



NATIONAL U.S.-ARAB CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

غرفة التجارة الأمريكية العربية الوطنية

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U.S. – ARAB CHAMBER HOSTS TUNISIA'S MINISTERS OF FINANCE AND TOURISM

Historic Visit of Tunisian President Takes U.S. – Tunisia Partnership to New Levels

Obama's Business Message: Ordinary Tunisians Need to "Feel the Concrete Benefits of Change to a More Open and Competitive Economy"

Washington, DC – Late last week, the National U.S. – Arab Chamber of Commerce (NUSACC), in partnership with the Embassy of the Republic of Tunisia, co-hosted two of Tunisia's recently appointed ministers: H.E. Slim Chaker, Minister of Finance, and H.E. Salma Elloumi Rekik, Minister of Tourism and Handicrafts. The luncheon took place at the Willard InterContinental Hotel, just steps from the White House, where President Barack Obama held a historic meeting with Tunisia's President, H.E. Béji Caïd Essebsi. This was the



H.E. Slim Chaker, Tunisian Minister of Finance: Tunisia is undergoing a transition to a "modern, open society that is attractive to investors."

first meeting of democratically-elected Presidents in the 220-year history of the two nations.

Tunisia, birthplace of the Arab Spring, is the only country in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region to transition successfully in recent years from an autocratic regime to a fledgling democracy. This has not been a seamless or painless transition, but Tunisia today is blazing its own trail, one that Tunisia hopes will serve as an example for other nations in the region.

In the short-term and medium-term, Tunisia is putting all of its energies into overhauling its economy to attract foreign direct investment (FDI). This was the focus of a recent [Investment and Entrepreneurship Conference](#) – supported by NUSACC – that took place in Tunis two months ago.



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The luncheon in DC highlighted another important feature: Participation by four Tunisian Members of Parliament who were invited to Washington DC by President Essebsi. These included H.E. Riadh Mouakhar (Afek party), H.E. Ali Bellakhoua (UPL party), H.E. Oussama Seghaier (Ennahdha party), and H.E. Wafa Sayadi Makhoulouf (Nida Tounes) – one of 68 women parliamentarians in Tunisia.



H.E. Salma Elloumi Rekik, Tunisian Minister of Tourism and Handicrafts: Tunisia is pursuing cultural tourism, eco-tourism, and medical tourism, to name just a few.

American Small & Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs). The success of this economic relationship may ultimately depend on American and Tunisian SMEs – which speak the same language and face the same challenges – and their ability to form partnerships.”

Sponsors of the luncheon included [Mandala Research](#), which provides market research for tourism and hospitality entities, and [Sam's Tech](#), one of Tunisia's leading providers of IT solutions for SMEs – and a regular participant in NUSACC's annual [High Tech Road Show](#).

Ministry of Finance

[Minister Chaker](#), with over 30 years of public service in Tunisia, hailed the White House meeting as an important first step in America's relationship with its “newest democracy and newest ally.”

Tunisia has always been on the cutting edge of civil society, Chaker said, with its “strong commitment to women's rights, education, and the middle class.” Now, he noted, Tunisia is undergoing a transition to a “modern, open society that is attractive to investors.”



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“Tunisia today is working on reforms that will make your lives, as investors, even easier,” Chaker offered. He highlighted eight important laws that are being overhauled: taxation, customs, public / private partnerships, investment, competitiveness, bankruptcy, and two banking laws. The proposed bankruptcy law is especially important to entrepreneurs and SMEs in Tunisia, who are reluctant to take risks if failure translates into prison time.

These laws are “50 percent finalized,” Chaker suggested. Glancing at the four Tunisian parliamentarians in the audience, he quipped, “The rest is up to the Parliament.” He also highlighted the importance of support from the U.S. Government and such multilaterals as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

Partnerships with U.S. companies are especially important, Chaker noted, because of best business practices and the message that U.S. investment in Tunisia will send to other nations. Tunisia’s “old models” for the economy are no longer applicable, he suggested,



Some of the VIPs who attended the luncheon included: H.E. Slim Chaker, Minister of Finance; H.E. Salma Elloumi Rekik, Minister of Tourism and Handicrafts; 4 Tunisian parliamentarians; Mrs. Hanène Tajouri Bessassi, Minister Counselor from the Embassy of Tunisia; Hon. Gordon Gray, former U.S. Ambassador to Tunisia; Hon. Mark Begich, former U.S. Senator from Alaska; Ms. Iman Awad, representing the Governor of Maryland; Ms. Laura Mandala, sponsor; and two U.S. Commerce Department officials -- Ms. Kelly Craighead, Executive Director of the National Travel & Tourism Office, and Mr. Christian Reed, Executive Director of the Office of the Middle East and Africa.



pointing to “new models” that focus on technology, added value, and products that contain a higher Tunisian content.

In his concluding remarks, Chaker suggested that Tunisia today faces three interconnected challenges: How to reinforce its young democracy, how to strengthen the economy, and how to reduce poverty and create jobs. Bringing U.S. investment to Tunisia, he concluded, will help to surmount all three of these challenges.



David Hamod, NUSACC President & CEO: "American and Tunisian SMEs speak the same language and face the same challenges."

Ministry of Tourism & Handicrafts

[H.E. Salma Elloumi Rekik](#), recently appointed as Minister of Tourism & Handicrafts, brings many years of business experience to her new position. This was apparent at the outset of her remarks, when she reeled off a series of facts & figures about Tunisia’s economy:

- Tourism makes up seven percent of the nation’s Gross Domestic Product, responsible for 400,000 jobs.
- Handicrafts in Tunisia generate 300,000 jobs.
- Tunisia boasts more than 40,000 archeological sites and over 150 museums, only 47 of which are currently in operation.
- The world’s three great monotheistic religions have always been at home in Tunisia, a 3,000-year-old civilization.
- Tunisia is a nexus of Byzantine, African, and uniquely Tunisian cultures.

Like Minister Chaker, Minister Elloumi Rekik stated that the old economic models in Tunisia no longer apply. With this in mind, she said, Tunisia is now focused on:

- 1) Quality, whether that be for products or services;
- 2) Rebuilding Tunisia’s image, especially in the aftermath of the recent attack at the world-famous Bardo National Museum;
- 3) Diversifying Tunisia’s offerings away from a “beach culture” dominated by low-end tourists from Europe.



Instead of focusing on a beach clientele that comes to Tunisia only four months out of the year, she suggested, Tunisia today is exploring alternative tourism offerings, including cultural tourism, eco-tourism, and medical tourism, to name just a few. (Tunisia is #2 in the world in thalassotherapy, for example, behind only France – where thalassotherapy is said to have originated.)

In her concluding remarks, Elloumi Rekik said she looks forward to welcoming high-end hotel chains to Tunisia, like the Four Seasons and the Ritz-Carlton, which are said to be in negotiations to open properties in Tunisia in coming years.



H.E. Ali Bellakhoua, Tunisian Member of Parliament, offered remarks on behalf of the four Members of Parliament at the luncheon.

A Landmark Visit to the White House

On May 21, Hon. Barack Obama – one of the world’s youngest presidents – hosted H.E. Béji Caïd Essebsi, one of the world’s oldest presidents. Despite an age difference of 35 years, the two Heads of State clearly saw eye-to-eye.

Obama and his cabinet have been very attentive to Tunisia, recognizing Tunisia’s outsized geostrategic importance as the only Arab nation to emerge from the Arab Spring as a functioning democracy. With that in mind, the U.S. Government has been keen to send a clear message about U.S. support for the youngest government in the MENA region and Africa.

During the White House meeting, Obama lauded Tunisia’s success in “allowing all parties and all parts of the population, including women and minorities, to be included in the governing process.” In a joint op-ed published in *The Washington Post* that same day, the two presidents noted:

Our two nations now have an unprecedented opportunity to forge an enduring partnership based on shared interests and values. Since the revolution, the United States has committed more than \$570 million, and supported two major loan guarantees, to help Tunisians pursue critical political, economic and security reforms . . . This is not charity; it’s a smart investment in our shared future.



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Perhaps the most tangible deliverable of the White House meeting was Obama's commitment to name Tunisia a major non-NATO ally, which clears the way for Tunisia to receive more – and more sophisticated – military assistance.

Since the revolution, according to *USA Today*, the United States has provided about \$570 million to Tunisia, including about \$300 million in economic aid, \$175 million in military aid and \$80 million for democracy-building. During the White House meeting with Essebsi, Obama pledged another \$134 million for next year. In addition, according to *Voice of America*, the White House said the United States would offer up to \$500 million in loan guarantees to Tunisia, if needed, for economic reforms.

"At this critical time in world history," Obama said, "we think it's very important for us to continue to expand the economic assistance that we're providing so that ordinary Tunisians can feel the concrete benefits of a change to a more open and competitive economy."

Tunisia's reforms are "almost midway," Essebsi noted. "This year we'll finalize other reforms, the objective of which is to reform the economy but also send a message to the world that Tunisia is a favorable place for investment and growth."

"We need the U.S., and maybe the U.S. needs Tunisia now," Essebsi concluded during the Oval Office meeting.

Pritzker Roundtable at Blair House

President Essebsi met with a number of Members of Congress and senior Administration officials during his visit to Washington, including Vice President Joe Biden, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, and U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Jack Lew.

Particularly meaningful from a business point of view was a roundtable discussion organized for Essebsi and his entourage at Blair House by U.S. Secretary of Commerce Penny Pritzker. About a dozen business executives were invited to attend the session, including George



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Ambassador Shaun Donnelly, Vice President at the U.S. Council for International Business, introduced Her Excellency Salma Elloumi Rekek.

Soros, Chairman of Soros Fund Management, Chris Nassetta, CEO of Hilton Worldwide, and General David Petraeus, Chairman of the KKR Global Institute.

“Tunisia is of great geopolitical significance to our government, but the private sector makes decisions based on their assessment of where they will get the best return on investment,” Pritzker said. “These investors need to understand Tunisia’s business plan, including your long-term approach to security and your sense of which industries or sectors will become backbones of Tunisia’s prosperity for the long run.”

To the U.S. business leaders, Pritzker said, “President Caid Essebsi and his team want to hear from you. They want to know what it typically

takes to attract your business to a challenging market and what, specifically, it will take to draw you to Tunisia. And, if you are already engaged in Tunisia, they want to understand what obstacles you face on the ground and what challenges inhibit further investments.”

Concluding Words

H.E. Fayçal Gouia, Tunisia’s new Ambassador to the United States, expressed appreciation to NUSACC for co-hosting the luncheon for the two ministers and four Members of Parliament. He said, “The National U.S. - Arab Chamber of Commerce has been a consistent, reliable friend of the Republic of Tunisia for many years, and today’s luncheon was the most recent manifestation of NUSACC’s unwavering support for Tunisia. As newly-appointed Ambassador to the United States, I look forward to many more opportunities, working with NUSACC, to strengthen Tunisia - U.S. relations in the fields of investment, tourism, partnership, trade and finance.”



Christian Reed, Executive Director of the Office of the Middle East and Africa at the U.S. Department of Commerce, introduced H.E. Slim Chaker.



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The final word, of course, goes to Presidents Obama and Essebsi. In their op-ed piece in *The Washington Post*, they concluded:

After decades of dictatorship and several years of transition, Tunisians have won their freedom and democracy. There are still many big days ahead as Tunisians strive to deliver the dignity, opportunity and prosperity sought by a young vendor more than four years ago. It won't be easy. But as Tunisians seek to build the Arab world's newest democracy, they will continue to have a strong friend and partner in the world's oldest democracy, the United States of America.



A roundtable discussion was organized for President Essebsi (second from right) and his entourage at Blair House by U.S. Secretary of Commerce Penny Pritzker (third from left).

Photo courtesy: Getty Images, Mandel Ngan

The National U.S.-Arab Chamber of Commerce, widely regarded as the voice of American business in the Arab world, is in touch with business communities across THE United States and serves as the U.S. point of contact for the national chambers of commerce in the 22 Arab nations. On a daily basis, NUSACC works closely with leaders throughout the Arab world, as well as high-level decision makers in the U.S. business community, public policy research centers, multilateral institutions, nongovernmental organizations, media, and the U.S. Government.

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