

“We haven’t left from Tunisia, we’ve escaped”

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The coup d’état-revolt in Tunisia has devastated the country, a neighbour of Italy, which until yesterday was thought to be an oasis of stability; it is a clear sign of the failure, on our part, to understand the situation in North Africa. **Roberto Vielmi**, from Lonate, who we met during the campaigns that he had inspired to save Via Gaggio, against Malpensa Airport’s third runway, knows something about it.

Yesterday, Friday 14 January, Roberto ended a month’s holiday in **Annaba**, the ancient town of Hippo of Saint Augustine, with his Algerian relatives, returning via Tunis airport; the journey turned out to be **a frightening adventure**.

Vielmi and his relatives left the Algerian city at 5.30 a.m., and crossed the border into Tunisia after the usual two-hour wait and a meticulous search of their car, which culminated with the seizure of **four kilos of Algerian dates**. “It was the usual procedure,” Vielmi said, “nothing out of the ordinary; pity about the dates.”

The rest of the journey to Tunis passed peacefully. “At 12.30, we were at the airport, and, as the check-in time was 2 p.m., we went for a tour around the city. There were people on the roads, it was like any Sabbath (Friday is the day of prayer for Muslims), but there were a lot policemen, and even a tank. But all around, it was like **a “day after” scene**, cars overturned and burned,” the signs of the previous days’ protesting.

Vielmi explained, “The previous evening, President Ben Ali had made his second speech,” a summary of the demands of the protestors, “and some people had celebrated.” On returning to the airport, after the check-in, “the airport police seemed strangely even more relaxed than usual,” Vielmi and his relatives boarded the plane, “AirOne flight AZ 7447”. But then, something strange began to happen.

The airplane did not take off.

“We were already taxiing at 4 p.m., when an air hostess told us to get our hand luggage and leave the airplane **immediately**. From what I could make out, they were looking for someone. We left the plane, and we found ourselves **surrounded by commando units, wearing hoods and carrying machine guns** – although these weren’t aimed at us – with three coaches. They stuck us all on one of these, then, a minute later, they started to divide us up by nationality. In the meantime, **they started kicking one of the passengers, on the ground**. If I understood correctly, he had an Italian passport, but was Tunisian or of Tunisian descent,” presumably someone with dual nationality.

For quarter of an hour, the passengers stayed on the bus while the hooded commandos watched the man they had kicked. Then, just as they had arrived, the commandos went, **also**

leaving the man with his face swollen. “At first, I thought they were looking for him, then, as they didn’t take him with them, I guess he must have answered disrespectfully. It was all very, very strange,” our witness said. “We got back onto the plane, but at that point, all of the staff had disappeared, and the airport was **deserted**. I knew a strike had been planned, and we were informed that **the soldiers had closed the airport** at that very moment. They wanted to close the air space,” which is standard procedure during a coup d’état. And the atmosphere **was of a coup d’état**, Vielmi said. “There was hold luggage on the ground, and nobody to load it, it had just been left on the runway; fortunately, I hadn’t. We stayed there, on the plane, until 6 p.m., in a situation that was paradoxical, with the control tower giving us the go-ahead, and the pilot waiting for someone to load the luggage so that we could leave, in an airport that was closed and deserted. One air hostess had said they were looking for someone from Al-Qaeda, but I don’t know how true that is.” In the end, the situation was resolved by the flight staff, who were “professional, polite and excellent”. The pilot, and one air steward ensured that the airplane was closed. **“The steward said, ‘We haven’t left from Tunisia, we’ve escaped’.**” How true! And so, it was on taking off, not on landing, that the passengers gave a loud round of applause. “And the happiest passenger, who thanked God, was the one that the commandos had kicked.”

The flight went without event, “although one air hostess went past repeatedly, counting the passengers.” At 7.30 p.m., the plane landed at Malpensa Airport without any problems, after an hour and three quarters over the Mediterranean. **There was another surprise at Arrivals.** “The police were already there under the stairs, they checked the passports one by one, and photocopied them; they made us go through an unusual exit, near the check-in desks, I think, they gave us pieces of paper on which to write our names, surnames and telephone numbers. In fact, we still have to be available to the forces of law and order, who, I must say, were extremely polite. There was great confusion; they divided us up by nationality, they took the man that had been kicked aside, and looked at him (presumably in order to understand what had happened to him, and why, *ed.*), while some passengers expressed their anger, demanding to be allowed to leave immediately, and causing **tension** between the passengers and the police. All of the luggage was checked. The person in charge told us, **“Be patient; we have to do this to protect your international position,”** implying they had received some strange *input* from Tunisia. About an hour and a quarter after the arrival, the passengers were finally free to leave by their own means.

“On returning to Algeria in the afternoon, my relatives described to me how **Tunis was in flames**, and how the Tunisia they had crossed had been ghost-like, where everything was closed and deserted. When they stopped to ask for information at a closed bar, they were insulted and treated like madmen. In Tabarka, they found some supermarkets they knew had been **broken into and looted.**” The regime had fallen.