

Administration of Barack Obama, 2011

Remarks Following a Meeting With Prime Minister Beji Caid Essebsi of Tunisia and an Exchange With Reporters

October 7, 2011

President Obama. Well, it is my great pleasure to welcome Prime Minister Caid Essebsi here to the Oval Office.

As I think all of you know, Tunisia was the first country in the North African-Middle East region to begin this incredible transformation that we now call the Arab Spring. The movement that began with one street vendor protesting and taking his life in response to a government that had not been responsive to human rights set off a transformation in Tunisia that has now spread to countries throughout the region. As a result, Tunisia has been an inspiration to all of us who believe that each individual, man and woman, has certain inalienable rights, and that those rights must be recognized in a government that is responsive, is democratic, in which free and fair elections can take place, and in which the rights of minorities are protected.

We are deeply encouraged by the progress that's already been made in this short period of time. In part, because of the extraordinary leadership of the Prime Minister, what we've seen is a orderly process that includes constituent assembly elections this month, that will include the writing of a constitution and fair and free elections both for a new parliament and a new president.

So given that Tunisia was the first country to undergo the transformation we know as the Arab Spring, and given it is now the first to have elections, we thought it was appropriate that Tunisia would be the first to visit the White House.

The Prime Minister and I had an excellent discussion about both the opportunities and the challenges that Tunisia face going forward and how the United States can be a helpful partner in that process. In particular, we discussed the importance of having a economic transformation that has taken place alongside the political transformation.

The United States has an enormous stake in seeing the success in Tunisia and the creation of greater opportunity and more business investment in Tunisia. And so in addition to the \$39 million that we have already provided in assistance to Tunisia as they make this transformation, we discussed a package that includes loan guarantees, assistance in encouraging trade and foreign investment, a whole range of support programs that will allow Tunisia to create a greater business investment, offer more opportunities for employment to its young people, and further integrate it into the world marketplace.

We also discussed issues regarding the transformation that has taken place in the region as a whole. And I expressed my great admiration and appreciation for the Libyan—for the Tunisian people in the hospitality and kindness that they showed to Libyan refugees during the tumultuous period that has taken place in Libya over the last several months.

Let me just close by pointing out that Tunisia is one of our oldest friends in the world. Tunisia was one of the first countries to recognize the United States of America over 200 years ago. One of the first trade agreements that we had as a country was with Tunisia. And so I told the Prime Minister that thanks to his leadership, thanks to the extraordinary transformation that's taking place in Tunisia and the courage of its people, I'm confident that we will have at least another two centuries of friendship between our two countries. And the American people

will stand by the people of Tunisia in any way that we can during this remarkable period in Tunisian history.

Prime Minister Caid Essebsi. What could I add? I entirely agree with everything that the President said. But first and foremost, I'm very grateful, first of all, for having been invited by President Obama.

I came here to convey the great satisfaction, the great gratitude of the Tunisian people for the constant support that he provided to the change in the revolution that took place in Tunisia. And in fact, he was the very first person to applaud, to congratulate the change that took place in our country on the 14th of January. And this change, this support, I believe is irreversible. I came here to express to him my personal esteem for him, because he was the first to truly understand the depth, the importance of the changes that were occurring in Tunisia, and also the importance for the entire region.

You spoke about the Arab Spring, but up until now the Arab Spring is only really the "Tunisian Spring." So what I do hope is that this—our spring will not limit itself exclusively to Tunisia, and that it will spread throughout the region, and that, of course, it depends for large part on the economic and political success of Tunisia.

And I'm confident in the success of this process, thanks to the support expressed by President Obama today. And I told him that the longstanding and privileged relations that exist between the United States and Tunisia will not last merely for 200 years, but hopefully, until eternity.

The President mentioned the fact that Tunisia was one of the very first countries to recognize the independence of the United States. I also reminded him of the fact that the United States was also one of the very first countries to recognize the independence of Tunisia.

At any rate, at the end of this visit I would like to reiterate my thanks to President Obama and assure him that in Tunisia he will always find a credible and sincere friend.

President Obama. Thank you, everybody.

2011 Nobel Peace Prize Recipients

Q. Mr. President, the women who won the Nobel today, any reaction?

President Obama. The three women who won the Nobel Prize today are all remarkable examples of not only their own determination and spirit, but also a reminder that when we empower women around the world, then everyone is better off, that the countries and cultures that respect the contributions of women inevitably end up being more successful than those that don't. All right?

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:32 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to 2011 Nobel Peace Prize recipients President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia, Liberian peace activist Leymah Gbowee, and Yemeni human rights activist Tawakkul Karman. Prime Minister Caid Essebsi spoke in French, and his remarks were translated by an interpreter.

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Names: Caid Essebsi, Beji; Gbowee, Leymah; Johnson Sirleaf, Ellen; Karman, Tawakkul.

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