Arab position that responds to European arguments.

Tunisian representatives, who have submitted a variety of initiatives and projects for consideration by the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, have also participated in numerous sessions dealing with the fight against terrorism. Underlining the necessity of adopting a comprehensive and multifaceted approach, they regularly stress the

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need not only to discuss the security dimension of the problem, but also to tackle the root causes, including poverty and marginalization.

Tunisia was an early backer of establishing a financial institution to support development in the Maghreb countries, a concept that was adopted during the Euro -Mediterranean ministerial conference in Valencia in 2002. Tunisia has also offered to be the home of the Maghreb branch of the European Investment Bank. Tunis was chosen as the site of the office to implement a Euro -Mediterranean transport project.

Tunisia's representatives have submitted several proposals to promote the private sector and boost regional cooperation. The country has also held a number of symposia in the fields of energy, environmental protection, investment, and scientific research and technology.

In addition to economic and financial cooperation, Tunisia has been involved in a number of social and cultural projects. The creation of a Euro -Mediterranean Observatory for Employment and Vocational Training, which was proposed by Tunisia in 2000 and adopted last year, is one key result.

The Euro-Mediterranean ministerial conference held in Crete last year adopted the Tunisian proposal to organize "The Year of the Mediterranean" to promote Mediterranean culture.

Tunisia's long-term philosophy is that overall, ongoing cooperation with the EU, based on the principles of partnership and sustainable development, should reduce economic disparities between the two shores of the Mediterranean.

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## Tunisia welcomes summit and progress

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The First Dialogue Summit 5+5, being held in Tunis Dec. 5-6, will be the first time the group's 10 heads of state and government have convened since the forum was created in 1990. A consultation among senior officials, who met in Tunis to plan the summit in October, precedes a conference among the ministers of foreign affairs on Dec. 5 and a meeting of national leaders on Dec. 6.

The summit is expected to outline common guidelines for major issues concerning the western Mediterranean, including the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and Iraq. The leaders of the five-member Arab Maghreb Union, who recently met in Algiers and Tripoli to coordinate their positions, and five European Union member countries are expected to underline the importance of their continuing dialogue and the implementation of tangible multilateral programs.

Tunisia, which was the site of an important conference on migration in October 2002 and a meeting on commercial facilitation in June, has been an enthusiastic participant in the 5+5 Dialogue and was one of the main instigators of this week's summit. The country's president, a firm backer of the evolving integration process among Maghreb nations, continues to encourage general and specific regional economic, cultural and social initiatives.

Says Tunisia's President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, "We hope that our call for the establishment of a Euro-Mediterranean bank will find the necessary support so that the bank may be an effective development tool that would help launch the process of association between the European Union and the Arab Maghreb Union." At a cabinet meeting in November, he highlighted the importance of "ensuring follow-up to Tunisia's initiatives aimed at anchoring the bases of co-development among countries of the Mediterranean."

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