

Your Excellency Mohamed Salah Tekaya, Ambassador of Tunisia to the United States

Your Excellency Ghazi Jomaa, Ambassador of Tunisia to the United Nations

Your Excellency Ambassador Salah Bourjini

Honorable Diplomats and Defense Attaché

Mr. Sami Guedoir, Advisory Board Chairman of the Tunisian Community Center

Mr. Ali Khemili, Executive Director of the Tunisian Community Center

Members of the Tunisian Community Center

Distinguished Guests

It is a privilege for me this evening to be the guest of honor and keynote speaker at the 2011 annual Ibn Khaldun Award Hafla, and I would like to thank Mr. Guedoir for his kind invitation. This year's event is a special one and I am so pleased to join you for the commemoration of the Tunisian revolution and the celebration of our people's inspiration towards freedom, democracy and a better future.

Before I proceed with my speech, I would like to warn you about something which I am used to mentioning to my students: I speak a few languages but all of them with a foreign accent, including my mother tongue. I left Tunisia 33 years ago; now when I visit there and speak Arabic, some people ask me what country I come from! So for the duration of this speech, please bear with my foreign accent.

It is so nice for me to visit again the United States. I was last here this past summer as Faculty Guest at Harvard Business School. But my first visit to the US goes back to 1981 when I enrolled as Ph.D. student at New York University Stern School of Business. Then in 1984, I joined Indiana University as Assistant Professor. I thought at the time that if I can survive the cultural shock of going from Manhattan to Bloomington (Indiana), then I should be able to make it anywhere in the world! And here I am today; so I guess I survived it...

It is with humility that I stand here to share with you some thoughts inspired by the Tunisian revolution. I shall talk about two of the root causes of this revolution: the high number of jobless graduates and the uneven regional development of the country which led to social injustice. I'll then conclude with some suggestions regarding the contribution that the Tunisian Diaspora can make to our-post revolutionary country.

Let me start with **education**. Although the Tunisian uprising was ignited on December 17th 2010 by Mohamed Bouazizi in the remote city of Sidi Bouzid, it subsequently spread all over the country involving hundreds of thousands of jobless youngsters, many of whom were university graduates. It was a revolution for dignity, freedom and democracy.

Reflecting on higher education and employability, I was reminded of my own studies at the University of Tunis in the late 1970s. At that time, I was one of only 17,000 students in the country. The Government directed high-school leavers to the various study fields at university as to match, upon graduation, students' skills with the job market needs. Although this approach (known as "le système d'orientation après le baccalauréat") made sense, it did not fully deliver on its promises. Fundamentally, the problem was that the country created many more university graduates than jobs, thus the very high unemployment rate of over 30% among university graduates (including doctors, engineers, lawyers, etc.).

As a university professor, I believe that one of the causes of the high unemployment rate in Tunisia is that students have a mono-dimensional education with limited competencies, restricted avenue of employment, and little job mobility. In essence, there is quite often a mismatch between graduates' skills and recruiters' needs. Moreover, the rapidly growing university population which has in Tunisia mushroomed to about 350,000 students today did not always have a commensurate development in a quality infrastructure and fully-qualified faculty. Although over the past decade, our country had an average GDP growth of approximately 5% per year, it couldn't create a corresponding number of jobs to match the expansion of the university population. Moreover, the gap has been widening between the quantity of graduates and the quality of their skills and competencies.

Historically, the Government has been at the center of job creation. Such a role could not be sustained, and graduates need now more than ever before to rely less on the public sector and more on themselves. After all, the private sector and in particular small-and-medium-size enterprises, is the engine of entrepreneurship. In order to help create new generations of entrepreneurs, universities need to be revitalized to involve students in action-learning. They should also enable them to develop entrepreneurial skills and the talent they so desperately need to compete in a rapidly changing and increasingly global labor market. As Benjamin Franklin once said "Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn".

New educational programs and initiatives need to emphasize cross-disciplinary learning, hands-on experience, international exchanges with leading centers of knowledge, and entrepreneurial initiatives. The latter exposes learners to best practices, to interact with diverse cultures, and will help to remove the silo mentality that has existed for decades. A strong partnership between university, Government and industry is another way to ensure that there is a supporting eco-system fostering job creation and self-employment. By so doing, higher education graduates would be more marketable and better equipped to use their talent and knowledge in a more rewarding and lasting job, thus creating value for themselves and the country's economy.

I insisted on education not because it is my profession but because it is widely acknowledged as the key to a sustainable socio-economic development. As Paul Krugman, the recipient of the 2008 Nobel Prize in economics said "If you had to explain America's economic success with one word, that word would be education".

I would like now to say a few words about possible ways to foster **regional development** in Tunisia.

As an educator and researcher in the field of information and communication technologies, I am deeply convinced about the strategic role that innovation and technology can play and the major contribution they can make to regional development and national competitiveness. Technology should not be seen as just a tool but rather as a catalyst for change and an enabler for value creation.

Public-private partnerships (or PPP) represent a powerful mechanism to foster regional development. I don't think that our country is leveraging enough this important concept. PPPs can obviously take different forms and have different objectives. Let me just illustrate it through an example from Kenya, where I recently did a study on the use of mobile phones for online financial services (such as payments, remittances, international money transfers, mobile banking, insurance, etc.). Safaricom, Kenya's incumbent telecom operator, partnered with Vodafone, to create what has become today the world's largest technology platform for online financial services. The system, called M-PESA, brought on board the financially-excluded in society, including small farmers, micro-enterprises and people living in remote areas of the country. It allowed them to transfer money without having to lose half a day's

work or more to go to a bank. The system was as fast as sending a text message or email. The access to this technology revolutionized money transfer for poorer people in the community. It has today more than 12 million users in Kenya and the system has been exported to other countries!

This is just one recent example of a successful private-public partnership in sub-Saharan Africa. There are other means, such as micro-credit, to create economic and social development at the bottom of the pyramid. Examples here include the pioneering work in Bangladesh of the Grameen Bank founded by Dr. Muhammad Yunus, the recipient of the 2006 Nobel peace prize. This mechanism has been in use now for over 30 years lending micro-credits (averaging \$200 per loan) to poor people in society (90% of them being women), helping them to successfully launch small businesses. Such financial support provides each individual an independent opportunity to live a decent life and thus serves to advance democracy and human rights.

Besides Public Private Partnerships, another powerful concept that could help regional development is CSR. This should not just mean « corporate social responsibility » but should be extended to corporate regional responsibility. Let me try to illustrate these two meanings. I'll first start with an example of CSR (or “entreprise citoyenne”) from a company I am very familiar with: the mobile telecom operator Tunisiana where I have been serving since this past February as Chairman of the Board of Directors.

As you recall, right after the ousting of Tunisia's former President this year on January 14th and over several days, people in Tunisia were very frightened by the insecurity and looting that were taking place in the country. Recognizing that in this critical period, people needed to call their dear ones and check on their safety but knowing that a lot of them would have run out of airtime and could not, because of the curfew, go out to buy calling cards, Tunisiana decided to offer free of charge to each user of its mobile telephone service one Dinar of airtime per day for a period of a five days, from January 14th through January 19th. Tunisiana was the first telecom operator in the country to take such action which cost a total of 25 million Tunisian dinars (about 18 million US dollars). This CSR action was highly appreciated by millions of users.

An example of corporate regional responsibility is putting in place a spin-off strategy (or “une stratégie d’essaimage”) which enables employees who want to start a business, especially in the less-developed regions of the country, to be helped with 30,000 dinars (about 22,000 US\$) and to be given leave of absence for up to three years. In case the new venture does not take off, the employee can return to the company and resume his or her position there. I believe that actions like these can go a long way in fostering the socio-economic development of the regions of Tunisia that were left behind by the previous regime.

Another promising avenue for regional development is outsourcing and offshoring, be it of services or manufacturing. To succeed here, large Tunisian companies should move some of their activities or back-office operations from the capital city to the interior of the country. We cannot reasonably hope that European and American companies outsource or offshore in Tunisia some of their work if we don’t do it ourselves. We have to walk the talk in order to be credible with the message.

Furthermore, the regions of our country cannot be quickly or sufficiently developed if policy formulation, planning and decision-making fully remain in the hands of the central Government in Tunis. We need to move from a centralized, top-down strategy to a decentralized, bottom-up approach. We need to set up and empower regional Government bodies, such as “un Conseil Régional”, which best know what their region needs and in what timeframe. This change should go hand in hand with implementing badly-needed reforms in the bureaucracy, keeping in mind that better Government is less Government. I would like here to quote President Obama in saying that making strategic changes in the Federal Government are like turning around a giant ocean tanker. “You set the course but it takes some time to swing the ship around. However, each day is progress and you do eventually get there”. I believe that for Tunisia to progress, we should make each day a small step forward and every month a big step.

Finally, regarding the Tunisian **Diaspora**, it can of course do a lot to help future development back home. Let us keep in mind the famous statement that John F. Kennedy once made: “Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country”.

Our community wherever it is around the globe can help spread a positive word about Tunisia, be it in our workplace, in the neighborhood where we live, or among the members of

our contact members. Every Tunisian living abroad is in a way kind of ambassador of his or her country and can contribute to building a positive image of Tunisia. You, members of the Tunisian American Center, can encourage people around us to visit our beautiful country, to gain support for it from their local constituency, to initiate joint cultural or social initiatives, to sponsor projects not only financially but also by sharing know-how and expertise, internships or offering tutoring and coaching. Keep in mind that every little thing helps and there are so many young and educated people in Tunisia with not much to do. They are desperately looking for an opportunity that will connect them to society in a constructive way. You can help turning their dream into a reality.

Beyond remittances that you make back home, you should consider investing in productive projects and job-creating ventures. I personally believe that we, as Tunisians living abroad, have a moral debt towards our country and it is now time, more than ever before, to pay back this debt. A specific idea that comes to mind is launching the “One project per village” initiative. Can we, individually or as a group of two or more Tunisians living abroad, sponsor just one project in a village preferably located in one of the 14 under-developed regions (or “gouvernorats”) of the country? Can we help with know-how, equipment, infrastructure, capital or some other resources, setting up a new business venture, an educational program, a training unit, a health care center, a recreational facility, an incubator, etc.?

It is through actions like these that we can contribute in a meaningful way to the development of our country. We should think big; start small, and scale fast. And we should keep in mind that with every 1% of GDP growth, we can create 20,000 new jobs. Our motto (or “devise”) should be “Dream, believe, and achieve”. Now that we have a dream for Tunisia to turn it into a democratic and prosperous country for all citizens, we need to believe in this dream and to deliver on it. Let’s act today!

Tunisia has begun a new era of its history and it’s our duty as Tunisians, whether we live inside the country or abroad, to help shape the future of our country and ensure that democracy is here to stay. For the Tunisian revolution, today is not the beginning of the end, but just the end of the beginning. It will be a long journey to establish our country as a true democracy, a land of peace, freedom and social justice for all. We WILL get there, inchallah!

Before concluding, let me say to our American friends that the USA is a country of winners and it likes cooperating with winners. We, Tunisians, want to become winners in the Maghreb, in Africa, in the Euro-Mediterranean region and beyond. Now that we share with the United States the same values of freedom and transparency, we hope that beyond our long-standing friendship, you'll invest in democracy and help Tunisia meet the challenges and fulfill the expectations of our post-revolution country.

As I look around this room, I see a lot of talent and knowledge. I am excited that ideas we share tonight will bring change to tomorrow's Tunisia.

I know that at this stage, the only obstacle between you and dinner is me! So let me stop talking and with your permission, show you a videotaped song that highlights the Tunisian revolution. The song is entitled "Etkalem ya Tounes", which means "Speak out O My Tunisia"; it is a tribute to the martyrs of the Tunisian revolution. You will see in the video clip ordinary men and women like yourselves taking to the streets to demand change in the country. The lyrics of the song were written by before the ousting of the former President; the recording was made after January 14th by composer and singer Skander Guetari. Earlier this week, I had the pleasure to translate the song into English, especially for tonight's event. You are therefore the first audience to view it. I hope you like it!

Thank you.