

# Pursuing an active diplomacy

## INTERVIEW WITH RAFIK ABDESSALEM

MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, TUNISIA



**RAFIK ABDESSALEM** received a BA in Philosophy from Mohammed V University in Rabat, Morocco, and a PhD in Politics and International Relations from the University of Westminster in 2003. He was a visiting scholar at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies. He was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs following the 2011 Revolution.

**You have had one year to re-establish relations with the world since the Revolution. What are your priorities and how have you done so far?**

Our priorities are based on the political conditions of Tunisia. Tunisia is a multi-dimensional country; we are a Mediterranean country and our relationship with Europe is strategic, both for geographical and historical reasons. We are deeply interconnected with the Mediterranean hemisphere. We are part of the North-African region and the Arab Maghreb Union. We are part of the African continent as well. So, all these circles are our priorities. We work in different capacities within the European Union, the Maghreb Union, the African continent and the Arab world.

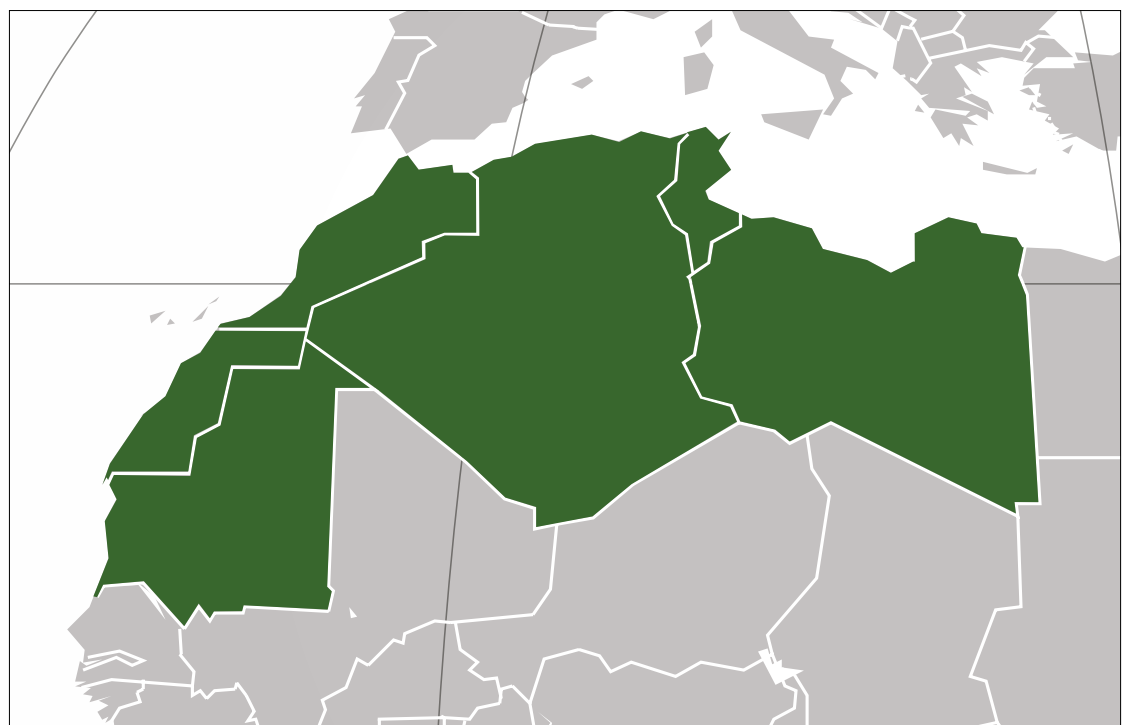
**How did the Revolution affect Tunisia's international relations?**

I would say our diplomacy is becoming more active. But apart from that the foreign policy of Tunisia does not start with this government or after the Revolution. We have a legacy which is based on our geographical conditions and our demographics. Of course Tunisia is not a huge country; it's a small to medium-sized

country that is Mediterranean but also part of the African continent and the Arab world. We take into consideration all these elements; so there is no shifting in our overall policy. We are very keen to be active in our diplomacy, but within the traditional priorities that have been pre-established over the years.

**What are you doing to restore trade and investment relations with your neighbours?**

This is one of our greatest priorities. The Maghreb Arab Union is for us the greatest priority, for strategic, geographic, social and political reasons. We are closely related to Libya. We have long borders with Libya, and we even have a social relationship where you find Tunisian families have relatives in Libya and vice versa. Our economy and our security is deeply interconnected with Libya, as well as with Algeria and other neighbouring countries. We are very keen to have an integrated economic zone within the Maghreb Arab Union. Of course, we understand the complexity of this situation due to the polarisation between Morocco and Algeria and the Sahara problem, and we have already spoken with



The Arab Maghreb Union encompasses Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Libya and Mauritania

our friends in the Maghreb Arab Union about this. We advised them to be pragmatic; to put aside the Sahara problem and to look at the economic interests that would be in favour of all member states. And I hope we succeed in this.

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**Specifically looking at your relationship with the UK, given the fact that you yourself studied here, where do you see this relationship going?**

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It is going in the right direction. Traditionally, our relationship has been closer with the Mediterranean countries, but we are very keen to consolidate our relationship with the United Kingdom. Our first partner in energy is the United Kingdom – British Gas has a big investment here in Tunisia – and I hope that the relationship will become more active and consolidated, and one that will be in favour of the United Kingdom as well as Tunisia. English, for example, is becoming our third language here, and it is the lingua franca of the world. Of course, the second language of Tunisia is French, due to historical and cultural reasons, but the younger generation is more keen to acquire the English language, which is beneficial to become more active in a globalised world.

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**How are you going to manage this very fine balance between a relationship with the West and with the Muslim world?**

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I think there is no such contradiction. We are not obliged to be either with the West or the Muslim World. Due to the complexity of our geography we

are part of the Arab and the Muslim world of course. But we are also part of the Mediterranean hemisphere. Europe is very close to Tunisia, just a few tens of miles from Italy. So we have historically had to strike a balance between Europe and the Arab world and the Muslim world.

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**You were a student and scholar of politics and international relations for a number of years. You're now a practitioner. How easy was it to make the transition?**

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It was not easy. There is, of course, a difference from reading international relations in the books or to have the theoretical background, and to put it into practice. There is a gap.

But I think I have benefited from my political background and political theory and have tried to make the necessary modifications from theory to the reality.

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**What is the importance of the Chatham House Prize for Tunisia?**

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I think the prize is very important in appreciating the efforts of two political figures in Tunisia – President Marzouki and Sheikh Rachid Ghannouchi – for their political and intellectual work.

Chatham House is a very prestigious think tank and is very influential in British and international affairs. I think it's good for Tunisian political and business leaders to be more involved with this very interesting institution. E

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Putting theory into practice: Rafik Abdesslem applies the lessons learned from his political studies in the United Kingdom