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“The Success Story of the Arab Spring? An Update on Tunisia's Transition”
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
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1779 Massachusetts Ave NW, Washington DC

On Wednesday, the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) hosted a panel at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace to address the progress that Tunisia has made thus far in its democratic transition, and to discuss the challenges that lie ahead. Panelists were **Omezzine Khelifa**, Tunisian civil society activist and former candidate for Tunisia's National Constituent Assembly (Ettakatol Party), **Mohamed Malouche**, president of Tunisian American Young Professionals, and **Alexis Arieff**, Africa Analyst at the Congressional Research Service. The moderator was **Stephen McInerney**, executive director of POMED.

Omezzine Khelifa described the current situation as very delicate, and discussed both the accomplishments of Tunisia's transitional government to this point and the challenges it must address to successfully move forward. In talking about the latest electoral dynamics and the constitutional drafting process, **Khelifa said 27 percent of the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) seats were allotted for women, which is a significant step toward democracy.** Furthermore, a positive relationship has been established between the transitional President **Moncef Marzouki** and the NCA, similar to that of the U.S. President and parliament. Marzouki was elected by members of the NCA to lead the country in holding future elections and drafting a new constitution. **Khelifa said there are three challenges facing the transitional government: security reform, unemployment, and transitional justice.** “Tunisia's youth are very educated,” she said, but employment opportunities are scarce and the youth are losing hope in their government. In addition, Tunisians are unaccustomed to trusting their judicial system; therefore the government must implement the rule of law and alleviate their fears. Lastly, **Khelifa said freedom of expression is still limited and the media should be free to criticize the government without concern of threats or being shut down.**

Mohamed Malouche spoke mainly about the dire need for economic growth in Tunisia. Foreign investment has decreased by 30 percent, which is expected he said, “but now investors are in a ‘wait and see’ mode.” Malouche described a negative “feedback loop” where sit-ins and protests about high levels of unemployment are not conducive to economic growth and in fact are counterproductive for achieving those desired outcomes. **While importantly noting that there is no single panacea to Tunisia's economic woes, Malouche offered some possible solutions to the crisis, including a recommendation that the government clearly outline goals to provide employment opportunities and immediately begin its planned infrastructure projects (which provide tangible and visible evidence of progress), and that it encourage an environment that fosters entrepreneurship, particularly among the youth.** He also recommended that the government utilize its electoral legitimacy more to reassure local and foreign investors that Tunisia is “predictably stable”

(meaning that it may not always have stability in the short-term, but that its highly educated and pacifistic population grants Tunisia stability over the long term). Finally, Malouche emphasized the support system that the Tunisian diaspora in the U.S. has developed, actively backing investment and economic growth to encourage long-term sustainability.

Alexis Arieff discussed the U.S. and international community's policies toward Tunisia as they relate to supporting its democratic transition. She began by stating **prior to 2011, bilateral aid to Tunisia was very modest by regional standards, but the Obama administration has been supportive of democracy in Tunisia and is hopeful that its transition will continue to serve as a leading model for its neighbors and will grant opportunities to deepen the U.S-Tunisia bilateral relationship.** As Tunisia's regional role grows (the Friends of Syria meeting held in Tunis being one example), the challenge will continue to be anticipating new events and being able to support them financially when necessary. Some ways the administration has creatively developed more support for Tunisia (without needing Congress to make new appropriations- a great challenge given the strict budget climate) is by re-establishing the Peace Corps program there, making Tunisia eligible for support from the Millennium Challenge Corporation, and expanding educational and cultural exchange programs. In addition, the U.S. has continued to back the efforts of multilateral organizations such as the International Monetary Fund. The E.U. is also reworking its outreach framework toward the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries to create stronger partnerships than it had in the past. **The biggest challenge facing the international community, Arieff argued, is coordination, but she believes it is a challenge that will be overcome.**

During the Q&A session, the moderator first asked about the perception of international actors from Tunisians' points of view. Malouche said **the reputation of the U.S. is improving even post-revolution, as it has been regarded as a fair and supportive external actor.** Both Malouche and Khelifa emphasized the need for technical and training support as well as civil society empowerment and civic education. Khelifa said there is a lack of cultural discussion and would like to see more cultural exchange both within the different regions of Tunisia and internationally. On a related note, a question was raised about the fine line between international support and international interference. **Khelifa said transparency in foreign aid both from the U.S. government and the Tunisian government would help ameliorate skepticism that there are hidden agendas or personal motives involved.**

Another audience member asked the panel to elaborate on security sector reform and transitional justice. Khelifa said that to some degree, Tunisians want to see some level of accountability for their actions, especially for high-level authorities who worked for former President **Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.** Arieff agreed with Khelifa that **security sector reform is one of the most difficult challenges ahead, particularly because of the extensive network throughout the country Interior Ministry had established over the years.** Another audience remark was made about the importance of praising the army for indirectly causing Ben Ali's ouster by refusing to attack protesters, and for subsequently not seizing political power when an opportunity presented itself during the revolution.

There was a question raised about the role of women in the Tunisian revolutions and how those roles will remain the same or change with post-revolution rebuilding. Khelifa agreed with Malouche's assessment that Tunisian women are carefully scrutinizing every action of the government, and would never sacrifice their rights or freedoms. She also explained that **women's rights are very progressive relative to the rest of the region.** Polygamy is outlawed, and women have had the right to vote and have abortions, just to name a few

long-standing freedoms, she said. **Although there are undoubtedly challenges that face women, 62 percent of Tunisians with degrees are women, and in terms of gender, it is a very united and integrated society.**