

# How Washington Can Help Tunisia and Other Arab Revolutions

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## Robert Satloff makes specific recommendations for actions the U.S. government can take to support reform in Tunisia.

**F**ueled by courage and desperation, the people of Tunisia toppled their authoritarian government this month, sending a message of warning to leaders of Arab states. The citizens of some of those states, most notably Egypt and Yemen, have been studying this message and crafting their own.

In writing a book and narrating a film on what happened in Arab lands during the Holocaust, I have studied Tunisia closely over the past decade. Only 90 miles from the southern tip of Italy, this small North African country was the sole Arab state to suffer a full-fledged German occupation during World War II. I have visited the places where SS officers rounded up Jews and sent them to concentration camps.

Yet Tunisia was also where I found the most stories of Arabs protecting Jews during the war. As in Europe, these Muslim rescuers were ordinary people performing extraordinary acts -- like the Tunis bathhouse owner who hid a Jewish man in his hammam or the Mahdia country squire who sheltered two dozen Jews on his farm. This moment in Tunisian history -- which had a much happier ending for Jews than did events on the other side of the Mediterranean -- gives hope that the current chaos will end reasonably positively.

Tunisia's largely homogenous population has blended a 1,400-year-old Sunni Arab identity with an organic, deeply embedded connection to Europe. Its capital once rivaled Beirut and Alexandria as the most cosmopolitan Arab city, with large communities of Italians, French, British and Maltese injecting a heady mix of energy and ideas into the local culture.

One result is that the Tunisian people have historically sought engagement with the world and rejected extreme ideologies, whether fascist, Nasserist or Islamist. This openness has enabled Tunisia to escape the self-induced savagery and backwardness, respectively, of neighboring Algeria and Libya. Tunisia has its share of radicals, many of

whom have recently made their way to the infantry of al-Qaeda and other movements, and the threat of religious extremism is not fantasy, as some suggest. But the local Islamist movement, an-Nahda, is not poised to step in.

Indeed, most Tunisians appear united in rejecting organized Islamism as the solution to their political ills. Their cry is for freedom, justice and jobs, not the imposition of sharia law. They seem to want to bring Tunisia's politics into the 21st century, not drag it back into the seventh.

The Obama administration should be a full partner in this effort. So far, it has congratulated itself for a handful of public statements that, unlike the reluctant Europeans, put the United States on the side of the street protesters. But there is much more for Washington to do, especially if it wants to advance the prospects of non-Islamist reform movements taking root in other Arab countries.

First, the administration should endorse the inclusion of all secular political partners in Tunisia's national dialogue and upcoming elections. While many leftists and nationalists may critique specific U.S. policies, our interest in the success of the Tunisian people's commitment to a secular state, governed by the rule of law and with a vibrant civil society, trumps those differences. Moreover, this support for "discriminate democracy" -- democracy for all but the Islamists -- would protect U.S. security interests.

Second, we should back up this endorsement with funds for America's democracy-supporting institutions, such as the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute, to launch a full-scale effort to help Tunisia create an independent election commission and hold free and fair national elections, a first in an Arab country. When that commission is up and running, President Obama should dispatch respected public figures, such as retired Supreme Court justice Sandra Day O'Connor or former secretary of state Madeleine Albright, to lead America's mission to observe the campaign and election.

Third, we should propose now to open negotiations with the interim government over a package of economic initiatives, from a new trade agreement to a Millennium Challenge Corp. grant, which Tunisia narrowly missed getting last year because of low marks on political rights and civil liberties. The United States will never supplant Europe as the dominant player in Tunisia's economy, but we should make clear that Tunisians' leap into democracy earns economic dividends.

Fourth, we should increase funding for U.S. cultural outreach, media training, educational exchange and technological upgrades to make Internet access as broad as possible throughout the country. After Tunisia's decades of political isolation, our greatest gift may be our ability to multiply Tunisians' connections to the rest of the world.

Seven years ago, over tea at his apartment, the revered grand rabbi of Tunis, the late Haim Madar, explained to me that modern Tunis was the biblical Tarshish, famous as the place to which Jonah tried to flee to avoid the heavenly mission of warning the people of Nineveh about their evil ways. He never arrived.

Today, the U.S. task is to do what we can to help the Tunisian story end well and thereby help Arab leaders make decisions for reform now so that a political leviathan does not swallow them -- and us -- in the future.

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