

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## U.S. Should Support Tunisia's Democratic Progress with Concrete Action

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On January 26, three years after the beginning of Tunisians' uprising for greater freedom, Tunisia's National Constituent Assembly peacefully and decisively ratified a model constitution that lays the foundation for a functioning democracy in the birthplace of the Arab Spring. Tunisia's remarkable political turnaround, epitomized by the near unanimous ratification of the constitution and the inauguration of an interim technocratic government, is a truly hard-won triumph for Tunisians.

Given the instability continuing to plague Arab Spring countries and the increase in violent Islamist extremism, security and good governance is a formula the U.S. should be actively promoting in the region, particularly in a country such as Tunisia, which is continuing to make measurable progress largely on its own accord. The U.S. should take concrete action to reinforce Tunisia's ongoing democratic transition toward a nation where freedom, economic opportunity, and civil society can flourish.

**Tunisia's New Constitution: Paving the Way Forward.** Following a relatively peaceful uprising that ousted President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in early 2011, Tunisia had been through a series of challenges and setbacks, which had made many in Wash-

ington seriously question whether Tunisia could make a democratic transition and offer a test case for democratic transitions in the Middle East and North Africa. The country has been plagued by terrorism and political assassinations that nearly derailed the interim coalition government formed by the Muslim Brotherhood's Nahda party and secular groups.

Indeed, drafting and passing the constitution had been the culmination of hard-fought political battles between Islamists, who held the largest bloc in the assembly and led the coalition government, and the minority secularists, who sought to exclude Sharia law, limit the influence of religious groups on the constitution, and maintain Tunisia as a secular state.

Nonetheless, Tunisia has progressed toward a recognizable democratic transition, in sharp contrast to other nations in the region. According to Freedom House's "Freedom in the World 2014" report, despite the fact that 2013 was the eighth year in a row in which freedom in the world as a whole lost ground, Tunisia persevered on the march to democracy as "the most promising of the Arab Spring countries," with its civil liberties notably improving in 2013.<sup>1</sup>

More specifically, the political dynamic in the country has changed markedly in recent months following a year of turmoil that had led many Tunisians to even question whether they had been better off under Ben Ali's rule. Yet Tunisia persevered and charted a way out of the political gridlock in late 2013 through a constitutional drafting process defined by compromise and moderation.

The new constitution recognizes democratic freedoms and a separation of powers while including general references to Tunisia's Islamic and Arab identity.<sup>2</sup> The Islamist government has agreed to

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step down in favor of a neutral technocratic government that will rule until elections are held in 2014. The agreement and the adoption of the new constitution marked a significant breakthrough for Tunisia, renewing hope for a functioning democracy in a tumultuous region.

**Time to Realize the “Economics of the Possible.”** Tunisia’s impressive consensus-based political turnaround in no way lessens the need for instilling sustainable economic growth. With even greater urgency, the historic breakthrough calls for effective economic reforms that would advance economic freedom for ordinary Tunisians.

The Tunisian economy remains fragile. In the past two years, Tunisia recorded economic expansion, with gross domestic product growing by around 3.2 percent on average. However, the average growth rate was too weak to respond to the urgent economic issues of creating jobs—particularly for the youth—or addressing the regional development disparities in the country.

According to the *2014 Index of Economic Freedom*, a data-driven policy guide produced jointly by The Heritage Foundation and *The Wall Street Journal*, Tunisia remains a less free economy struggling for greater economic freedom.

It is notable that Tunisia became one of the five countries in the Middle East and North Africa whose economic freedom score improved over the past year. Tunisia in particular made notable progress in the areas of tackling corruption and engaging with the world through trade. Nevertheless, Tunisia’s much-needed economic dynamism remains below its full potential. The overall entrepreneur-

ial environment remains severely constrained. An overbearing regulatory framework, exacerbated by poor access to credit and high financing costs, stifles economic activity and hurts the development of a job-creating private sector.

Indeed, as pointed out by Oussama Romdhani, a former Tunisian minister of communication, while the process of implementing the new constitution can be described as a demonstration of the “politics of the possible,” Tunisia’s success in the future will depend a great deal on the “economics of the possible.”<sup>3</sup>

**What the U.S. Should Do.** U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry lauded Tunisia’s ratification of a new constitution and formation of an interim government, calling the moves “historic milestones” in its political transition and remarking that “they are proof positive that Tunisia’s democratic transition can succeed.”<sup>4</sup> In his surprise visit to Tunisia on February 18, Secretary Kerry emphasized, “We’re going to do what we can to help Tunisians to be able to finish the job that was begun here three years ago.”<sup>5</sup>

Tunisia, the birthplace of the populist uprising for greater freedom in the Arab world in 2011 and the gateway to North Africa, does matter to America. The United States cannot afford to appear indifferent to the fate of liberty that so many Tunisians have pushed for with determination and courage. Merely conveying promise after promise for greater support is no way to secure America’s vital interests in the region. In his speech on the Middle East and North Africa in May 2011, President Obama made the case that “a moment of opportunity” in the region should not be lost.<sup>6</sup> In that regard, the U.S. should act on its promises by:

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1. Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2014: The Democratic Leadership Gap,” Freedom House, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Freedom%20in%20the%20World%202014%20Booklet.pdf> (accessed February 12, 2014).
  2. Carlotta Gall, “Three Years After Uprising, Tunisia Approves Constitution,” *The New York Times*, January 26, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/27/world/africa/three-years-after-uprising-tunisia-approves-constitution.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/27/world/africa/three-years-after-uprising-tunisia-approves-constitution.html?_r=0) (accessed February 12, 2014).
  3. Oussama Romdhani, “Tunisia Seeks New Beginnings Through Constitution,” *Al-Arabiya*, January 28, 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2014/01/28/Tunisian-Constitution-Seeking-a-new-departure.html> (accessed February 12, 2014).
  4. Secretary of State John Kerry, “Formation of New Tunisian Government,” U.S. Department of State, January 29, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/01/220727.htm> (accessed February 12, 2014).
  5. Secretary of State John Kerry, “Meeting With Staff and Families of Embassy Tunis,” U.S. Department of State, February 18, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/02/221751.htm> (accessed February 18, 2014).
  6. The White House, “Fact Sheet: ‘A Moment of Opportunity’ in the Middle East and North Africa,” May 19, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/fact-sheet-moment-opportunity-middle-east-and-north-africa> (accessed February 12, 2014).

- **Incentivizing greater trade and investment engagement with the U.S. while encouraging Tunisia to pursue greater economic freedom.** A more prosperous Tunisia benefits not only the region but also America. The U.S. should follow up initiatives focusing on greater investment<sup>7</sup> as well as development of a private sector via the Tunisian–American Enterprise Fund.
- **Proactively engaging with key segments of Tunisia’s civil society, including universities and business associations.** The underlying level of discontent in the country and the presence of Islamic extremism in Tunisia require a sustained focus on building a moderate and democratic citizenry that demands transparent and accountable governance from the country’s leaders.
- **Expanding support for Tunisian efforts to combat extremism and secure the country’s borders to inhibit outside extremists from entering the country.** Essential to Tunisia’s path toward democracy and economic prosperity will be ensuring a safe and secure environment. So long as extremists can freely operate or

terrorize Tunisian civil society, progress will be elusive. Expanded support for initiatives such as the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership will be critical in strengthening a security partnership with Tunisia.

**Time for an Economic Freedom Partnership with Tunisia.** Tunisia’s ongoing journey to greater openness and transparency has resulted from the quest for the fundamental freedoms of property rights, trade, and entrepreneurship that have driven the country’s bottom-up democratic transition. As Tunisia is charting a more hopeful course with its newly adopted constitution, it is time for America to act and reinforce Tunisia’s democratic progress with concrete action, not more political gestures.

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7. The White House, “Fact Sheet: The President’s Framework for Investing in Tunisia,” October 7, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/10/07/fact-sheet-presidents-framework-investing-tunisia> (accessed February 12, 2014).