

Help Tunisia First

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Articles & Testimony

The United States should make at least \$50 million available immediately for democratic institution building in Tunisia. The country's size and considerable assets mean that a modest investment could bring huge returns for the Tunisian people and U.S.-Tunisia relations.

Arriving at the airport in Tunis, one finds it hard to believe a revolution took place here just over a month ago. Everything functions exactly as it should. Passports are stamped, bags are collected, and customs officials wave visitors right through. The only difference is that they're smiling, and they're not the only ones: When I emerged into the arrival hall with the rest of my flight, large Tunisian families cheered joyously, tears streaming down their faces, as they welcomed home long-exiled family members.

Tunisians took back their country on Jan. 14, when the autocratic President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali was driven into exile by a massive popular uprising, and they are now embarking on the difficult task of building the first truly representative democracy in Arab lands. The interim government is headed by Ben Ali's former prime minister, but includes real opposition participation. The government is working to prepare a new constitution that will govern the rules for a presidential election, to be held this fall, and parliamentary elections after that.

If Tunisia doesn't succeed, no other country in the region can. Tunisia's 10 million inhabitants do not suffer the ethnic and sectarian divisions that bedevil many of their neighbors. Tunisians are well educated and largely middle class -- 80 percent own their own homes. Nearly all Tunisians practice the same form of moderate Islam. The populace looks to Europe for its economic and political inspiration. The cry Tunisians made famous around the world during their revolution, "*Degage!*" (Get out!), is tellingly in French, not Arabic.

But U.S. President Barack Obama's neglectful approach to facilitating Tunisia's democratic transition risks wasting these positive factors -- letting Tunisians down and contributing to an unnecessary security vacuum in an already tense region. Unless the administration reorders priorities now, it could lose a historic opportunity to make up for three decades of faulty policy.

The revolution in Tunisia has so far been remarkably disciplined: Looting, when it has occurred, targeted the symbols of corruption associated with the ruling family. In Sidi Bou Said, a small tourist town just outside Tunis, I walked past three cafes in a row. Two had been left completely untouched, but the one in the middle, which had been owned by a member of the Trabelsi family, looked like it had been set upon by locusts. The houses of one of Ben Ali's brothers-in-law were looted down to the very foundation.

As a State Department official, I traveled to Tunisia a number of times during the ancien regime to press the government on human rights and democratic reforms. The Tunisian government never gave an inch. Despite the fact that the State Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative's (MEPI) regional office was based in Tunis, I could never secure permission for MEPI or any of its grantees to actually conduct Tunisia-specific programs. To meet with Tunisians required inviting them to embassy functions in small groups. If Tunisians did decide to meet with you outside the embassy, they would take the batteries out of their cell phones, and ask you to do the same, to avoid government agents who they were sure were listening. Their fear back then was palpable. Now, it has evaporated.

People in today's Tunisia are talking nonstop. Radio programming features entirely call-ins; most television is the same. As one person who was closer to the regime than most I spoke with put it, "For 50 years they didn't say a word; now they can't shut up." The whole country seems involved in a massive group therapy session -- and loving it.

Tunisians are mostly talking about politics and the economy. They are ambivalent about the current interim government. They want it to act, but not too decisively; they do not want their revolution hijacked. "Clarity is not what we need," a businessman told me. "We've had enough of that."

What they do need is a plan to keep their economy from going completely off the rails. The economy has built a strong foundation in the past 10 years and should be able to recover from the current short-term instability. Prior to the revolution, the economy was in good shape from a macroeconomic perspective. Inflation was low, the central bank had three months' currency reserves, budget deficits as a percentage of GDP were within acceptable levels, and the economy had been growing at an annual rate of 5 percent or higher. Even with the upheaval caused by the revolution, the World Bank still projects Tunisia to grow by 1 percent this year.

Still, many business and political elites are nervous about the immediate future. The tourism sector, which makes up 11 percent of the economy and employs a huge number of Tunisians, has been badly hit and will not recover in 2011. An ongoing drought threatens to devastate the agricultural sector, and a growing number of labor strikes threatens to shut down the economy entirely.

If Tunisia's economy collapses, all bets for a successful democratic transition are off. The country is going to need help from the international community -- and a lot of it. Mondher Ben Ayed, current president of the Tunisian-American Chamber of Commerce, told me, "We will need billions in a mix of loans and assistance, but only for two years."

So far, the West has been slow to respond, and the United States has provided nothing. The U.S. government has so far neglected to contribute material assistance to the task of democratization in Tunisia, adding to uncertainty about American intent in the country. This stands in marked contrast to the U.S. response toward events in Egypt, where, last week, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that the United States would immediately provide \$150 million to foster democracy.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has been especially slow off the mark. Despite convening a meeting to discuss emergency priorities in early January, no emergency aid has yet reached Tunis.

A number of American nongovernmental organizations on the ground in Tunis told me that they've now been informed they may not get anything at all in 2011. MEPI "is still reviewing what it can do given other regional priorities," one Washington-based MEPI representative told me, presumably meaning Egypt. On Feb. 22, MEPI indicated its "priorities" by putting out an ill-timed request for proposals for the entire region on civic education.

The U.S. Embassy in Tunis was staffed to manage a sleepy relationship with a dictator -- it is too small to handle the demands of a country in the midst of radical change. For example, the entire political section comprises only a handful of people. Nearly incessant information requests from Washington, as well as preparations for high-level visits, preclude the small staff from actively mapping who's who in the new Tunisia and building relationships with those people. But there is no sign that the State Department is planning to add staff or resources,

despite an urgent need.

The U.S. government should be acting now to provide Tunisia with the political and economic support it needs. The United States has a vested interest in seeing the first Arab society to experience a popular revolution in the post-colonial era complete the transition into the first true Arab democracy. Failure in Tunisia would represent a failure for U.S. policy and would likely mean a military coup or a strengthening of the Islamist forces in the country. As Roger Bismuth, leader of Tunisia's Jewish community, told me, "The Americans have no choice but to support us now. They must."

High-level engagement from U.S. policymakers is critical at this point to reassure Tunisians and restore confidence abroad. The visit of Senators Joseph Lieberman and John McCain last weekend was incredibly important, but more should be done. Obama and Clinton should publicly reassure their Tunisian counterparts of American support.

The United States can also move aggressively to bolster Tunisia's economy. Commerce Secretary Gary Locke should lead a trade delegation that includes businesspeople from the IT sector, so critical to the success of Tunisia's uprising, to participate in an April conference being planned by the interim government. The Millennium Challenge Corporation should clearly outline the steps necessary for Tunisia to qualify for entry, which would send a strong signal to the Tunisia people and international markets of the United States' long-term commitment to Tunisia's successful transition. And the U.S. trade representative should signal his readiness to restart trade discussions as soon as a new government is in place, perhaps raising the possibility of establishing free trade zones, which have contributed so much to Egypt's and Jordan's export growth.

The United States should make at least \$50 million available immediately for democratic institution building in Tunisia. Given the fact that its regional office is based in Tunis, MEPI should dedicate its considerable human resources and a large percentage of its available funds to this task. It can play a valuable role in developing a political strategy for supporting Egypt, but adequate funds for supporting Egypt's democratic transition can be found in USAID's budget.

Tunisia's size and considerable assets mean that a modest investment could bring huge returns for the Tunisian people and U.S.-Tunisia relations. The country provided the initial spark that launched a regionwide effort to shake off decades of sclerosis, replacing it with a renewed sense of human dignity. With a little help, Tunisia can also be a beacon for other Middle Eastern countries attempting to transform the recent upheaval into more durable governments, based not on tyranny but on respect for universal civil and political rights. The United States should do everything in its power to help Tunisia along this path.

J. Scott Carpenter is the Keston Family fellow at The Washington Institute and director of [Project Fikra \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=24&newActiveSubNav=Project%20Fikra:%20Defeating%20Extremism%20through%20the%20Power%20of%20Ideas&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D24&new\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=24&newActiveSubNav=Project%20Fikra:%20Defeating%20Extremism%20through%20the%20Power%20of%20Ideas&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D24&new), which focuses on empowering Arab democrats in their struggle against extremism. ❖

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