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**U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Middle East and North Africa**

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"Transition at a Crossroads: Tunisia Three Years After the Revolution"

Madame Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to testify on the state of Tunisia's political transition three years after the uprising that toppled the authoritarian regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

Since then, Tunisia has made significant progress toward establishing democratic institutions. While Tunisia's transition is today more vulnerable than at any point thus far, there is reason to hope that the country's experience can and will continue to serve as an inspiration to those beyond Tunisia's borders.

Serving as part of the leadership of NDI's international observation mission in October 2011, I witnessed firsthand the hopes that many Tunisians placed in the National Constituent Assembly elections - that they would represent a solid step toward a more democratic future.

The results confirmed these hopes. The anticipated frontrunner, Ennahda, won a plurality, but 26 other party, coalition and independent lists also received enough votes to win at least one seat.

Ennahda's moderate Islamist leadership sought to form a broad coalition to share the responsibility of governing. The ruling "troika" coalition formed by Ennahda and two center left parties, the Congress for the Republic (CPR) and Ettakatol, took power in December 2011. In these two years, the coalition has struggled, but remained intact despite the often strained communication among its members and increasing pressure from opposition political parties.

If there is an early lesson in the post-Arab Spring aftermath, it is that coalitions and consensus building are far preferable to winner-take-all politics. Egypt went the

route of winner take all and paid the price. Tunisia has chosen, thus far, to be more inclusive.

Unfortunately, the 'troika' government has struggled to address growing economic and security challenges as the Tunisian economy has generally declined or stagnated since the revolution. Just last week, the Tunisian currency hit an all time low. New figures show the unemployment rate hovering just under 16 percent, with university graduate unemployment closer to 34 percent. Thus the young Tunisians, who are widely credited with bringing about the revolution, are those being left behind.

Some Tunisians have accused Ennahda of failing to crack down on violent extremism, a perception that has been fueled by the assassinations of two leftist politicians this year.

The assassinations caused a political stand-off between Ennahda and the leftist and secular opposition and efforts to broker a settlement led to the signing in October of a 'National Dialogue' process to address four fundamental issues: 1) composition of a new apolitical technocrat government; 2) reaching agreement on final sticking points in the draft constitution, 3) appointing leadership of an independent election administration, and 4) agreeing on the sequence and timeline for presidential and parliamentary elections.

Tunisian views about the National Dialogue are clear – to begin the process of restoring public confidence, all responsible political parties must return to the negotiation table immediately. They must work to complete the constitutional phase, making it possible to hold elections.

There has finally been movement on the constitutional process and the naming of an interim Prime Minister -- yesterday opposition MPs returned to the Constituent Assembly to hash out remaining disagreements. There are also rumours that there is finally a compromise candidate for prime minister.

Despite Tunisia's numerous challenges, reasons for optimism remain. Tunisia's transition has moved forward in fits and starts, but it remains on track. The Tunisian value of consensus over expediency remains a strength.

There is a growing perception in Tunisia that the world has lost interest in this important democratic experiment. The international community should enhance its support of the Tunisian transition, emphasizing that an immediate return to

National Dialogue negotiations is essential to demonstrate genuine commitment to democratic principles and fundamental freedoms.

The mediation team, led by the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT), should announce a definitive date for the dialogue to re-commence and stress that any party that fails to participate will forfeit its right to contribute to decisions.

Tunisian politicians must conclude their agreement to nominate a caretaker prime minister and cabinet, finalize the constitution, appoint the election management body, and outline steps to conduct presidential and parliamentary elections.

These steps are essential to adequately address pressing citizen priorities, including salvaging the economy and ensuring safe and secure communities.

While there is an urgent need for more international economic support and assistance, the United States should also strongly and consistently support popular demands for transparency, accountability and freedom. This means a continued commitment to pluralism and civil society and speaking clearly with respect to ongoing threats to freedom of expression.

Just a word about my organization, the National Democratic Institute -- NDI. Through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the State Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), NDI received funding to establish programs in Tunisia within weeks of Ben Ali's departure. Since February 2011, NDI has worked to keep parties focused on building lasting structures and creating platforms that resonate with voters. At the same time, NDI is supporting opportunities for citizen oversight and domestic election observation with the aim of increasing accountability during the country's delicate transition, with a particular focus on upcoming elections.

Thank you, Madame Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee. I'd like to request that my full statement be included in the record.