

Opening Statement of the Honorable Ileana Ros-Lehtinen
MENA Subcommittee Hearing entitled:
Transition at a Crossroads: Tunisia Three Years After the Revolution
Wednesday, December 4, 2013

Three years ago this month, the self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor would set in motion a series of events that would fundamentally change the political landscape of the entire Middle East and North Africa region – a period we now call the Arab Spring. Finally fed up with autocratic rule, with corruption, with a lack of basic freedoms, thousands of Tunisians took to the streets calling for democratic and social reforms and an end to the maligned twenty-three year rule of their leader.

But though there has been some significant progress made since his ouster, there is still much that needs to be done to meet the goals and aspirations of the Tunisian people who began this process, as I said, three years ago. By most accounts, the Tunisians had a successful National Constituent Assembly election in October 2011, which brought a party into power together with the Tunisian two leading secularist parties.

However, the newly formed government quickly ran into obstacles that it could not overcome and Tunisia's transition came to a grinding halt this summer when a prominent secular party member was assassinated. The assassination eventually led to the formation of a National Dialogue process to jump start the reconciliation process, to select a caretaker government, and get Tunisia back on track for a new round of elections. But the National Dialogue has been met with its own set of obstacles and the negotiations over who will be the caretaker Prime Minister has caused an impasse.

Now, as the political process has paused and the future of the constitution and elections are in question, Tunisia finds itself at a crossroads as frustrations begin to set in and the rift between the secular and the Islamist ideologues continues to grow as both sides battle for legitimacy. Compounding these political problems are the economic and security challenges facing Tunisia as all three are undeniably linked and all three face an uphill battle.

However, one of the most pressing issues from a U.S. perspective is the threat of Islamic extremism in Tunisia. Foreign fighters and home grown extremists have challenged the stability of Tunisia, and while the Tunisian security forces have thus far been able to combat al Qaeda (AQIM) and its affiliates, these terrorist networks continue to pose a threat to Tunisia and to the region.

Tunisia's border with Algeria is known to be a training area for the terrorist groups, and the insecure border with Libya is a major area for concern as it is vulnerable to smugglers and others who wish to cross into Tunisia undetected. Terrorist attacks like the one on the U.S. embassy in September 2012 as well as the assassination of two prominent secular politicians threaten to derail the political process.

With Tunisia being the birthplace of the Arab Spring, we must continue to support the democratic aspirations in the hope that it can come through this transition successfully. For better

or worse, the fate of Tunisia is tied to the reform movements throughout the rest of the region as it is viewed as the test-case for the democratic transitions in the Arab world.

It is in the vital national security interests of the United States to see a secure, a stable and a democratic Tunisia, and I hope the Administration does not overlook the importance of this strategic country. We must remain engaged throughout the National Dialogue process and beyond to ensure a successful transition to democracy in Tunisia and we must not allow the terrorist groups to derail the political transition nor gain any more influence in an already susceptible region. And we must work to find effective ways to assist Tunisia as it struggles to fight this rising threat of terrorism.

This is a critical juncture for Tunisia, for the region and for United States strategic interests. We must support the people of Tunisia as they struggle to achieve real reforms and we must also support the groups like the IRI, the NDI, IFES who are on the ground day after day promoting democracy in this vitally important region and working to find a consensus among all parties on a new constitution and new electoral process.