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“Tunisia’s Transition: Successes, Obstacles, and the Role of the International Community”
Project on Middle East Democracy, Emerging Democracies Institute
Wednesday, February 26, 2014, 3:00 pm - 4:30 pm
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
1779 Massachusetts Ave, NW

On February 26, 2014, the Project on Middle East Democracy co-hosted an event with the Emerging Democracies Institute entitled “Tunisia’s Transition: Successes, Obstacles, and the Role of the International Community.” The event featured His Excellency **M’hamed Ezzine Chelaifa**, Ambassador of the Tunisian Republic to the United States, **William Roebuck**, Deputy Assistant Secretary at the U.S. Department of State, **Emna Jebblaoui**, former Adviser to the President of the Tunisian National Constituent Assembly, and **Stephen McInerney**, Executive Director of the Project on Middle East Democracy. **Reuf Bajrovic**, President of the Emerging Democracies Institute, moderated the discussion.

Reuf Bajrovic opened the event by describing the current situation in Tunisia. Bajrovic said that Tunisia is undergoing dramatic changes and that it’s “landmark” constitution gives hope to people in other countries affected by the Arab Spring. After Bajrovic finished his introduction, he introduced the rest of the panel members— **M’hamed Ezzine Chelaifa**, **William Roebuck**, **Emna Jebblaoui**, and **Stephen McInerney**.

M’hamed Ezzine Chelaifa started by saying, “It’s good to be a Tunisian ambassador these days in Washington.” He spoke about Tunisia’s “historic breakthrough” in establishing a democratic, non-partisan government with an electoral board and a liberal, secular constitution. Chelaifa cautioned that Tunisia’s democratic transition “remains unfinished and fragile and needs to be protected.” He acknowledged that the way forward will have risks and challenges. On the political level, Chelaifa suggested that the people work to keep the “spirit of dialogue alive.” He also mentioned the necessity of having free and fair general elections. In terms of security challenges, Chelaifa spoke about terrorism and the proliferation of weapons from neighboring countries. Lastly, Chelaifa spoke about Tunisia’s economic and social challenges, saying that the real challenge for the next government is going to be balancing long-term reforms with the immediate social demands of the people. Chelaifa then discussed the U.S. role in Tunisia, saying that Americans have a stake in Tunisia’s success and that the two countries should work together to foster a strategic partnership that is “program based” and “results-oriented.”

William Roebuck spoke next and began by saying that “Tunisia remains the best hope for a democratic transition in the region.” Roebuck said that youth empowerment remains a top priority for the U.S. government. He also spoke about Kerry’s recent visit to Tunisia, stressing that the U.S. will stand with Tunisia throughout its democratic transition. Roebuck agreed with **Rached Ghannouchi** that there is a young, fragile democracy in Tunisia in need of a series of elections and consensus building efforts. Roebuck then spoke about Tunisia’s strengths including its inclusive national dialogue, liberal constitution, vibrant governmental and non-governmental institutions, and independent government. Roebuck also said the U.S. and Tunisia signed an agreement to build operational capacities, create a more transparent system, and work with the Tunisian armed

forces to help them address Tunisia's threat environment. Roebuck concluded by briefly talking about economic issues, saying that one of the underlying causes of unrest in the Middle East is a lack of economic opportunity and jobs. Roebuck asserted that the U.S. will continue to support Tunisia's commitment to economic reform and its promotion of private sector development. He also mentioned that bilateral trade between the two countries has grown steadily.

Emna Jebblaoui spoke next about her experiences working with the constituent assembly throughout the national dialogue process. Jebblaoui discussed the achievements of the new constitution as well as the challenges that it faces in the long-term. She mentioned the need for both independent election monitoring and press freedom. Jebblaoui also said that political parties need to be able to organize in a secure environment, which includes strengthening Tunisia's borders and security forces. She concluded by saying, "we still have a lot of work to do, but we are very happy to have the support of our American friends."

Steve McNerney opened by pointing out how rare it is that countries in the Middle East and North Africa enjoy positive international attention. McNerney called for more of a focus on Tunisia from the U.S. administration. While he welcomed Kerry's visit to Tunisia, McNerney pointed out that it was the Secretary's first visit to the country and that it only lasted for a few hours. McNerney then said, "By the end of this year I hope that Tunisians and everyone across the Arab world will see that the U.S. is committed to supporting Tunisia's democratic transition on par with our support for other goals or agendas in the region."

McNerney continued by presenting his policy recommendations. He spoke about the State Department's travel warning on Tunisia, acknowledging that the attacks in Tunisia were certainly frightening, but saying, "I feel that the reaction has been somewhat disproportionate to the events themselves." McNerney believes the State Department should reevaluate the threat status of Tunisia because removing the travel warning could expand tourism, trade, and investment. McNerney suggested that the U.S. use its leverage and provide economic assistance in a way that encourages Tunisia's leaders to make difficult decisions on security sector reform and the restructuring of old institutions.

Reuf Bajrovic then opened the floor for Q&A. In response to a question about whether or not Tunisia can serve as a model in the region, McNerney said that the establishment of the Troika in Tunisia is indicative of a willingness to compromise that other actors in the region lack. He also said the Tunisians benefitted from higher levels of education and the military's choice to let political forces emerge and handle the transition. Mr. Roebuck added that, from the beginning, Tunisia had a more diverse and successful economy than other countries in the region.

In response to a question about the Tunisian government's tolerance for U.S. engagement on the issues of transitional justice and security sector reform, Ambassador Chelaifa acknowledged that Tunisia needs "big and deep reforms" related to decentralization and job creation. Roebuck added that the U.S. will be very engaged, particularly regarding security sector reform.