

Tunisia's Fragile Democratic Transition

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Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch, Members of the Committee, I am honored to be with you today and to have this opportunity to speak on the Middle East and North Africa's brightest hope for democracy, Tunisia.

At the [International Republican Institute](#) (IRI), we believe that Tunisia's remarkable journey towards democracy over these last five years can serve both as an inspiration to those who hope to shape their own democratic path and a rejoinder to those who claim that democracy has little chance outside the Western world. Tunisia's story should also serve as a symbol to policymakers of what nonprofit organizations like IRI, the [National Democratic Institute](#) (NDI) and the [International Foundation for Electoral Systems](#) (IFES), with U.S. government support, can do when we work as one team.

Members of the Committee, I had the privilege of observing the Tunisian elections during the first round of balloting in October 2014. Like all 141 of our observers who participated in the three rounds of elections last year, I was struck by the unwavering commitment to democratic principles shown by the country's main political stakeholders throughout the process.

Both in victory and in defeat, Tunisia's political competitors accepted the voters' will, which is particularly striking in a region of the world too often haunted by polarization, sectarianism and extremist violence. In my view, the Tunisian people have shown their mettle, and as the country faces the challenges that will no doubt emerge in coming months and years, we should stand ready to help.

The Challenges of Tunisia's Fragile Transition

Madam Chairman, last month's heinous and cowardly act of terror that killed 38 tourists on a Tunisian beach is a stark reminder of just how perilous Tunisia's transition to democratic rule remains. Tunisia is bordered to the south by Libya, and that country's political unraveling and growing security vacuum present major security challenges. After all, the Tunisian attacker in the June 26 attack trained in Libya, as did the perpetrators of the Bardo Museum terrorist strike on March 18.

Of course, Tunisia has its own challenges with extremism as well. Many reports suggest that Tunisia supplies the largest number of foreign fighters to the conflict in Syria and Iraq, estimated at 3,000 and now likely more. When those fighters eventually return home, having been further radicalized by continuing barbarism in Syria, it will present challenges to Tunisia's peace and security for many years.

The Obama Administration should be commended for working with Congress to expand U.S. security assistance to Tunisia through foreign military financing, military training and security sector reform efforts. All of this must continue. Acts of terror can undermine the country's ability to realize the economic benefits that should materialize from the new leadership in Tunisia.

Left unchecked, these acts of violence can also complicate relations between political stakeholders and renew polarization between secular and more Islamist-minded Tunisians. In light of the dangers, we in the U.S. must be smart about the kind of security assistance we provide. We want to help the country build security capabilities in ways that are consistent with the ethics and practices of democratic states. Proper training for security personnel and reform of the security services are of paramount importance.

The Administration and Congress should also be commended for the considerable economic assistance that is being provided. Tunisia's economy has floundered since 2011. Since tourism is a major part of the country's economy it remains to be seen how great an impact the recent June 26 attack will have on this summer's tourist season, but it will almost certainly create even greater economic pressure on leaders who are still grappling with the effects of former President Ben Ali's overly corrupt and bureaucratic regime. A June public opinion poll conducted by IRI reveals that unemployment at 39 percent is the issue weighing most heavily on the minds of Tunisians, surpassing even security at 26 percent!

Of course, tackling unemployment and overall economic challenges are as much about good policy by the Tunisian government, as they are U.S. economic support. As many of the country's leaders acknowledge, Tunisia needs to carry out reforms that will remove stifling bureaucracy, encourage small and medium enterprise growth in the private sector, increase access to credit, attract foreign direct investment and produce a workforce with the skillsets that cause employers to want to hire Tunisian college graduates. Tunisia's policymakers need to make the right policy choices on laws ranging from competition and banking to the education system.

Like our sister organizations, we at IRI are proud of the modest role we've played in assisting Tunisians with their historic steps towards a more democratic future. What we submit to you today is that the country's next crucial steps – ones aimed at increasing both security and economic growth – will also need significant democracy and governance investments.

How Democracy and Governance Assistance Helps

Since the elections, IRI has focused its attention on helping the new government identify and meet key policy priorities by strengthening inter-ministerial planning, coordination and communications. We've also worked to provide technical skills training to key communications staff within government ministries so that they can better interact with the Tunisian public and help them understand the government's progress on key reform priorities.

We believe it is essential that the government is able to identify citizen needs, build the capacities necessary to plan for those needs, and also manage public expectations on how quickly Tunisia's pressing priorities can be addressed. All of this is crucial to growing a stable, sustainable democratic Tunisia. We are appreciative of the support we receive from

the U.S. State Department [Middle East Partnership Initiative](#) (MEPI) to enable this vitally important work.

Another important part of IRI's governance work in supporting the Tunisian-led process of decentralization is through a [National Endowment for Democracy](#) (NED) funded program that ensures all of Tunisia's regions are listened to and contributing to the country's national dialogue on decentralized power, checks and balances and citizen-centered decision-making. As many of you know, disconnect between Tunisia's coastal and interior regions was a key factor prompting the 2011 revolution against Ben Ali. This problem remains a source of tension today. IRI helps the government promote greater inclusivity in decision-making between and within regions.

Additionally, IRI is supporting a national accountability network that is strengthening the involvement of Tunisian youth activists in community groups. As we noted in our election observation statements ([parliamentary elections](#), [presidential election](#), [presidential run-off](#)) last year, the lack of youth voter participation is a serious concern that Tunisia's leaders must address, especially given the prominent role played by youth in the 2011 revolution.

[Our polling in recent years](#) shows great interest on the part of youth in building a more democratic and entrepreneurial Tunisia. At the same time, however, many youth apparently don't translate that interest into their participation in key democratic institutions either due to lack of access, or lack of understanding about the constructive role they can play in the political process. We assist the government in efforts to harness youth idealism and apply it to day-to-day policymaking.

Recommendations

In its, Fiscal Year 2016 budget request, the Administration seeks to boost support to Tunisia to more than double last year's level. The approach appears to have strong bipartisan Congressional support which we commend, however, there is still more that should be done to assist Tunisia's new democracy. According to [an analysis by the Project on Middle East Democracy](#), only about 16 percent of overall assistance falls into the category of Governing Justly and Democratically.

We would respectfully suggest that governance support be further strengthened to help ensure the Tunisian transition stays on a democratic track. Communications infrastructure and capacity within Tunisian government ministries is somewhat rudimentary at present. Ministries lack efficient, secure internal communications platforms, leaving government employees to conduct official business through their personal accounts or via paper, SMS text messaging or Facebook. IRI is working with the Tunisian government to identify solutions to these challenges, however, we are running to keep pace with the numerous demands for assistance.

A second hole in the current U.S. democracy and governance strategy is an absence of support for continued political party development. At IRI, we would caution policymakers

against a dramatic shift away from political participation programs, especially given the initial investment made in parties in the last years. Our experience in Tunisia suggests the environment for political party participation remains in a state of transition, as it would in any new democracy. Tunisia's political parties still lack distinguishable identities or platforms and most have not developed the internal organizational structures to effectively serve as conduits of citizen interests at the regional or local levels.

If Tunisians do not believe political parties have presence or effectively represent their interests especially at the local level it exacerbates the country's regional tensions and can undermine confidence in the democratic process generally. Additionally, a potential for renewed polarization between the political parties exists, especially with respect to secular and Islamist political groups. If we are not actively working with the political parties to address these issues, little can be done to mitigate the risks. Finally, Tunisia will likely hold local elections in 2016. The time to work with parties to prepare for democratic competition in these elections is now, especially if we want to encourage greater inclusivity of young Tunisians in the country's political life.

A third area where more should be done is support for Tunisia's increasingly dynamic civil society sector. The U.S. government is already making an important contribution to promote civic participation, increase transparency and accountability and help Tunisia's growing number of nongovernmental organizations and community-based groups develop the management know-how to succeed as organizations.

Experience shows that a vibrant civil society is a key to achieving greater inclusivity in any country's political life, and strengthening this sector in the crucial years ahead will both hasten Tunisia's democratic development and make efforts to combat extremism more effective. We should do everything we possibly can to help Tunisia involve the country's youth in the transition; after all, it was young Tunisians who led the wave of demands for change that brought down the authoritarian Ben Ali regime. Civil society offers an immediate channel for constructive youth engagement. It presents a meaningful path for young people to enter the arena, express their hopes and fears, and then find ways to turn their idealism into concrete reforms.

Fourth, the U.S. government should help the new government turn Tunisia's political parties and civil society into more active participants in the country's national dialogue on decentralization. Although other issues in the country may be more immediately pressing, it is vitally important that government leaders not overlook the delivery of good governance and the cementing of democratic institutions. While Tunisians know the path ahead is difficult, they must also believe that they, especially in the country's south and interior, have credible, capable representation that can be their voice at the national level. This is an essential part of giving every part of the country and every point of view a stake in the country's democratic success.

Fifth, the U.S. government should find ways to reinforce bold economic reform that tackles disastrous policies from the Ben Ali days and transitions to a market-based entrepreneurial system. Young people need to see that there is hope in the coming years for economic

opportunity and good paying employment. Among other things, I would encourage the leaders of the [Millennium Challenge Corporation](#) (MCC), on whose Board I sit, to have a dialogue with Tunisian leaders about the possibility of qualifying for an MCC Threshold program. I know this idea has been under discussion since the 2011 revolution; indeed, Tunisia was threshold eligible in September 2011. Whether Tunisia can be made eligible or not, there must be a way for the expertise and principles of MCC to help chart the country's path ahead.

Conclusion

Madam Chairman, Ranking Member Deutch, with all of the challenges that seems to come from the Middle East and the challenges posed by authoritarian pushback against democracy globally, we cannot lose sight of the most promising signs of democracy's advance. Tunisia is an example of what can be achieved when our democracy community stands with local citizens seeking to build a democratic future. It is vitally important work that deserves our steadfast commitment and support, especially in the face of extremism. Much has been achieved in Tunisia since 2011 with the active involvement of the United States through the good work of organizations like IRI, NDI and IFES.

Tunisia's transition remains fragile in a hostile neighborhood – and there will no doubt be new threats and challenges in the months and years ahead. But I think back to the incredible atmosphere of national pride and democratic commitment that accompanied Tunisia's national elections this past year. I think about the striking reaction of condemnation Tunisians had to the vicious Charlie Hebdo terrorist attacks that occurred in France last January. I recall the images of Tunisian hotel staff forming a human chain to prevent more killing on the beach in Sousse on June 26.

I know democracy is within reach in Tunisia. While we cannot and should not choose Tunisia's path ourselves, where a country has taken courageous steps to shape its own future – a future that is democratic and which respects human liberty – I believe it is in our vital interests to come forward and support them. Tunisia has so much potential and so much to offer. Let's help them get there.

Thank you.