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RELEASE IN FULL

**R/NEA Delegation to Tunisia**  
**Trip Report**

**Trip Overview:**

With the overthrow of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia and rapidly approaching elections in July, the United States faces a unique moment to engage the Tunisian people. In order to ensure that we are fully incorporating Tunisians' new needs and priorities into our approach, Under Secretary Judith McHale (R) led a short trip to Tunisia to interact with Tunisian civil society, to hear from Tunisians about their priorities for forging a more democratic and prosperous society, and help set a path forward that takes full advantage of the changed landscape for engagement and the unique opportunity which the United States faces.

Given the critical role that the *people* of Tunisia played in the recent revolution, and the lead role they will play moving forward, the trip focused on State Department programs that engage people and civil society—particularly public diplomacy and Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) programs.

The trip was built around a full day workshop with a broad cross-section of Tunisian civil society intended to provide a platform for collaborative brainstorming on how U.S. programs can better support Tunisian priorities and to cast our ongoing relationship as a two-way conversation. During the workshop, approximately 60 Tunisians, drawn from a diverse range of civil society, media, and student groups, participated in small breakout groups focused on brainstorming priorities for Tunisia's transition to democracy and suggesting programs that the US could undertake to support their needs. The groups also heard about current Embassy programming from Public Affairs, USAID and MEPI representatives and provided feedback.

Participants quickly coalesced around a number of priority themes:

- 1) ***Preparing for elections and political reform:*** Large opportunities emerged in supporting political party development, voter education, training for Tunisian election monitors, and strengthening the rule of law.
- 2) ***Strengthening the media and freedom of expression:*** Given a previous lack of competitive elections, media outlets have not had to cover real elections or conduct deep investigative reporting. With a profound and swift change in censorship rules and a rapid proliferation of new media, participants highlighted the need for extensive media capacity building,

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED

particularly focused on covering elections.

- 3) ***Bolstering economic opportunity and job creation:*** High unemployment, particularly for educated Tunisians, was a major cause of the revolution. Tunisians continue to place paramount importance on creating jobs and facilitating economic growth. In addition to significant regulatory reform and lowering of trade barriers, participants highlighted the need to help build professional associations, connect Tunisian businesses with American businesspeople, and enhance internship and apprenticeship opportunities for young Tunisians.
- 4) ***Improving educational opportunities:*** Tunisians see education as a critical tool for building a post-Ali society and advancing individual opportunity. Participants emphasized access to scholarly materials, scholarships, and English language teaching. They also suggested deepening partnerships between U.S. and Tunisian higher education institutions.

In addition, participants highlighted the need to engage youth and women in order to be successful on each of these fronts. Participants were extremely positive about the Embassy reaching out to solicit input in program design, and even skeptical participants admitted that this was a promising approach.

The delegation also met with government officials, business leaders, students and educators to get a broader perspective on how the U.S. could strengthen our relationship with the Tunisian people during this transition. Meetings at the Ministry of Higher Education and University of Sfax in particular highlighted a deeper desire for educational and people-to-people exchange. Finally, the Ambassador described his ongoing efforts, which have been received very positively by Tunisians, to explore bringing the Peace Corps back to Tunisia.

**Suggested Path Forward:**

Tunisia – the country that began the wave of unprecedented political change across the Middle East and North Africa – has the potential to cross the threshold from dictatorship to full democracy. Its success is critical to the USG's efforts to encourage responsible democratic institutions in the region. Millions of Tunisians, who previously had no voice, now are eager to play a role in shape their country's future. We have gone from needing to engage a small set of influential Tunisians to needing to touch nearly all Tunisians. This monumental

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transformation presents a challenge but also a tremendous window of opportunity, which we must rise to seize—particularly before the July elections for constituent assembly.

However, Embassy Tunis requires additional attention, support, and resources to take advantage of these new opportunities. Embassy Tunis was appropriately staffed during the time of the Ben Ali regime, when access to individuals and information was tightly controlled. Circumstances have drastically improved since the revolution, and opportunities for engagement and advocacy are exploding: the Embassy's NGO and private sector contacts are eager to move from occasional and tentative contacts to continuous and very substantive cooperation. Universities are now open to Embassy visits without prior GOT approval. The Government of Tunisia (GOT) now seeks robust cooperation and assistance in almost all areas of bilateral cooperation. With all of this new activity, current Embassy leadership is overtaxed, and fully engaged with running the Embassy, reporting requirements, managing an increased workload of high-level visits, and administering our programs.

To help support the Embassy realize the opportunities the revolution has presented, we suggest establishing a **Transition Engagement Support Team** that can provide focused support in country and in Washington to ensure that we can quickly mobilize resources and deeply engage with Tunisians, especially in the three months before July elections. **The Support Team will focus on four major themes, with a lead identified for each area: (1) democracy and elections; (2) media; (3) business and job creation; (4) education.** In addition, across these categories, we will ensure special attention is paid to youth and women as critical demographics to be engaged. This entire effort would be coordinated by a senior Foreign Service officer who would oversee these streams of activity, reporting to the Ambassador and working closely with NEA.

Each thematic group would begin activity immediately, focused on the tangible ideas which emerged during the trip as starting points for a more robust and strategic agenda in each area.

Initial program suggestions include:

### 1) Democracy and Elections

- Create regular DVCs with democracy activists in the US and elsewhere to provide training on: how to create a party, develop a political platform, engage with the media, etc.
- Leverage NDI, IRI and other entities to provide training on how to monitor elections, coordinate information, and be effective watchdogs

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- Seminars/workshops focused on training for female politicians (since 50% of each slate is now legally required to be female)
- Dispatch DRL delegation to explore other avenues for partnership in preparing for elections (already scheduled to be led by A/S Posner)
- Find partners for producing PSAs to encourage democratic participation (e.g. MTV "Rock the Vote" etc.)

**2) Media**

- Establish weekly DVC/CoNX sessions with journalists (American and others) to impart practical information and engage in a dialogue about how to cover elections
- Explore feasibility of creating of a credible media training or advisory center in Tunisia, to help create capacity on everything from basic media skills to determining the best business models for media enterprises
- Include more Tunisians on IVLP programs focused on freedom of expression and media
- Connect young Americans with budding bloggers and journalists through virtual channels to discuss techniques of information dissemination
- Create exchanges (in person or virtual) focused on the technical side of media: building a rolodex to book guests or line up interviews, production, editing, design, platform distribution, etc.
- Help introduce and explain the role of audience analysis
- Help nurture a regulatory environment and legal framework for freedom of information through the development of a credible professional association for journalists, including the development of a code of ethics and possibly drafting legislation

**3) Business and Job Creation**

- Leverage Embassy network to serve as a convener for curriculum-designers (Ministry of Education) and business people to collaborate to ensure market needs are reflected in education
- Help to create and strengthen professional associations to ensure a stronger voice for business in advocacy to the government, educational institutions, and the labor force
- Create business exchange program for informal mentoring and exchange between American businesspeople and Tunisians
- Work with Tunisian companies to establish broader array of internship and apprenticeship opportunities to expose younger Tunisians to the workforce

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- Establish DVC series on “Building Businesses”—including soft skills like establishing corporate culture, and training employees

**4) Education**

- Pursue parity in Fulbright programs and in the near future put emphasis on science and technology
- Expand English-teaching, especially through technological solutions to broaden our reach
- Create teacher-to-teacher exchanges to focus on teaching critical thinking, project-based learning, and civic education
- Use inexpensive technologies, like Skype, to connect American classrooms with Tunisian classrooms
- Develop a multidimensional exchange agenda modeled on the WHA NEXUS initiative with a focus on sectors identified by Tunisians as areas where they have a comparative advantage (perhaps biotech) or a pressing need which could be addressed through such an effort (for example, in Latin America, smart growth)
- Extend access to American Corner resources more broadly—including online databases and other reference materials
- Explore creating a joint U.S.-Tunisian commission focused on science and technology to expand “lab-to-market” programs, innovation corridors, and other tools to strengthen linkages between academic pursuits and business creation
- Explore creation of an American Corner at University of Sfax to expand access to reference materials and other educational resources

To complement these focus areas, we have already begun discussions on bringing the Peace Corps back to Tunisia. Initial conversations with Aaron Williams, Peace Corps’ Director, have been productive. Peace Corps will be sending a team to Tunisia to explore initiating a small-scale program, potentially focused on English teaching in business schools—well-suited to dovetail with the priority areas highlighted by Tunisians.