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**U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs  
Subcommittee on Middle East and North Africa**

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**"Transition at a Crossroads: Tunisia Three Years After the Revolution"**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to testify on the state of Tunisia's political transition three years after an uprising that toppled the authoritarian regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Protests against his legacy of corruption and nepotism, which began in December 2010, quickly transformed into a citizen-led movement for dignity and liberty that resonated across the region in the days and months following.

In the three years since popular protests began, Tunisia has made significant progress toward establishing democratic institutions. This has included the successful administration of the country's first free election to seat diverse political representatives in a National Constituent Assembly that is now tasked with drafting a new constitution reflecting citizen aspirations. Initial steps toward democracy have not been easy. While Tunisia's transition today is more vulnerable than at any other point to date, there is reason to be hopeful that the country's experience can and will continue to serve as an inspiration to others beyond Tunisia's borders.

The international community should enhance its support of the Tunisian transition, making it clear to all political actors that an immediate return to the National Dialogue negotiations (more detail on the dialogue process appears below) is essential to demonstrate genuine commitment to democratic principles and fundamental freedoms. The mediation team, led by the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT), should announce a definitive date for the dialogue to re-commence and stress that any party that fails to participate will forfeit its right to contribute to decisions. Tunisian politicians must seek agreement to nominate a caretaker prime minister and cabinet that can garner public trust, finalize the constitution, appoint the election management body, and outline steps to conduct presidential and parliamentary elections. These steps are essential to adequately address pressing

citizen priorities, including salvaging the economy and ensuring safe and secure communities.

Serving as part of the leadership of NDI's international observation mission in October 2011, I witnessed firsthand the hope many Tunisians placed in the National Constituent Assembly elections. This was their first opportunity to make free choices at the ballot box and to ensure that votes were counted as cast. As they enthusiastically turned out to vote, many Tunisians calculated that if election day proceeded smoothly, if competitors accepted the election results, and if the composition of the Assembly represented public will, Tunisia would have taken a solid step toward a more democratic future and away from its authoritarian past.

Election results confirmed these hopes. While the anticipated frontrunner, Ennahda, won a plurality, taking 89 of the 217 contested seats in the assembly, 26 other party, coalition and independent lists also received enough votes to win at least one seat. In keeping with Tunisia's progressive legacy on women's rights, the 2011 election law also ensured the prominence of women in the Assembly. As a result, 27 percent of Assembly seats were filled by women.

Making good on pre-election promises, Ennahda's moderate Islamist leadership sought to form a broad coalition to share the responsibility of governing. This was intended to mitigate fears of some Tunisians and the international community that the party might seek to dominate the transition, especially through the constitution drafting process. The ruling "troika" coalition formed by Ennahda and two center left parties, the Congress for the Republic (CPR) and Ettakatol, took power in December 2011. In these two years, the coalition has struggled but remained intact, despite the often strained communication among its members and increasing pressure from opposition political parties.

Soon after the election, the Assembly pledged to complete a new constitution and announce fresh elections -- all within one year. This deadline proved to be overly ambitious. The work of constitution drafting committees was often interrupted by political stand-offs and the competing business of the general legislative standing committees. Despite the disorganization that has often characterized their work, Assembly members have frequently sought to build broad consensus, reaching out to local and international experts, and engaging citizens in the drafting process. The Assembly has negotiated and refined four successive constitution drafts and while some problems still exist, the current version is cohesive and much improved. Only a few contentious points remain regarding the separation of powers.

When the one-year deadline was not met in the winter of 2012, the Assembly attempted to engage the public by having members present a draft to invitees from civil society in all 24 Tunisian governorates and key constituencies outside the country. Despite these attempts at outreach, Tunisia's Assembly has grown increasingly unpopular among average citizens. This is due in large part to its inability to communicate adequately the purpose and pace of its work, thereby failing to meet public expectations.

While the Assembly has not met the one-year self-imposed deadline, the 'troika' government has also struggled to address growing economic and security challenges. The Tunisian economy has generally declined or stagnated since the revolution. Tunisia's middle class, one of the most robust in the region, suffers growing economic pressure as the price of necessities such as milk, bread and fuel have steadily risen. Political uncertainties since 2011 have also negatively affected the country's economic driver, the tourism sector, and have stalled much-needed domestic and international investment. Two weeks ago, Tunisia's National Institute of Statistics published unemployment figures for the third quarter of 2013. The government institution stated that while the overall unemployment rate hovers just under 16 percent, university graduate unemployment is closer to 34 percent. Thus the young Tunisians, who are widely credited as bringing about the revolution, are those being left behind.

Growing frustration and disillusionment with the pace of political change is also affecting stability in the country. Public opinion research, conducted by NDI since March of 2011, shows that Tunisians are experiencing deep anxiety since swapping the stability of a police state for the uncertainty of a transitional context in which state authority is fragmented. For Tunisians concerned with transitional justice, change has been hard to see; basic institutions of day-to-day life, such as courts, police offices, and other public establishments, barely function under bureaucratic inefficiency and entrenched corruption.

Many Tunisians, the most vocal of whom have been leftists and secularists, have accused Ennahda of delegitimizing itself and the government as a whole by failing to crack down on violent Islamic extremism in its various forms. These groups have presented a dilemma for Ennahda, particularly in the context of a weak, contested security apparatus and judicial system. Though Ennahda initially accommodated Salafist groups in exchange for their support, it hardened its rhetoric in the wake of the attack on the U.S. Embassy and American School in September 2012. By the spring of 2013, Ennahda had significantly toughened its tone toward Salafists calling for violence, particularly Ansar al-Sharia, which the

Ennahda prime minister eventually declared a terrorist group. Despite Ennahda's change of tack, many Tunisians continue to see the government as ineffectual or unwilling to enforce the rule of law.

This perception has been further fueled by two assassinations of leftist politicians this year. Both men were aligned with the Popular Front, a loose coalition of parties that fared poorly in the 2011 elections but that have risen in prominence due to their vocal stance against Ennahda. The first assassination in February forced the government's hand, resulting in the resignation of Hamadi Jebali from his post as prime minister and a government reshuffle to meet the demands of opposition parties. The second murder – this time of a member of the Assembly – happened on July 25, Republic Day, an annual celebration marking Tunisia's independence from French rule and establishment of an independent republic. The second assassination came as the Assembly was on the brink of completing its work on the constitution and finalizing the selection of nine experts who would constitute an independent election administration, an oversight body responsible for planning and setting the date for the next elections.

In response to this second shock, and emboldened by what they saw unfolding in Egypt, Ennahda's opponents were quick to act. Leaders in Nidaa Tounes, the key opposition party, stepped up attempts to label Ennahda not only a failure in government, but perhaps complicit in the murders. Beji Caid Essebsi, the savvy 87-year-old leader of Nidaa Tounes, called for opposition members of parliament to boycott the Assembly until the government stepped down, and went so far as to issue calls to dissolve the Assembly entirely. Essebsi has been praised for his efforts as interim prime minister, successfully shepherding Tunisia through the first phase of its transition in 2011. Today, however, his party is associated with old regime elements, which raises concern about a return to the pre-revolutionary approach to governance.

A coalition of opposition parties led by Nidaa Tounes and the Popular Front, labelling themselves the “National Salvation Front,” organized a sit-in outside Tunisia's Assembly and held nightly rallies in the month following the July assassination. As the protests wore on, the ruling coalition attempted to make concessions to draw the lawmakers back to the table. Ettakatol's Mustapha Ben Jaafar, in his role as president of the Assembly, went so far as to temporarily suspend the work of the legislature in a move to force the two sides to sit down. While Ennahda capitulated to opposition demands for another government reshuffle, sacking the Assembly was a “red line” it was not willing to cross.

This political stand-off continued throughout August and September, with the opposition hardening its line and making attempts to enlarge the coalition to include power brokers such as the national workers union, UGTT. While these political alliances took shape in Tunis, popular support for the boycott was waning and the Salvation Front was no longer able to turn out the numbers that it had earlier in the summer. With the end of Ramadan 2013, the summer hiatus and the return to regular schedules, concerns of daily life and daily economics have led Tunisians to pressure the politicians to move away from partisanship and toward an election.

The UGTT, along with leadership of the chamber of commerce, the lawyers syndicate and the Tunisian League for Human Rights, known as the Quartet, stepped in to try and broker a negotiation process that would allow both sides to save face and begin rebuilding trust. Leaders of most parties represented in the Assembly eventually agreed to the Quartet's 'National Dialogue' process, which would address four fundamental issues: 1) composition of a new apolitical technocrat government; 2) reaching agreement on final sticking points in the draft constitution, 3) appointing leadership of an independent election administration who would be responsible for drafting the election law, and 4) agreeing on the sequence and timeline for presidential and parliamentary elections.

This 'package' of issues, which politicians agreed to in a public signing ceremony on October 25, was accompanied by an ambitious timeline that should have seen completion of the process by late November. The optimism following the signing was dampened when parties could not reach agreement on an interim prime minister. Since mid-November, the structured dialogue process has ceased, and the Quartet has gone back to shuttle diplomacy between factions. Also assisting the process, diplomatic efforts by the U.S and European Union member states have encouraged a speedy return to dialogue, while respecting Tunisia's preference for a locally-managed negotiation.

In the midst of the various rounds of political deliberations, NDI has provided Tunisia's political leadership with advice and information on comparative experiences in managing complex negotiations as a means of considering appropriate models and encouraging constructive dialogue. Through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the State Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), NDI received funding to establish programs in Tunisia within weeks of Ben Ali's departure. Since February 2011, NDI's activities have been designed to support and strengthen the democratic process by creating a space for inclusive political debate to inform citizens and

expose them to various political options. NDI has worked to keep parties focused on building lasting structures and creating platforms that resonate with voters. Parties' investment in their internal structures, recruitment of party activists and platform development also contribute to democratic stabilization. At the same time, NDI is supporting opportunities for citizen oversight and domestic election observation with the aim to increase accountability during the country's delicate transition, with a particular focus on upcoming elections.

The week after the official negotiations stalled, NDI organized focus groups to gauge citizens' perspectives on the National Dialogue process, their views on accomplishments since 2011, and priorities in their daily lives. When asked about strides made since the revolution, Tunisian participants were resolute that freedom of expression remains the only tangible accomplishment. However, fears over recent arrests of journalists and what citizens view as media bias raise concerns about even these gains. Views about the National Dialogue are clear – in order to begin the long process of restoring public confidence, all responsible political parties must return to the negotiation table immediately. They must work hard to complete the constitutional phase, making it possible to hold elections for a new president and parliament in the next six months.

The calls from the United States and the international community during the uprising of 2011 demanding that the Tunisian government listen to pleas for dignity lent important legitimacy to citizen aspirations throughout the Arab world. Despite Tunisia's numerous challenges, reason for active engagement remains. Tunisia's transition, symbolized most powerfully by its constitutional drafting process, has moved forward in fits and starts, but it remains on track -- setting Tunisia apart from stalled or reversed transitions in neighboring countries. Tunisians' value of consensus over expediency remains one of the strengths of this country's transition. To ensure the current stalemate does not encourage undemocratic intervention in the process, it is important that the U.S. government continue to support trust-building measures between the Ennahda-led governing coalition and leading opposition parties to conclude the current constitutional phase as quickly and responsibly as possible.

In addition to directing assistance to economic and security reform, the United States should strongly and consistently support popular demands for transparency, accountability and freedom. This means a continued commitment to pluralism and civil society and speaking clearly with respect to ongoing threats to freedom of expression. The Administration and U.S. Congress should be steadfast in supporting an enabling environment for political parties and civil society to build a

democratic Tunisia, and in support of the aspirations of Tunisian citizens and those around the world who continue to look to Tunisia for inspiration.

Thank you, Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee.