

Administration of Barack Obama, 2015

Remarks Following a Meeting With President Beji Caid Essebsi of Tunisia
May 21, 2015

President Obama. It is a great pleasure to welcome back President Caid Essebsi to the Oval Office. We had the opportunity to meet early in the aftermath of the political transition that had begun in Tunisia. And it was very gratifying to hear about the excellent progress that's been made in Tunisia's transformation into an inclusive and functioning democracy.

It is important to recognize that the place where the Arab Spring began is the place where we have seen the most extraordinary progress in allowing all parties and all parts of the population, including women and minorities, participate fully in the civic and political life of the nation. And it bodes well for Tunisia's future and for the future of its children. And I emphasized to the President that the United States is fully committed to working with Tunisia so that it can continue to build on this success.

The friendship between the United States and Tunisia dates back centuries. But at this critical time in world history, 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. I committed to continuing to work to expand the education scholarship and exchange programs that have already been established between our two countries so that young Tunisians can continue to access the skills they need to get good jobs and compete in the international economy.

We discussed the importance of security and the recognition that, given the instability in the region, it is important for us to continue to partner effectively in counterterrorism efforts, but also in our efforts to stabilize Libya and bring the parties together so that we don't have a failed state and a power vacuum that ends up infecting the situation in Tunisia as well.

And in recognition of the importance that we place on the security and diplomatic relationship with Tunisia, I indicated to the President my intention to designate Tunisia as a major non-NATO ally of the United States. And I committed that as Tunisia continues to embark on important structural reforms to the economy that we will not only provide short-term aid, but also try to provide the kind of bridge and support that's necessary to complete those reforms and make sure that they're effective and benefiting the people of Tunisia.

So overall, this was an excellent discussion, but it was reflective of what had been ongoing consultations and a lot of work by our diplomatic and military and economic and intelligence teams during the course of this incredible transformation of Tunisia. And I want the President and the people of Tunisia to know that the United States believes in Tunisia, is invested in its success, and will work as a steady partner for years to come.

President Caid Essebsi. I have little to add to what Mr. President have kindly said. In this meeting, we have discussed all issues related to Tunisia-U.S. cooperation, in all fields. And I felt that there is the opportunity to continue this support to ensure the success of the democratic choice that Tunisia has opted for.

However important the milestone that Tunisia has reached in the democratic process, we are still in midway. The—we have a long way ahead of us. To reach the conclusion of the democratic system and the final consolidation of this system, still—there is still a lot to be done.

The democratic process is always fragile, vulnerable, and threatened by chaos, by parties that do not believe in democracy, that do not espouse democratic policies and discourse, but also by our regional environment, which could represent a threat to the democratic process.

Fortunately, the Tunisian people are very much aware about the importance of the gains it has acquired and about protecting these gains and continuing to work to ensure success.

We have a process of reforms that is underway. We have achieved a milestone in implementing these reforms. In—we are almost midway. We are committed to these reforms, and within this year, we are going to finalize all the reforms that we need to implement. The objective is to reform the economy, but also to send a potent message to the world, to investors, and to tell them that Tunisia is a favorable site for investment and for growth.

Mr. President Obama has underscored during our discussion his faith in Tunisia and his belief in Tunisia's chances for success. We, too, in Tunisia have trust in the friendship of the U.S. and with the longstanding history and the friendship between the two countries. We are integrating a new phase, a new chapter in our bilateral relations, and we need the support of the U.S., and maybe, the U.S. needs Tunisia too now. *Merci*.

President Obama. Merci beaucoup. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:40 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. President Caid Essebsi spoke in Arabic, and his remarks were translated by an interpreter.

Categories: Meetings With Foreign Leaders and International Officials : Tunisia, President Caid Essebsi.

Names: Caid Essebsi, Beji.

Subjects: Libya : International diplomatic efforts; Tunisia : Counterterrorism efforts, cooperation with U.S.; Tunisia : Democracy efforts; Tunisia : Economic growth and development; Tunisia : Educational exchanges with U.S.; Tunisia : President; Tunisia : Relations with U.S.; Tunisia : Security cooperation with U.S.; Tunisia : Women's rights.

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