



The Tunisian Diaspora: What Role to Play in the Economic Development of the Country?

On August 15th, 2018, Afkar brought together more than fifty key stakeholders around the theme of “The Tunisian Diaspora: What role to play in the economic development of the country?”. The discussion was moderated by activist Chaima Bouhleb and had as rapporteur Dr. Kamel Jedidi, the John Howard Professor of Business and the Chair of the Marketing Division at Columbia Business School in New York.

Thirty representatives of the Tunisian government, civil society, private sector, international organizations, professional associations, and representatives of the diaspora were present around the table.

This third edition of 2018 started off with presentations from five different institutions on ways Tunisians abroad can have an impact on the economic and social development of the country.

Over the course of this edition, the speakers brought to light these main challenges:

1. The Lack of Data:

There is no central database of information about the nature and demographics of the Tunisian diaspora around the world. Current information is very limited and often only considers Tunisians living in countries historically considered destinations for the diaspora, ignoring countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

2. A Simplistic View of the Diaspora:

Afkar gathers a critical mass of empowered stakeholders around a problem requiring urgent action to establish a dialogue between the diverse entities in order to address the issue and to develop implementable solutions. This year, Afkar is implementing six editions of Afkar to address economic challenges in Tunisia.



As a sociological reality, the diaspora is frequently perceived only as financial resource able to send transfers of money. In reality, the diaspora can play a much broader role. Individuals in the diaspora have often built strong economic ties with their host countries that can be leveraged.

3. A Hostile Investment Climate:

A common practice in the diaspora is to send funds to family rather than invest in SMEs. Since the Tunisian dinar is a currency that is not freely convertible, citizens have limited choices when it comes to accessing sources of financing and many have no access to foreign currency at all unless a relative sends money from abroad. Although there are administrative measures with the Central Bank of Tunisia, they remain extremely tedious. These strong restrictions on the conversion of capital hamper private initiative.

4. A Public Administration Suffering from Corruption:

The Tunisian public administration, with its complex bureaucracy and its problems with corruption, hinders practically any proposed economic reform. This generates strong apprehensions vis-à-vis public institutions. The business climate lacks mutual trust and suffers from institutional blockages, hence the discouragement of a large part of the diaspora to invest.

5. A Lack of Strategic Planning :

The state is struggling to develop clear strategies for mobilizing the diaspora. Transnational collaboration initiatives remain relatively modest compared to the potential for action of the diaspora. Some organizations have put in place actions to address certain diaspora issues. Nevertheless, they remain individual initiatives that require more coordination and would benefit from collaboration.



6. A Need for Recognition:

Many actively engaged Tunisians living abroad feel that neither their compatriots nor the state recognize their efforts in the economic development of the country. The diaspora is not only an auxiliary but it can be at the heart of economic development too. It is a real and vital lever that remains unfortunately unrecognized by the general public.

RECOMMANDATIONS :

During the discussion, participants proposed and discussed specific and achievable solutions to resolve the issues identified above. The following ideas have been proposed:

1. Pool Resources and Networks:

Throughout the discussion, participants emphasized the urgent need to overcome the wave of pessimism that weighs on the Tunisian diaspora, especially after the revolution, by bringing Tunisia to a better economic future. This can be done through the construction of strong networks through active exchanges, events and dynamic associations. This network would aim to create meaningful partnerships for the long term.

2. Collect and Analyze Data Related to the Diaspora and Make them Available to the General Public:

It is imperative to collect data so that various stakeholders can understand the diaspora in all its specificities, particularities and needs. It is also urgent to intensify efforts to collect this data. A database of the diaspora would better identify and guide public policies and partnerships.

3. Refine Targeting to Establish a Categorization of the Diaspora:

To overcome the lack of engagement among the diaspora, it is necessary to differentiate the different types of diasporas and to examine the specific needs of each of these



communities. The diaspora is by no means a monolith made up only of a social and economic elite (this so-called elite represents only 4% of the diaspora). Differentiating the different groups in the Tunisian diaspora would enable public and private institutions to develop refined engagement strategies adapted to the specific characteristics of each group.

4. Create Attractive Public-Private Partnerships :

The creation of a database would make it possible to connect professionals in the diaspora with those in Tunisia. As a result, the public sector would be able to offer more attractive public-private partnerships. For example, the implementation of projects and initiatives focused on the promotion of export, entrepreneurship, and education would benefit from possible partnerships between the Ministry of Higher Education and foreign universities.

5. Inspire the Public by Sharing Models of Diaspora Success Stories:

During the debate, many of the participants had personal experiences and examples of everyday life to share about the motivation and economic commitment of the Tunisian diaspora. However, their testimonies are not sufficiently communicated. Sharing their stories through the different media available would have a real positive impact on the image of the Tunisian diaspora and its involvement in Tunisia.

6. Organize a "Diaspora Day" Bringing Together Tunisians Living Abroad Alongside the Public and Private Sectors for the Promotion of Investment:

The organization of a Diaspora Day following a joint initiative by the state, civil society and private institutions to bring together all the Tunisian diaspora around the world would highlight the diversity of the diaspora, create synergy between its different components and lead to concrete actions and projects.



7. Put in Place a Clear and Effective National Public Strategy for Diaspora Engagement:

The Tunisian government should draw on the experiences of other governments that have focused on the diaspora in their development plan. Recognizing the diaspora by including it more in specific development programs would facilitate its integration into the Tunisian economy. There should be a clear and effective national public strategy that takes into consideration the various individual initiatives. These constitute an important aspect of the diaspora's experience in the development of the Tunisian economy. The strategy must be articulated around a common objective that brings together all stakeholders: the increase of collective efforts to ensure the prosperity of Tunisia.

8. Focus on the Creative Economy to Strengthen the Image of Tunisia Abroad:

Members of the diaspora are ambassadors of Tunisian culture and would benefit from visibility in their host countries. Cultural events should be diversified to promote the cultural image of Tunisia. Beyond orientalist clichés, Tunisia would benefit from attracting foreign cultural promoters. Support for art and culture is important for the image of the country and the development of a creative economy.