

# Positive lessons from the Arab Spring

António Guterres

Forced displacement in today's world is marked by several characteristics: multiple and unpredictable triggers; overwhelming numbers fleeing in a short period of time; and entire communities destroyed, too often for generations, in a matter of days. Whether across international borders or within their countries of origin, those displaced are often met with remarkable generosity by individuals and host communities, yet sometimes fail to elicit the international assistance required to alleviate their misery or the political will to resolve their plight.

The exodus from Libya serves as a microcosm of these features. Sparked by an individual act of resistance in Tunisia, peaceful protests in Libya were met by oppression, and by late February border points with Tunisia that had formerly received 1,000 persons a day were getting that many in an hour. Entire communities fled, leaving behind their homes and life savings, the more fortunate carrying what possessions they could such as mattresses and blankets. The scenes I witnessed during my visits to the border during the crisis were dismaying, with frightened and disoriented crowds still in shock from the violence they had escaped and the uncertainty they faced.

The response from ordinary Tunisians was remarkable in its altruism. I witnessed villagers sharing their homes and land while others drove for miles to provide sandwiches for those stuck in the crowds at the border. That Tunisia

maintained an open border is also noteworthy as it was still emerging from its own 'Arab Spring' turmoil. The international community in this instance joined forces, sending aircraft to return workers and, in the case of refugees, offering resettlement places so that those secondarily displaced from Libya could start a new life.

Coordinated and timely assistance and protection are critical, as we witness a proliferation of new conflicts – Mali, Syria and Sudan – in addition to 'old' ones, including the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia and Afghanistan. We need, unfortunately, to be able to focus on more than one story at a time as the world is creating displacement faster than it is producing solutions. These are essentially political problems and require a political response, as humanitarian agencies like mine can neither prevent nor end displacement on our own. The reaction to the exodus from Libya showed it can be done, when the international community has the will to do so.

I welcome this issue of *Forced Migration Review* for examining what was accomplished and highlighting what challenges remain. Our common work to seek political responses and solutions, in a systematic fashion, must be underpinned by learning such as this.

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