

# **CSIS Statesmen's Forum on "Tunisia's Path Forward"**

## **Featuring H.E. Mehdi Jomaa, Prime Minister of Tunisia**

Center for Strategic and International Studies  
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### ***Transcript***

**Mehdi Jomaa:** Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to meet you and for this kind invitation. I agreed with the organizers that I will speak in English. So you will support my English during 15 minutes, but I'm allowed to switch to French if needed. That's the rule, okay.

So I'm happy to be with you. I'm happy to get this opportunity to share with you my opinions and the situation in Tunisia. I know that a lot of you are eager to know more about what is happening in Tunisia. You know that we succeeded since two months, a little bit more than two months, to end the big political issues which occurred after the revolution three years ago. It started with some young people, politically leaderless. It's like a spontaneous movement by the people who these young people who were educated for a part of them, unemployed and seeking, looking for freedom but looking for something simple in the life like jobs, like education for their sons, for their kids.

During three years after this revolution, after this fact, the period became political. You know we did not have many opposition parties, and now we have more than 160. I think that we exceeded the United States and all of North America. So if you need it, we can help you in developing that. All of that created many tensions as well since the state was shaken, since there was a big expectation and big frustration from many areas and from many people. It creates and generates some social tensions. Because of all of that it was not certain that we could and that we would succeed to find the door to a peaceful conclusion.

But when we know the Tunisian history, when we know the Tunisian people, we know that they always avoided the extreme solution, they evaded the violence. They refused

it and they reject it. And that's what happened. We found the way to conclude that through dialogue. So there was an initiative from the civil society and particularly from what we call the quartet. The quartet was composed by the labor union associated with the employers or let's say the trade and industry chamber, with the law and order, and the human rights organization. These four organizations made the mediator.

With hard but successful dialogue we succeeded to vote and to adopt the constitution which is a secular constitution, which is a constitution which guarantees the universal and fundamental rights, freedom like the freedom of conscience, like the freedom of worship so many, many secular. We are really proud of this constitution and I think all of you are a part of that. So it was really successful. We spent three years to achieve that. Maybe it's a lot. But when we know how things are happening everywhere, if we studied history, or even if we examine the geography today, we know that that's the price to pay. It's a limited price.

With this dialogue, it was an agreement from all the parties as well to give and to constitute, to set up a new government – nonpolitical government. For two months now the head of this new government has to be neutral, nonpolitical, with equal distance from each and all the parties. The first mission is to organize the election, to turn the page of the last step of this transitional period. To do that is not easy, but, I think that, we believe that we will succeed.

The first thing is to offer the right atmosphere, the right climate for the organization of this election, that they have to be fair and transparent. That's our first mission. For that, we have to offer security. You know that security was and is still a big issue in our region and for our country, for Tunisia as well. So we think today that the scare is coming more from outside or imported, things that are local we call locally, there was really some issues with the help of the population, to be direct with you. With the revolution and what the revolution all around in Libya and Egypt and Syria, we got some trouble. We got some terrorists cells that introduced weapons and all the means to make some attacks.

We are not used with this phenomenon of terrorism in Tunisia. That's why I think we did not react in the best way in the beginning, because we were not trained to and because the state, because of the revolution, was shaken and a little bit disappointed. But since that time, we organized ourselves. For one year now we have the right organization

to withstand this phenomenon and to fight it. We have a clear determination that there is no place for terrorism or extremism in Tunisia, because we never knew that and we never chose that. We are organizing ourselves today to improve our organization to be able to answer even to the random events.

So that's the first step and we get some progress this last week by fighting them and beating the operational head of this organization. We are looking to cooperate and to work with all our friendly countries, among them, as you can imagine, the United States, because this phenomena is no longer local. It's regional. More than that, sometimes it's universal.

To have the right answer, we have to look for good cooperation, exchanging information but as well experience and working together. That's one of the aims of all my visits to all the friendly country besides the economic and politics, it is to work on security. It's important to prepare the election in the right way, but it's important for the future of the country. It's important to give Tunisia the opportunity again to open all the doors for investors. So it's a crucial thing. We are determined to fight each phenomenon, like terrorism, which is illegal. So that's the first thing.

Second, to offer for the right climate for a fair and good organization of the election is also to take care about the economy. You know, I told you that the past three years were difficult. There were big disputes, political disputes. You know our parties were learning as well how to make politics, and they learned well because everyone understood in Tunisia that the only way to manage this country is by concessions, it is through agreements. It was hard learning, good learning, but it has a price. We discovered that the price today is economic.

So we have some difficulties, the main difficulties we have in the economy is the budget deficits. We have a big budget deficit since there was a big social pressure. So they tried to have that moment, which was a difficult moment, to manage it by increased salaries and by hiring in the administration. So we have a big salary increase for the state and we have a system of subsidies to compensate the energy price and all the elementary food and so on. During these three years, the cost was multiplied by three. So you can imagine the weight on the budget, but it was a big pressure.

No government could move and launch reforms on that trouble time. Today we are facing that. So we know that to ensure elections today but also to ensure sustainability and

durability for democracy we also have to offer the right economic ground because we can't forget that the revolution was made for jobs, for a better life. Today we can't say that after three years we can offer this, so we have to pay attention to that. In my analysis of this government and situation, the threat will not be security. The threat will not be political. It could be economical and social. We are working hard on that.

We have two kinds of measures that we took, quick measures. Because we are managing the country until the end of three years, so what we decided is really to push to quick wins, to show the people that we can realize progress. Even though we are waiting with big promises without having the dividend of the revolution, we can work together and have some dividends quickly. But to solve the problem we have to make reforms, and this government is not expected to make reforms. It's not a long-term government. It's a short-term government. The main mission is to prepare the election. But even though we are not expected to, we have to make reforms. Really we are determined as well to start the reforms. For that we will use the same means and the same way to check issues with which we succeeded in the politics —I mean the compromise and the dialogue. That's why for these big reforms, we are now involving all the parties. We are involving all the organizations, like the labor union, and the trade, and the industry community, for a dialogue for the reforms. So we have many things.

I told you about this compensation system that we have to review, and we have to review quickly. We have the reform of the banking system, because if we want to finance the economy, we have to improve that. You know the banking system in Tunisia during the last years of the previous regime was not working with the rules that are used here. There was some corruption. So we are now making an audit and launching reform, and we have to accelerate that. We decided not to hire any more people in the public administration, which was not the expectation of the people —some of whom have been waiting over these last three years for a chance to be hired in the administration— because we don't believe that it is the best way.

We know that we want to push the projected jobs and so that's why we will push as well and encourage all the private initiatives by putting in place some mechanisms to help even for individual entrepreneurship. So that's the major things that we have to do. I think

that we will not get a lot of time to rest, but be sure that we are determined to do that and that it will be made mainly by the Tunisian people.

There are two things which are important as well in this period. Personally, I am really convinced that we have to focus on that. The first is to restore the authority of the state because the revolution made some big gains, which is normal. But it's time, if we want to build something, for this to be durable and sustainable. Fortunately, we have the chance that Tunisia is a state which was built with big institution. That's why we persisted throughout the revolution without any collapse because we build a state with institution, and now we have to restore that. We have the cover of the new laws and the cover of this new constitution, but we have to do that. That's a key factor.

The second is really to motivate people to work harder because we know when we have a crisis like we have, we have to make some sacrifices and to work harder. It always happens like that. All the lessons learned from the positive experience throughout the world, Asia or anywhere, show that it's necessary to do that. But it's not enough.

We also need to cooperate. We need the support of our partners and mainly in these difficult periods and particularly from United States. You know we have a deep and historical relationship with the United States. I think that the first relationship was around 1795. So more than two centuries of relationship. We were one of the first countries recognizing the United States, and the United States was one of the first countries to recognize the independence of Tunisia. So it's a long, long, long, long-time relationship. We look forward today to strengthen this relationship.

We have an agreement. We made an agreement in 2002 of trade, the TFAP. I would like to say that we are really working and pushing to have a free trade agreement. What we are looking to do is to push and to elevate our relationship with the United States like the ones we have with Europe. You know that Europe today is our first partnership. We conduct 80 percent of our trade with Europe so we are well-trained to work with western people. I think that it's time now to push our relationship. Our wish, and we will work hard to get that, is to push our relationship to the best position with United States on the sectors of economy.

But I am here with the delegation to speak about new technology, to speak about education, to speak about security. I would like to get the support of all the people here in

the United States. I know in this room that we have many ambassadors. So please work hard, as we have to do in the government, to push all of these ideas and to step-by-step get the relationship that we are looking for with the United States.

I will not say more for the moment. Even though I did not cover all the things that you are expecting, I prefer to discuss with you in an open way so please, I'm at your disposal for all your questions.

***—Question and Answer Session—***

**Jon Alterman:** Mr. Prime Minister, thank you very much for that presentation. I'm Jon Alterman. I direct the Middle East program here. I'm also the Brzezinski chair in Global Security and Geostrategy. We are delighted to have you here. We're delighted to have you here at this moment. We are going to open up the floor to questions. I would ask three rules. One is, you identify yourself; second, that you only ask one question so that everybody has a chance; third, that you ask your question in the form of a question which is to have an actual question and not a statement and then saying what do you think of my statement. To demonstrate, perhaps I'll ask a question.

You have been on an incredible journey in Tunisia. Over the last three years you've seen tremendous change and unpredictable change in many ways. As you talk to people in Washington, what do you wish people in Washington knew about the changing politics in the Middle East, that you know because you've lived through the last years in Tunisia, but Americans don't know?

**Mehdi Jomaa:** I think what is important to know is that the area is moving. We are looking at this for a couple of years and now too. We have the new generation which is connected and open to the world. They are looking for some changes and progress, and attempting to have more freedom and to have a better life. What is happening today is that we discovered after this romantic start, and we call that the spring but it's more than a spring, it was seen maybe like a romantic story, we discovered that it's not so easy and across the region the situation is hard now.

In Tunisia, I think this experience is turning in the right direction today, after three years. What I want to say is: it is important for us to succeed, but I think it's also important for the area that the experience in Tunisia succeeds. I don't know what we can offer as perspectives to the people or to these young people. We started the changes. We started the revolution. But we would like as well now to start the process to converge to a democracy, to more freedom, but as well to more development for the people in the area, giving hope and restoring hope for the young people.

It's important as a Tunisian for me to succeed, but I know that for all of us, it's also important if we want to secure this area, if we want to avoid the big troubles, and when we speak about troubles now it's a serious problem of security. We experimented with that in other areas. Now, the problem of terrorism and security is not local. It immediately became regional and universal. It has a big meaning to succeed in Tunisia for the whole region. That's the first thing that I would like to explain.

The second is that the expectation of people is not ideology and I'm speaking mainly about the people. We tried many things. There were disputes, and this is normal. It's like a debate, but you see when we voted for the constitution, it was voted by 92 or 93 percent. It was not religious, no ideology inside of it. It was a secular constitution because that's the right aspiration of the people, and we still believe this. Maybe it's different in other countries, but it is important now to make this experience succeed and to get it to succeed, the key is economical.

**Jon Alterman:** Thank you. We have a question here.

**Josh Rogin:** Thank you very much. My name is Josh Rogin. I'm a reporter with *The Daily Beast* here in Washington. My question is: over the past three years during your country's transition, has the U.S. government and the Obama administration done enough to support your country's transition? If so, what would you say are the three top examples of that? If not, what more can be done from Washington at this point? Thank you.

**Mehdi Jomaa:** You know when you say that, I have to thank the government of President Obama for all the support they gave me because it's true. But as I have many problems and little time, I will say it's not enough for me. It's a lot from the U.S.

government, and really we have good support and good collaboration, but we are seeking and looking for more support. That's why I am here, because we know that we can expect that from the U.S. government and you are a part of this country and I feel that you are ready to give this support.

On which kind of support, I think we will start the strategic dialogue that includes all aspects of the current collaborations, so we are speaking about more economic collaboration. We are speaking about security, and we are also speaking about technology, employment, and training, so it's a large collaboration. But I should be honest that we have to thank the U.S. government for all the support, political support and many kinds of support and even security support. There were some hard times these last three years. It was not always linear, but with regard to the depth of our relationship, we can look forward for more support and more collaboration.

I think in the meantime Tunisia could be an opportunity as well for the United States. When you see the location of the Tunisia, we are in the intersection of three big areas. We have Europe. We have the Arab or Middle East area and Africa. We know that Africa and the Middle East have economic potential. Tunisia, is one, maybe, of the best areas—with the resources we have, with the link and the bridges that we create, with these three different areas, we could be the right hub to develop interest in this area. We have educated people. The level of the educated, we are at the standard of the European standard. We have people speaking English. We have people speaking French, German, Italian, Arabic and we do believe in that end.

One of the big things that we want to give to Tunisia is to give our country this position, a hub or a platform to develop our relationship with United States, and it's not a speech. Believe me. I spent a large part of my life traveling to the U.S., Europe, and this area. If we organize ourselves, if we believe in that we have the means, we have the right resources to do that, and I will work as well with our colleagues and our friends in the U.S. to develop the learning of English. I think it's important for us because the economy in Tunisia, since we have highly educated people, a lot of highly educated people, one of the orientations that we have to give is of the services, ITC, tourism, some industries. For that, we have to export to and import from larger markets and larger areas. Today, English is

mandatory in order to develop Tunisia. It does not mean that we will leave French or Arabic. No, we have to enlarge to make it richer.

There is a lot to do. We want to check the immediate problems, but we also want, through this dialogue, to really make a projection for the future. We have all the fundamental key factors to succeed and to be a platform and an opportunity for the U.S., but the U.S. is a big opportunity for us as well.

**Jon Alterman:** We have question over here on the right, yeah.

**Bill Taylor:** Bill Taylor with the United States Institute of Peace. Mr. Prime Minister, you mentioned Tunisia's success in this national dialogue run by civil society. We all recognize that Tunisia is the leading candidate for success overall for the Arab Spring and for that region, democracy in the Arab world. We would like to figure out if there is something about this national dialogue that Tunisians undertook, run by the civil society, the quartet that you mentioned, that is applicable to other countries. My question would be what was it about Tunisia that allowed that national dialogue to succeed?

**Mehdi Jomaa:** Thank you. The specificity of Tunisia, why we succeeded to find success, is because it was always through the history of Tunisia. Tunisia is moderate and even when we have such events in our history, I will say it in a simple word. It's boring for Tunisian to make revolution for a long time. When it's summer, he needs to go to the beach. He needs to go to rest at the café and believe me, it's like that. I am Tunisian and I know. To say that it's in the constitution of the Tunisian to be moderate and to take time to take adventure from life. They spent three years doing that, so it was a lot. That's in the behavior of Tunisians.

But I think it was possible because we have this civil society existing. We have this organization. The union, its historical organization, and through the history of Tunisia, each time we got through big trouble, they played a role. We have as well this organization of trade and industry which is historical and which played a role as well throughout history. We have this tradition of human right organization even when there was a dictator, they existed. They were suffering, but existing, and they were really in the

resistance. We have this institution. We have this organization and we have the state. Really what saves Tunisia from big troubles is the state. We have a tradition.

I will remind you of something. The first constitutional charter was made in 1856, or something like that, so we have a tradition. It's not new for us. We could forget it for a short time, but we have that in our history, in our tradition. You know as well that the abolition of slavery was in 1846. We have many things like that which helped us. We have roots and we know that we have like a spring gun. We cannot go so far. We are happy to go back to the right and to the middle position.

Also, just after the independence, many rules were taken like the equality between women and men. The big investment since the first year was the big investment in education and in the institution of the state, so even during the revolution, our institutions were still working, so all of that helped really to find the way.

I think that each country has its specificities, but I think that it should have an influence and we know from our neighbors that they are really looking with big interest to that. I'm not sure that they will do it in the same way, but it gave the example that the only way to solve such issues is through dialogue, and we know it. In Lebanon, they've spent 17 years. They've tried everything, but the only thing that worked was dialogue to solve the problem. So I think it will have an influence and we would like to serve as an example, but I remind you that we are not looking to export anything. The only thing that we want to export is our products, our knowledge, and our services.

**Jon Alterman:** That's a date in wine advertisement. I have a question here and then I have some over here.

**Steve McInerney:** I'm Steve McInerney with the Project on Middle East Democracy. You mentioned that your government in Tunisia, your caretaker government that you're now leading is not expected to undertake reforms, but despite that, you will undertake reforms. This is very important. Could you say a little bit more about which priorities in terms of reform your caretaker government will focus on? There are lots of reforms needed in Tunisia. You mentioned some economic reform. In addition, it's important to see serious reform of the security sector not only building its capacity, but also serious

reform of that sector, also the judiciary. If you can say a little bit more about what priorities your government will have during this period in terms of reform and also which kinds of reform do you see the international community, outside actors including the United States, being able to play a constructive role in supporting and enabling you to take these important steps?

*Mehdi Jomaa: I think you asked a lot of questions. If you want me to answer all of that, I will switch in French. You have the choice.*

*Jon Alterman: We paid for the translator.*

*Mehdi Jomaa: Okay. You paid him?*

*Jon Alterman: Yeah.*

*Mehdi Jomaa: You have to negotiate. You negotiate the price. I will consider in English to negotiate a good price.*

*Jon Alterman: Great business opportunities in Tunisia.*

**Mehdi Jomaa:** I said we were not expected to make reform, but we have to do. I did not say we will not do. We have to do. It was not expected because it's a short time. The reforms, I told you, include subsidies, to stop hiring in the administration, and the banking system. We have to reform it, the physicality, because one of the problems that we had after the revolution is the increase of trafficking, so we have to reduce that. It's a non-formal sector which has been created. We have to control our border for security as well as for economy. That's four or five major things that we have to start today.

Also, we have to simplify things for investors. Tunisia is an open land for investments and the Europeans know that very, very well. Even during these three troubling years, they still continue to invest in Tunisia because they know that. It's easier than anywhere and I explained the position of Tunisia and the skilled resources and competitiveness resources allows and attracts a lot of investors.

But now, we want to diversify and to open Tunisia to more investors. That's one of the reasons of my travel to the Gulf, to attract and to encourage and to market the possibilities of Tunisia as well one of the aims of my travel here. We will meet my companions with business women and men. And I will have the opportunity and the pleasure to meet investors. For that, we have to adapt our service to the different mind and

the different way to make business. The main thing that we have to push in the springtime is to simplify, again, more and more the administrative approaches.

For example, we are looking to set up a one-stop shop. We know the bigger the administration is and the stronger it is, the more laws they make because in their mind, they want to control things, but for business and for investors, it's constraints. If we can succeed to set up the company and to start working in one day, it's important for us. It's not the same approach for the administration, so we have to push to have that election. That's the main feature. Make it easier for a new investor who don't know the country to get and to create and to invest and check these four big points and to push for more private initiatives and activities and to restrict the role of the state in these new developments and in big projects like infrastructure. And even for infrastructure, we will push for a private-public partnership, the three Ps.

**Jon Alterman:** Mister Prime Minister, we have two questions and two minutes.

**Capital Intel:** Mister Prime Minister, Capital Intel, I set up shop two-and-a-half years ago in Tunisia because I see Tunisia as the best growth market, probably the best growth market in the world. You have these American investors like Honeywell, General Electric, FedEx possibly and other people. You have a center of renewables. You have liberty. You have oil and gas, Anadarko and VNI. On your trip, you're going to the chamber of commerce later, you are meeting with the President. Will you be announcing deals at this point on your trip and what deals do you expect to announce? I mean Tunisia is doing very well.

**Jon Alterman:** That's one question. The second question right here, sir?

**Dan O'Flaherty:** Thank you. I'm Dan O'Flaherty at the National Foreign Trade Council. One of the key decisions the constituent assembly had to make was whether Tunisia would have a parliamentary system or a presidential system. You seemed to have come out with something resembling the Fifth Republic. How would you describe the division of power in the new constitution between the president and the prime minister?

**Mehdi Jomaa:** Okay. I will start to answer your [Capital Intel representative] question. It's easier. First, I think you haven't visited Tunisia for two-years-and-a-half. It's a lot. You have to come back. You're invited. I think if you want me to make announcement, we have to develop it together. No, I will not make any announcement. I have a business background and I have a rule. I did not announce something which is not already done. I know with the press who are with me, they will get some frustration, but it's the training. It's not a long period. It will change after, but you have to prepare yourself for that. I was in the Gulf countries and everyone was expecting a big announcement. I did not make one. I'm sorry, but it's my way of doing things.

[Responding to question by Dan O'Flaherty] For the kind of the regime that we have, the organization that we have, it was more parliamentary, but with more balanced shared with the president than what is done now in this transitional period. There was a long debate, that's why they took longer than expected. There were many arguments for myself. I don't have to express any opinion because it's voted on. It's in the constitutions and I will just apply.

**Jon Alterman:** I want to thank you all for coming. Please join me in thanking Prime Minister Mehdi Jomaa.

**Mehdi Jomaa:** Pardon, I forget something. I prefer to, instead of speaking about the Arab spring when I speak about Tunisia, I prefer to express it differently. For me, Tunisia is a democracy startup and like any startup, you have to believe in it, you have to take the risk, and you have to invest. I think now is the best moment to invest in this democracy startup. All of you are invited to invest in that, to help this startup, and I'm sure that the growth of the startup will be quick and big and all of us will take the dividend from this. Thank you very much.

**Jon Alterman:** Thank you very much. Thank you, Mr. Prime Minister.

[End of Transcript]