



Annika Savill
Executive Head, UN Democracy Fund

--

**Remarks at Panel on Youth Economic Empowerment
to Strengthen Threatened Democracies
Sixth Annual Athens Democracy Forum
Athens, 18 September 2018**

Thank you all for coming. I am very excited to be here to talk about a subject that I think is critical to the future of the Arab world and beyond, and to have with me two leaders and practitioners from the region who are at the forefront of this effort.

This discussion stems from a project in Tunisia, generated two years ago by the UN Democracy Fund together with Tamkeen for Development and Zitouna Tamkeen. Silatech later joined the effort as a generous partner in microfinance to support the project. All of us were determined to address the challenges of vulnerable youth, considering the events of the so-called Arab Spring, which started with one desperate, jobless young Tunisian burning himself to death, and less than a decade later, saw Tunisia become the largest contributor of young jihadists to IS – both per capita and in absolute terms.

Add to that the huge migration flows to Europe, the issues posed by the informal economy, the chaos going on next door in Libya, and the full range of political, ideological and security challenges facing any post-revolutionary nation -- yet Tunisia remains a democracy full of highly educated, talented, motivated people. There you have just some of the reasons why Tunisia deserves our attention.

Since 2011, Tunisia has been a priority country for the UN Democracy Fund, UNDEF, which funds and manages civil society projects in more than 100 countries. It should be a priority for all donors and supporters of democracy worldwide. Full disclosure on my part: Tunisia is also a personal priority for me. I was at school in Tunis as a young girl many years ago, and the country continues to be part of me.

Too many young people with diplomas, too few jobs, drawn to extremism through cash and adrenalin. There you have the problem in a nutshell. The project we are highlighting today is one of more than 10 UNDEF projects in Tunisia, but it is by far the most important. It is a pioneering initiative that promotes entrepreneurship for vulnerable youth to build participation and inclusion, and one that we aim to replicate in other democracies at risk.

So far, our project has trained almost a thousand young potential entrepreneurs in soft skills, leadership and participatory democracy; established over 10 civil society groups managed entirely by youth; engaged a team of young people in municipal elections this year, some as independent observers, some as candidates; and provided youth with skills in business and engineering in collaboration with leading private companies.

To tell us more about this and about economic youth empowerment in the region, we have two distinguished panelists.

Ms. Sabah Ismail Al Haidoos is the CEO of Silatech, an organization based in Qatar with a mission to create jobs, economic opportunities and vocational training for Arab youth, particularly through microfinance partnerships. Ms. Sabah is a veteran of youth empowerment and education, who has championed a range

of education reforms in Qatar. She has served on the Board of Trustees of Qatar University and the Supreme Council for Family Affairs.

Dr. Nabil Ghaleb is the founding CEO of Zitouna Tamkeen, one of the largest microfinance and economic empowerment institutions in Tunisia. He is also president of Tamkeen for Development, specializing in the economic empowerment of vulnerable youth. He previously served as senior investment manager in the Islamic Development Bank and as investment advisor to the mayor of Medina, based in Saudi Arabia. He returned to his native Tunisia three years ago as a man on a mission: empowering young people through work and leadership. He has blazed a trail from day one.

There you have our two panelists. I invite both of them to make brief opening remarks before we get our interactive discussion going. Ms. Sabah, you have the floor.