

**Statement by Leslie Campbell
Senior Associate and Regional Director,
Middle East and North Africa Programs
National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI)**

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

July 14, 2015

“Tunisia’s Fragile Democratic Transition”

Madame Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to testify on the state of Tunisia’s democratic transition. Protests against former authoritarian leader Zine El Abidine Ben Ali’s legacy of corruption and nepotism began in December 2010 and quickly transformed into a citizen-led movement for dignity and liberty that resonated across the region in the days and months following.

Nearly five years later, Tunisia has adopted a modern constitution and, for the first time, democratically elected a new legislature and president. The process of getting to those elections was not without its challenges, with a prolonged constitution-drafting process that was tested by occasional political deadlock and twice rocked by political assassinations.

The road forward—toward consolidating democratic gains, building the capacity and sustainability of governing institutions, ensuring the protection of freedoms achieved through the revolution, and enacting much-needed economic and security-sector reforms—has not and will not be easy. In the wake of two recent terrorist attacks targeting Tunisia’s vital tourism industry and killing 60 people, 59 of whom were foreign tourists, Tunisia’s fragile polity today seems more vulnerable than at any other point to date.

Yet, there are reasons to be hopeful that the country will stay on course and continue to serve as an inspiration beyond Tunisia’s borders. To do this, the United States and the international community must remain engaged and supportive of Tunisians as they develop their democratic institutions and practices. We must stay vigilant in encouraging the government to find the right balance between security

and the respect for freedoms and to avoid the repression that brought Tunisians to the street.

Several factors have differentiated Tunisia from regional neighbors which have struggled with transitional processes, either succumbing to a return to authoritarianism or slipping into violent chaos:

- 1) Tunisia took time to develop a constitution, undertaking a deliberative and representative process rather than rushing into snap elections that could have exacerbated regional differences and partisan polarization.
- 2) As it has historically, the military stayed out of politics and refrained from interfering with economic policy. It remained a neutral institution focused on defending the country's borders and did not enter the political fray.
- 3) Civil society was allowed to flourish and secured a role in the transitional process, demanding dialogue, compromise and inclusivity. Civil society organizations – trade unions, women's groups, community development associations – were treated as important partners in the democratic transition.
- 4) Tunisia's political leadership generally avoided hyperbole and polarization, seeking compromise and embracing the concept of "no victor, no vanquished."

These factors manifested in the highly competitive but peaceful and credible elections of 2014. Beyond voting in significant numbers, tens of thousands of people participated as candidates, poll workers, candidate representatives and citizen monitors. Notably, Tunisia defied the oft-repeated warnings of naysayers that Islamists would never give up power once elected to office – the notion of "one person, one vote, one time" – with the then-majority Ennahdha party conceding defeat in the legislative elections and joining its opponents in a national unity government.

While Tunisia's transition to date bodes well for the future, the path will not be smooth. As we know from Eastern Europe, Latin America and even here in North America, the democratic process is tumultuous. Tunisia has already seen attacks from domestic and foreign entities devoted to destroying democracy and to curbing human freedom.

Tunisia's new legislature and government are now struggling to tackle growing economic and security challenges, while addressing the important task of effectively communicating their efforts to citizens, who grow increasingly

frustrated with the economy's general stagnation 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 stalled much-needed domestic and international investment, while the country's economic driver, the tourism sector, is in crisis following the March 18 attack on the Bardo museum in Tunis and the June 26 attack in Sousse.

In light of these deadly attacks, President Béji Caïd Essebsi proclaimed that Tunisia is "in a state of war" against Islamic extremists and declared a renewable 30-day state of emergency on July 4, 2015 giving extraordinary powers to the appointed governors of Tunisia's 24 administrative districts to call on the national army to support police forces in ensuring security. In addition, in the days following the Sousse attack, a series of new security measures was announced, including the closure of 80 mosques not under state control and that were purportedly nurturing radical points of view. While Essebsi is a widely respected political figure praised for his efforts as interim prime minister, successfully shepherding Tunisia through the first phase of its transition in 2011, elements of his party are associated with the old regime, and the state of emergency raises concern about the potential for a slide toward some of the pre-revolutionary approaches to controlling expression, assembly and religious practice. That state of emergency should not be abused or unnecessarily extended.

Compounding these concerns surrounding the current security situation, citizens remain frustrated and disillusioned with the perceived lack of progress. Public opinion research, conducted regularly throughout Tunisia by NDI since March of 2011, shows that Tunisians' patience is wearing thin as positive change in their daily lives has been elusive; basic institutions of day-to-day life, such as courts, police offices, and other public establishments, sputter under bureaucratic inefficiency and entrenched corruption, while jobs remain scarce and the education and health care sectors are in desperate need of reform. Showing that democracy can deliver positive results is often the most challenging and fragile part of a transition, when expectations outpace capacities and immediate anxieties challenge long-term policies. Newly-elected legislators, government representatives and political parties need ongoing support to develop and implement policy options, ensure adequate oversight and communicate effectively with citizens to demonstrate that they are responding to public priorities.

Throughout the transition, 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. Ahead of the 2014 elections, NDI's U.S. government-supported activities were designed to strengthen the democratic process by creating a space for inclusive political debate that would inform citizens and expose them to various political options. NDI worked to keep parties focused on building lasting structures and creating platforms that incorporate citizen concerns and resonate with voters. Parties' investment in their internal structures, recruitment of party activists and platform development have already contributed to democratic stabilization.

At the same time, NDI supported opportunities for citizen oversight and domestic election observation with the aim of increasing accountability during the country's delicate election process. NDI's local partners mobilized more than 8,000 citizen observers, including a group that conducted a statistically valid parallel vote count. The widely publicized independent parallel vote tabulation process helped instill a sense of credibility in the overall electoral process and encouraged the competing parties to peacefully accept the outcome of the vote.

As Tunisia enters a phase of institution-building and governance, including upcoming municipal elections, NDI will continue to support political parties to develop policies that represent citizens' priorities, and to work with civil society to advocate for key reforms. NDI also will continue to support women's and young people's participation in political and civic life as Tunisia's new government tackles challenging economic and security reforms, among other issues. In addition, the Institute is currently working directly with the new parliament to support individual members and parliamentary groups to effectively play their roles of legislating, overseeing the government and engaging with constituents.

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 hope – and active engagement – remains. Tunisia's transition, symbolized most powerfully by the adoption of its new constitution and election of a new parliament and president, has moved

forward in fits and starts, but remains on track, setting Tunisia apart from stalled or reversed transitions in neighboring countries. To ensure the current security concerns and economic challenges do not encourage undemocratic intervention in the process, it is important that the U.S. government continues to support the new Tunisian government as it makes difficult choices, encourage peaceful debate and competitive politics, and stay engaged with the new legislature to nurture accountability and representation in decision making.

In addition to directing assistance to economic and security reform, the United States should continue to strongly and consistently support popular demands for transparency, accountability and freedom. This means a continued commitment to pluralism and civil society, as well as 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.