



Promoting Democracy & Effective Governance in Tunisia

SUPPORTING TUNISIA'S DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION AFTER THE 2011 REVOLUTION

Beginning in December 2010, protests erupted in cities across Tunisia over widespread poverty, social marginalization, political repression, high unemployment, and rising food prices.¹ Riots and civil unrest, which resulted in hundreds of deaths, sparked with the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a local fruit seller from the interior city of Sidi Bouzid.² In an act of apparent desperation and frustration with the status quo, Bouazizi set himself on fire outside a local municipal office in Sidi Bouzid on December 17, 2010. He died on January 4. Just 10 days later, President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fled the country and a national unity government was formed shortly thereafter.³

In the eight years since, Tunisia has held its first free presidential, parliamentary, and municipal elections, and it also ratified a new constitution. But as a nascent democracy, Tunisia must fortify its institutions and promote sound, transparent governance on the part of its elected officials to ensure sustained progress.⁴ To support this work, the Arab American Institute Foundation initiated the U.S.-Tunisia Peer Exchange Program. Moving forward, the U.S. government should continue to support efforts to promote democracy in Tunisia.

THE U.S.-TUNISIA PEER EXCHANGE PROGRAM

Funded through the U.S. Department of State's U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), our program is unique, hands-on co-mentorship exchange that pairs Arab American elected officials and policy practitioners with newly elected municipal officials in Tunisia. This innovative learning initiative is designed to support Tunisian elected officials as they work to strengthen

democratic institutions and effect positive, lasting change for their communities.⁵

PRESENT CHALLENGES

Despite measurable progress in the last eight years, the central demands of the 2011 revolution have remained largely unmet. Political progress has outpaced economic development, resulting in continued unrest and dissatisfaction, particularly among young, educated Tunisians.⁶ High rates of unemployment – 15 percent overall and a staggering 29 percent among university graduates – persist.⁷ Indeed, Tunisia has struggled to revitalize economic growth in the aftermath of the revolution. Annual gross domestic product (GDP) growth has not yet topped three percent.⁸ Inflation reached a 20-year high in 2018,⁹ while studies suggest purchasing power has decreased 40 percent since 2014.¹⁰

Aside from persistent economic stagnation, Tunisians face additional challenges. According to Transparency International, a monitoring group, perceived levels of public sector corruption in Tunisia have improved since the revolution, but not significantly compared to other countries.¹¹ Furthermore, socioeconomic and political development in Tunisia post-revolution has not been distributed evenly across the country, resulting in “regional estrangement and marginalization.”¹² According to some experts, social inequalities and regional disparities of this nature threaten the success of Tunisia's democratic transition.¹³

With these challenges have come resurgent unrest, despair, and disaffection. Protests have resumed in

Tunisian cities,¹⁴ and the rate of suicide by hanging or self-immolation has increased significantly since the revolution.¹⁵ Research on the nationality of ISIS foreign fighters also indicates that Tunisia has the greatest total number of fighters, in addition to the greatest number of fighters per capita.¹⁶

RECOMMENDATIONS

While various factors – political, economic and social – threaten or otherwise complicate Tunisia’s democratic transition, promoting effective governance and transparency is necessary to ensure the lasting success of political developments resulting from the revolution. The U.S. government should continue to invest in Tunisia’s democratic transition through the provision of economic assistance and other instruments of “soft power.”

The Trump Administration’s proposed budget for fiscal year 2020 would cut economic assistance to Tunisia by more than half, from \$79 million to \$31.5 million.¹⁷ These proposed cuts are short-sighted and contradict decades of U.S. foreign policy thinking.¹⁸ There is bipartisan agreement in Congress that sharp reductions to the federal government’s international affairs budget are detrimental to U.S. and jeopardize security. Not only will sustained U.S. investment in Tunisia strengthen the country’s democratic transition, it will also promote U.S. geopolitical interests in North Africa through the development of lasting partnerships. Congress should therefore reject the Trump Administration’s proposed budget cuts.

The U.S. government should also champion public-private partnerships in Tunisia. At roughly 14 percent, Tunisia’s public wage bill, the percentage of annual revenue dedicated to public sector wages, is among the highest in the world.¹⁹ Public sector employment is an unsustainable, short term remedy to Tunisia’s unemployment crisis. It is also costly. To address his crisis, the U.S. government should further its bilateral engagement with Tunisia on the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement talks,²⁰ the second U.S.-Tunisia Joint Economic Commission,²¹ and the U.S.-Tunisian Strategic Dialogue,²² with the goal of deepening economic ties that revitalize and open the Tunisian economy.

In addition, we should support Tunisian government policies that place an emphasis on

participatory governance and an empowered citizenry. Meaningful political participation at the local and regional level must be a cornerstone of Tunisia’s nascent democracy. This includes a continued embrace of political pluralism and a commitment to civil society participation in policy development and decision-making.

The decentralization of power in Tunisia – from a concentrated national government to interconnected systems of local governance – is yet another crucial factor in Tunisia’s democratic transition.²³ For the first time in 2018, Tunisia held free municipal elections, ushering in a new generation of public servants to represent their local communities and promote the interests of their constituencies.²⁴ Encouraging leadership development among these newly elected officials and promoting effective methods of governance in Tunisian society is in U.S. national interests. The U.S. government should therefore continue to support initiatives like the U.S.-Tunisia Peer Exchange Program, which not only promote effective governance abroad, but at home as well.

Eight years removed from the 2011 revolution, Tunisia has made considerable advancements in terms of political reform. However, civil unrest and disaffection stemming from various socioeconomic factors threaten Tunisia’s democratic transition. As Tunisians strive toward a more effective, transparent, and representative system of government, Americans should offer their support.

ENDNOTES

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