

“Transition at a Crossroads: Tunisia Three Years after the Revolution”
Testimony before the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa

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December 4, 2013

Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the important topic of Tunisia and its political transition, a country that I remain guardedly optimistic about three years following the departure of autocrat Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, despite numerous challenges that continue to confront its transition.

Tunisia’s Transition

I offer this sense of optimism based on what we have seen transpire during the past three years and especially as result of the interactions seen among Tunisia’s many political stakeholders, ranging from Islamists to secular political opposition, to trade unionists, civil society and the Tunisian people. Unlike Egypt, where the troublingly authoritarian behavior of the country’s Muslim Brotherhood so polarized relations between political forces during the short year Mohammed Morsi was in power, or like Libya where an absence of security makes a successful political transition incredibly fragile, or like the horrific effects we see from Syria’s civil war, what we see today in Tunisia is a persistent and continued effort from all political stakeholders that have joined into the transition to reach agreement on the future nature of rule emerging from nearly six decades of undemocratic rule.

This is no easy feat, building an inclusive and democratic process of transition that allows all relevant actors to be engaged, especially given the abrupt fall of the Ben Ali regime – in only about six weeks – and the absence of democratic norms during the repressive decades Tunisia’s police state lorded over its citizens. Yet even as moments of political crisis have challenged the transition, including two high profile political assassinations, a lumbering constitution writing process, suspension of National Constituent Assembly deliberations, and a volatile neighborhood where threats posed by Islamic extremists and political turmoil in close-by countries loom large, despite all of these problems, what we continue to see is an attempt by Tunisian political forces to solve vexing questions through negotiation and dialogue. In this Tunisia is exceptional in both form and substance from the events we see unfolding elsewhere in the region. And, in the sometimes dysfunctional and most times *ad hoc* process of deciding Tunisia’s political future, we can be encouraged that Tunisia’s transition reveals the raw beginnings of an emerging democratic culture, one of bare knuckles negotiation, horse trading and brinksmanship and yet, a culture made ever stronger by each moment of crisis diverted.

This is not to say we can take for granted Tunisia will be successful. To the contrary, the country has reached its most pivotal make or break point yet, and currently stands at an impasse. Today, I will briefly elaborate on what I see as three key factors to the transition either moving forward successfully, or going a different, less-optimal direction.

Key Factors

The first is the political track of National Dialogue agreed to by the current governing parties, including the Ennahda Islamist party, and the secular opposition parties, and moderated by the so-called Quartet of civil society entities, primary among them the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail general trade union. Key actions related to the ultimate passage of a constitution, an electoral law and appointment of an electoral commission extend from the dialogue's success but ultimately none of these important benchmarks will be achieved unless the political parties agree on a caretaker prime minister and government that can shepherd the country to elections.

The Ennahda party leading the government challenged by the Nida Tunis party, that has come to represent the largest share of more secular minded Tunisians, have been unable to agree on a prime minister in the most recent national dialogue talks. Growing polarization between Islamists and secular Tunisians especially over the course of the past year have contributed to an atmosphere of increasing mistrust between these primary political players where each is reticent to agree on personalities for the interim government they respectively believe give the other party an upper hand. Notable in the process thus far is the government's agreement to ultimately accept the opposition's demands for a caretaker government, which constitutes recognition of their own leadership failures during the past three years. Irrespective of rhetoric, the acceptance of a caretaker government is a pragmatic attempt to avoid an Egypt-like moment of popular unrest.

In the current state of negotiation, the key factor appears to be neither side believing it can leverage too much advantage or dig in for a better deal, and in this sense the continued willingness of Nida Tunis and other opposition parties to solve disagreement with the governing parties at the negotiating table is of paramount importance as opposed to some other mode like popular street actions. Directly related, is time. Tunisia has reached a critical point, and the transition is at an impasse. The longer that impasse continues, the greater the potential that other triggers I will discuss momentarily threaten the dialogue's key outcome, an interim government's composition.

Second is security, specifically the threat posed by Islamic extremists. We have seen the poisoning effect acts of terrorism have had on Tunisia during the past three years. First was the assassination of secular politician Choukri Belaid in February 2013. This was followed by the July 25, 2013 assassination of Mohamed Brahmi which brought the country to a critical point of crisis and triggered the need for the dialogue process we see now. As well, the recent killing of six Tunisian security officials in Sidi Bouzid and most recently, and disturbingly, an attempt by terrorists to target hotels frequented by westerners. These acts of terror have produced a growing sense of unease among Tunisians and perhaps most damaging have contributed to polarization between Islamists and secularists with the latter believing the Ennahda-led government has been too slow to recognize the threats posed by jihadists.

While Ennahda was slow in reacting to the threat posed by Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb and by locally grown salafists, they ultimately have done the right thing in attempting to eliminate jihadists in the Chambi Mountains along the Algerian border and in declaring Ansar al-Sharia a terrorist organization. The threat now is that future acts of terror along the lines seen with last month's attempted hotel bombings, or another assassination of a high profile politician or public

personality could derail the national dialogue before a successful government is put into place. This would leave Tunisia in a free fall. As with the successful naming of a government, time is again of the essence with respect to avoiding a terrorist induced crisis. The longer the impasse, the greater the potential an unforeseen security crisis undermines a successful outcome to the dialogue.

Third, and perhaps most important, is the continued patience Tunisian citizens are willing to show towards their political leaders and the transition path they have led the country down. The patience of ordinary Tunisians directly relates to the state of the country's economy and the sense that the transition offers at least the promise of economic betterment in the near term, which was a key driving force behind popular unrest seen in multiple Arab countries during the past three years. Tunisia's International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan secured this summer offers some help but in a recent visit IMF officials expressed concern over the country's budget deficit and delays in drafting and adopting a new investment law as part of the loan package. As well, some economic growth forecasts for the coming year have been scaled down to as low as three percent. The current government's most recent economic policy approach has failed to produce either the new enterprise or jobs desired by Tunisians, especially in the country's interior regions. This certainly does not meet public expectations in the areas where we now know dissatisfaction was highest pre-revolution. Failures in the economic sphere also do not give much hope to the young Tunisian university graduates unable to find a job, estimated by some to be at least 30 percent.

How much longer Tunisians are willing to accept these conditions is unclear, but Tunisia's politicians should not assume limitless goodwill, and the indicators at present are not good. A public opinion poll conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) in [October 2013](#) found that 79 percent of Tunisians say the country is going in the wrong direction, the highest yet recorded number and a trend that has been on the increase since IRI's first post-revolution poll in Tunisia in [March 2011](#). The economy and specifically jobs continues to count as the most important problem as Tunisians see it, which has been a consistent trend and makes economic factors the key driver behind public satisfaction. Disturbingly in the October survey, an increasing number of respondents (29 percent) say they are having a hard time feeding themselves and their family and buying even the most basic essentials for survival, while 48 percent say they are making just enough to get by.

It goes without saying that future Tunisian governments whether interim or those emerging after elections must prioritize economic issues. But addressing economic issues is not possible within the current political impasse and even if and when an interim government is announced, it may be less bold in making difficult economic policy decisions with a limited time mandate than a future government that has secured a popular mandate to lead. Whether Tunisians continue to show patience with the state of negotiations and for how long is a key determinate, but as with other factors, it seems the longer the impasse between the country's political forces drags on, the more frustrated Tunisian citizens may become with the transition's perceived impact on their desire for economic betterment and life opportunity. Again, the time is now for the country's political leaders to move the process forward.

Democracy Assistance

Tunisia is not unlike other Arab countries in transition where we see a multitude of assistance needs ranging from small, medium enterprise growth to security sector reform, to transitional justice.

Like other democracy organizations, IRI was prevented from working in Tunisia during the Ben Ali regime. Post-Ben Ali regime in early 2011, IRI established a presence in Tunisia and began programs with emerging political parties and civil society groups across a broad range of issues important to democratic development. We were registered by the Tunisian government in November 2011 and have been able to pursue active programming with all political stakeholders throughout the country. One reason for my continued optimism about Tunisia is what we are experiencing through interactions with the country's political stakeholders, with political parties and civil society organizations actively engaged in building a democratic future.

The political parties have already begun to prepare strategies for the next elections, as they know an outcome to the dialogue will quickly trigger the campaign calendar. IRI is regularly approached by the campaign teams of presidential aspirants and responds to those technical assistance requests. We provide messaging and communications workshops for party spokespeople, and a significant part of our ongoing efforts relate to helping the parties think strategically about establishing organization in different parts of the country and growing their membership bases. Tunisia's vibrant civil society has likewise demonstrated an incredible thirst for knowledge and skills with active participation in dialogues with elected decision-makers that have been supported by IRI. We have seen this type of enthusiasm for democracy skills building irrespective of political trend or ideology. Taken collectively, it causes us to understand Tunisians of all stripes are serious about moving their country in a democratic direction.

By this measurement, and across the various sectors of assistance provided by the United States, I cannot stress how important this point of wanting a democratic system to emerge is. This is because the Arab world continues to lack a successful working model of elective democracy and when one looks across the region we are hard pressed to see something with more promise emerging sooner, elsewhere.

Conclusion

In the next decade, a democratic Tunisia can have an important positive effect on the North Africa region, can serve as an important partner to both the United States and our allies in Europe and can break the as of yet elusive hope for a functioning, Arab democracy. It is by no means certain that Tunisia will reach the point of consolidated democracy and we should not be naïve about the considerable challenges that lie ahead. The country is at a pivotal moment presently and must successfully meet the key goals of the current national dialogue if it is to move ahead on achieving necessary electoral and governance milestones. Yet even as the current dynamic is uncertain, Tunisia is, after all, where the Arab Spring began. I believe Tunisia remains the best hope for a democratic political transition in the Arab world. The country deserves our continued attention at this critical juncture.

Thank you.