



# PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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## "U.S. Chamber of Commerce: Tunisian Ministerial Meeting"

U.S. Chamber of Commerce  
1615 H St., Washington D.C., 20062  
Thursday September 22, 2011, 3:00pm-4:30pm

On Thursday, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce hosted several Tunisian Ministers to discuss the future of U.S.-Tunisian relations and cooperation. **Mr. Lionel Johnson**, Vice President of Middle East and North Africa Affairs at the US Chamber of Commerce moderated the discussion and expressed his pleasure at the increase of Middle East and North Africa region events recently due to the Arab Spring.

Tunisian Ambassador **Mohamed Salah Tekaya** briefly discussed the importance of strengthening bilateral relations between the US and Tunisia. Ambassador Tekaya mentioned the need for Tunisian youth to actively participate in this effort and commended the **Tunisian American Young Professionals (TAYP)** organization and their President **Mohamed Malouche** for their efforts as a diaspora organization.

Minister of Finance **Jalloul Ayed** began by mentioning important points in Tunisia's history, notably the Carthaginian Empire. These comments were made to display the potential Tunisia has and the heights it has attained throughout history as a respected nation. This point was used as a spring board for his discourse. He stated that "[Tunisia] is under a magnifying glass every day" referring to the scrutiny from observers around the world awaiting post revolution developments, particularly with the upcoming October 23, 2011 National Constituent Assembly elections. Ayed **emphasized the importance of transition and consolidation of democracy, which to him is the first step.**

Ayed then discussed the Tunisia economy and job market. He likened the economic problems of Tunisia to those faced by the US. "**We have virtually the same problems, but on a different scale,**" he said - referring to the \$405 billion job plan announced by President Obama early this week, in comparison to the much smaller budget that Tunisia is limited to. He added that it is not only a problem of money, but also of resources that potential workers need in Tunisia. These issues are **addressed in the 'Jasmine social and economic plan' presented in Tunis by Ambassador Ayed early this week.** The 'Jasmine' plan also addresses new regulations for private entities, micro financing (loans) and other reforms to ease business in Tunisia and create jobs.

Ambassador Ayed then pointed out that the new "investment vehicles" used by Tunisia are based on US entity plans and aimed at easing doing business in Tunisia. **Ayed emphasized the importance of Tunisia's private sector and how it should be the main engine for economic growth,** as private sector specialists are the most knowledgeable and well-connected when it comes to money and investment. Government can only go so far in its pursuit for investments, whereas private sector specialists can be tasked with these international ventures.

Mr. Ayed stated **the need to give entrepreneurs the freedom to grow that hadn't been given during the former regime.** He guaranteed that the government will be active in facilitating this growth and ensuring this freedom, by providing funds and framework for private equity.

The Minister then transitioned and stressed the push to eradicate corruption from the Tunisian government. Removing the corruption that marred Tunisia under the former regime would serve to create a vibrant Tunisia that would appeal to outsiders. **Ambassador Ayed closed his discourse by bringing up Tunisia's central location and the possibility of Tunisia becoming a main hub in the region.** He talked about Tunisia's importance as **a role model for other countries affected by the Arab Spring.** He also focused on Tunisia's humanitarian effort towards Libya, recalling a Libyan NTC official who declared that "without the help from Tunisians, the Libyans would not be in a democratic transition now." He **concluded by stating that Tunisia still faces an uphill democratic transition, however Tunisia is in far better shape than other countries** since Tunisia has the infrastructure and institutes readily available for a transition. Tunisia has a **strong civil society that will continue to push for democratization until it is achieved.**

Minister of Planning and International Cooperation **Abdelhamid Triki** then spoke very briefly, mainly pointing at the need to ease international enterprise entry into Tunisia. He declared the importance of incentivizing market entry for International entities to Tunisia. Next, the Minister of Labor & Professional Training **Said Aydi**, who was not slated to attend, spoke briefly. Aydi touched on the staggering unemployment rate that is a main focus of the interim government, and mentioned the work being done with American organizations towards education in Tunisia. He announced that a focus is being put on language skills as well as IT skills, hinting at official education partnerships with the US in the near future. Aydi also **described how Tunisian-Libyan relations are essential for the democratic transition.**

In attendance were representatives from the Department of Commerce, the president and representatives from the Tunisian American Young Professionals, international trade law professors and specialists, World Bank senior advisors and economists (Tunisia), Tunisian embassy representatives, a representative from Project on Middle East Democracy, and fidelity investment organizations, amongst others.