



Statement of

**Alexis Arieff**

Specialist in African Affairs

Before

Committee on Foreign Affairs

Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa and Global Counterterrorism

U.S. House of Representatives

Hearing on

# **“Tunisia: Examining the State of Democracy and Next Steps for U.S. Policy”**

October 12, 2021

**Congressional Research Service**

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

TE10068

Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting the Congressional Research Service to testify today. My statement provides an overview of political, economic, and security issues in Tunisia, and summarizes U.S. relations and aid. I also identify several potential policy issues and challenges facing Congress as you look ahead.

## Introduction: Tunisia and the United States at a Crossroads

Starting on July 25, President Kaïs Saïed has asserted sweeping executive powers, unilaterally dismissing the prime minister and suspending parliament along with much of the constitution adopted in the wake of Tunisia's 2011 popular uprising. The president has announced his intent to rule by decree and to amend the constitution and electoral law, without indicating how long the current "state of exception" may last.<sup>1</sup> President Saïed's actions have fueled uncertainty about the future of Tunisia's nascent democracy, which successive U.S. Administrations and Congresses have sought to foster.

Tunisians have expressed differing reactions to President Saïed's decisions amid shared concerns about economic suffering, partisan infighting, police abuses, and the dismissed prime minister's ineffective response to an acute wave of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) cases in mid-2021. Some Tunisians view President Saïed as safeguarding the promise of Tunisia's 2011 uprising from allegedly corrupt and ineffective parliamentarians and other members of the post-2011 political class.<sup>2</sup> Others perceive a dangerous power grab that threatens to derail Tunisia's fragile gains in advancing individual rights and government checks and balances over the past decade.<sup>3</sup> Many are adopting a wait-and-see attitude. The potential for broad coalition building, or conversely greater polarization and confrontation, is in question.

In mid-August, a senior Biden Administration delegation traveled to Tunis and urged President Saïed to undertake "a swift return to the path of Tunisia's parliamentary democracy," including by appointing "a prime minister designate who would form a capable government able to address the immediate economic and health crises facing Tunisia."<sup>4</sup> Six weeks later, on September 29, President Saïed named a new prime minister—Najla Bouden Romdhane, a geology professor and the first woman to hold the position in Tunisia and the Arab world—while placing constraints on her independence and authority.<sup>5</sup> On October 11, he swore in new cabinet members, who apparently will not undergo parliamentary confirmation.

Some Members of Congress have expressed concern about developments in Tunisia.<sup>6</sup> Several have called on the executive branch to review—and possibly suspend—certain types of U.S. aid or security

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<sup>1</sup> Presidential Decree No. 2021-117, September 22, 2021; Reuters, "Tunisian President Declares Transitional Rules, New Electoral Law," September 21, 2021; and Reuters, "Tunisia's President Saïed Indicates He Will Amend Constitution," September 12, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Reuters, "Thousands rally for Tunisian president urging change to political system," October 3, 2021. See also Fadil Aliriza, "Why many Tunisians are celebrating President Saïed's decision," Middle East Institute (MEI), July 26, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> *The National*, "As the Tunisian Leader Tightens His Rule, Some Worry When Democracy Will Return," October 1, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> White House, "Readout from NSC Spokesperson Emily Horne on Senior Administration Officials Travel to Tunisia," August 13, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Prime Minister Bouden reportedly has little government experience apart from implementing World Bank projects at the education ministry. Under Decree No. 2021-117, the president appoints the prime minister and sets "general policy," which the cabinet implements. Under the constitution, by contrast, the prime minister sets "general policy" and is confirmed by parliament, along with the cabinet; the president's executive powers are limited to defense, foreign relations, and national security.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC), "Meeks, Deutch Issue Statement on Developments in Tunisia," July 26, 2021; statement by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) on Twitter, July 26, 2021, 9:21 am; statement by Representative Rashida Tlaib on Twitter, July 26, 2021, 3:06 pm; Josh Rogin, "Opinion: Biden Must Try Harder to Stop the Coup in Tunisia," July 26, 2021 [citing Senator Lindsey Graham and Rep. Joe Wilson]; HFAC Republicans, "McCaul Statement on Events in Tunisia," July 27, 2021; NATO Parliamentary Assembly, "NATO PA President's statement on the situation in Tunisia," July 27, 2021; House Democracy Partnership, "Bipartisan House Democracy Partnership Co-Chairs Release Statement on the Situation in Tunisia," July 30, 2021; SFRC, "Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch Joint Statement on Political

cooperation.<sup>7</sup> Events since July 25 have unfolded after the House Appropriations Committee reported its FY2022 State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations bill (H.R. 4373), which the House passed on July 28. The bill would provide \$197 million in bilateral aid for Tunisia, equivalent to the Biden Administration's budget proposal. Reporting the bill on July 6, House appropriators asserted that, "a stable and viable democratic Tunisia is critical to regional security" (H.Rept. 117-84).

Congress has annually provided \$191 million in U.S. bilateral aid appropriations and \$50 million in additional prior-year funds for Tunisia in recent years (discussed below), and did not enact aid cuts proposed by the Trump Administration. The Defense Department also has provided military training and equipment, and support for border security. In June 2021, the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) approved a five-year, \$499 million development aid compact. According to MCC, the compact has not been signed to date "due to democratic governance concerns following the events of July 25"; for full funding to be made available, Tunisia's parliament must also ratify the compact pursuant to Tunisian law, and then MCC and the government of Tunisia must agree for the compact to enter into force.<sup>8</sup>

U.S. diplomatic messaging since July 25 has been broadly consistent with that of other Western donors, which have called for a return to "constitutional order."<sup>9</sup> Some governments in the region, such as Egypt and Algeria, have expressed support for Saïed; Turkey has issued mixed signals, while other international players, including Russia and China, have been publicly circumspect.<sup>10</sup> To date, U.S. officials have not publicly indicated what measures they might consider if President Saïed does not take steps to restore "parliamentary democracy" or articulate an alternative inclusive political path forward.

The extent to which President Saïed may be susceptible to external pressure is debatable. He won election in a landslide in 2019 after running an "anti-system" campaign as an independent with no prior government experience.<sup>11</sup> He does not have a political party, appears to rely on a small circle of advisors, and has castigated domestic critics as corrupt and treacherous.<sup>12</sup> Political party leaders and Tunisia's powerful trade union, the UGTT, have grown more critical of President Saïed's approach in recent weeks, with UGTT leaders rejecting "the president's monopoly on [constitutional] amendments" as "a danger to democracy."<sup>13</sup> Saïed nonetheless appears to enjoy greater popular support at present than many of his chief antagonists, and faces few evident institutional checks on his authority. In recent weeks, thousands have turned to the streets in rival protests for and against the president, to uncertain effect.

Tunisians have expressed differing views on the desirability of external pressure. Debates over how to judge and react to Saïed's moves reflect, in part, divisions over "who gets to speak for or on behalf of Tunisians, and to what extent international entities should influence its domestic affairs."<sup>14</sup> Some Tunisian

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Crisis in Tunisia," August 5, 2021; Senator Chris Murphy, "Murphy Statement on Tunisian President's Extension of State of Emergency," August 24, 2021; HFAC, "McCaul, Meeks, Deutch, Wilson Issue Statement on Recent Developments in Tunisia," August 31, 2021; U.S. Embassy in Tunisia, "U.S. Congressional Delegation Led by Senators Chris Murphy and Jon Ossoff Met President Kais Saïed," September 5, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> *The CT Mirror*, "Murphy: Tunisia's president Saïed is not keeping his word," September 27, 2021; *Tunisie Numérique*, "3 members of US congress call on Biden to intervene to restore Tunisian parliament," September 25, 2021; statement by Representative Ilhan Omar on Twitter, July 27, 2021, 11:56am.

<sup>8</sup> MCC communications with CRS, October 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Statement by Group of Seven (G7) Ambassadors in Tunisia, September 6, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Reuters, "Egypt, Algeria agree on full support for Tunisian president – statement," August 1, 2021; TASS, "Problems in Tunisia must be settled by legal means — Russian foreign ministry," July 27, 2021. China's government does not appear to have responded publicly to President Saïed's actions. See also Al Jazeera, "World reacts to Tunisia's political turmoil," July 26, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> NDI, "The 'real anti-system candidate' set to curb foreign funds, remake Tunisian politics," October 14, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Reuters, "Tunisian president rejects dialogue with 'traitors,'" September 15, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Reuters, "Tunisia labour union rejects Saïed power grab, widening opposition," September 24, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Intissar Fakir, "A coup or not? What happened in Tunisia and what comes next?" MEI, August 5, 2021. In recent years,

politicians have called for “international condemnation” of Saïed’s actions, arguing that Tunisia is a rare example of regional democracy that is under strain and in need of protection.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, many Tunisians insist that their country must be seen on its own terms (not in comparison to other countries in the region), and protected from what they view as external interference.<sup>16</sup>

## Context

January 14, 2021, marked the ten-year anniversary of Tunisia’s “Jasmine Revolution,” in which peaceful protesters ousted the authoritarian regime of Zine el Abidine Ben Ali and sparked protests in countries across the Middle East and North Africa. While other countries affected by the “Arab Spring” uprisings went on to face brutal conflicts and/or resurgent authoritarianism, in Tunisia, an elected assembly adopted a new constitution establishing a democratic political system and protecting freedoms of expression and conscience. A quartet of local civil society and trade union organizations that helped resolve a 2013 political crisis, securing passage of the constitution, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015. Tunisia has held two competitive general elections under the 2014 constitution—most recently in 2019—each of which resulted in a peaceful transfer of power. Elections were also held in 2018 to fill new municipal posts, a key step toward political decentralization. U.S. officials heralded Tunisia’s political transition, and U.S. aid and diplomatic engagement expanded significantly after 2011, with bipartisan support in Congress.<sup>17</sup>

Still, many Tunisians view the promise of the 2011 uprising as unfulfilled.<sup>18</sup> Survey data suggest that most Tunisians support democracy, but are disappointed by the performance of their post-2011 political system and leaders—citing economic grievances and corruption as top concerns even prior to the depredations of the COVID-19 pandemic (see “The Economy,” below).<sup>19</sup> Fractious coalition governments and recurrent political crises have stymied deeper institutional reforms and undermined politicians’ accountability to voters.<sup>20</sup> In recent years, grievances over high unemployment and inflation, corruption, and police brutality have spurred protests, labor unrest, and a voter backlash against mainstream politicians. Few if any politicians or officials have advanced a clear plan to address these issues.

Severe hardships wrought by the pandemic have fueled further popular discontent in 2021 against the backdrop of perceived political dysfunction. In January 2021, large crowds turned out in street protests in defiance of a nationwide curfew, to which police reportedly responded with “excessive force.”<sup>21</sup> In July, as Tunisian officials warned that the health system might “collapse” amid an acute wave of COVID-19

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Tunisian activists have expressed concerns about illicit campaign financing and foreign lobbying contracts, arguing that Tunisian political factions are competing on an uneven playing field at home and abroad. See, e.g., *Tunisie Numérique*, “New lobbying contracts – I WATCH files a complaint against Ennahdha,” October 5, 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Rached Ghannouchi, “My Country Has Been a Dictatorship Before. We Can’t Go Back.” *New York Times*, July 30, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., Ouïem Chettaoui, “Tunisia: Western Pundits or ‘Hot-Take’ Arsonists,” *Jadaliyya*, August 1, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> See “Tunisia,” in CRS Report R46796, *Congress and the Middle East, 2011-2020: Selected Case Studies*.

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED), “Expert Q&A – Tunisians Reflect on the Tenth Anniversary of the Dignity Revolution,” December 17, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> According to the Arab Barometer survey, 79% of Tunisian respondents agreed as of 2018 that “Democracies have problems, but are better than othersystems,” but the proportion who expressed either “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of trust in government had fallen to 20% from 62% in 2011 (Arab Barometer V, *Tunisia Country Report*, 2019). Tunisian respondents ranked economic issues as their top concern and expressed the view that public safety and the quality of government services had declined since 2011 while corruption had expanded. A poll by the U.S. International Republican Institute (IRI) in 2019 found that 87% of Tunisians thought their country was headed in the wrong direction, the highest level registered since IRI polls began in late 2011. Nearly half of respondents assessed Tunisia’s political system as either a “flawed democracy” or “not a democracy at all” (IRI, *Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Tunisia, January 25-February 11, 2019*).

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., remarks by Amna Guellali in POMED, “Examining Tunisia’s Political Crisis,” August 5, 2021; and Sharan Grewal and Shadi Hamid, “The dark side of consensus in Tunisia: Lessons from 2015-2019,” Brookings, January 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Human Rights Watch (HRW), “Tunisia: Police Use Violent Tactics to Quash Protests,” February 5, 2021.

cases and deaths,<sup>22</sup> President Kaïs Saïed and then-Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi were in a standoff over control of cabinet appointments and the security apparatus. Mismanagement, “lack of transparency,” and political interference reportedly marred initial state vaccination efforts.<sup>23</sup>

### *Presidential Assertion of a “State of Exception”*

It was in this tense context that many Tunisians celebrated President Kaïs Saïed’s announcement on July 25 that he was dismissing the prime minister, suspending parliament, and lifting parliamentary immunity, citing Article 80 of the constitution.<sup>24</sup> President Saïed later extended parliament’s suspension indefinitely, asserted the right to govern by decree without constitutional review, suspended sections of the constitution that contradict these assertions, and announced plans to amend the constitution and electoral law via a commission of presidential appointees. Among the starkest symbols of the president’s actions has been his deployment of the military to bar members of parliament from entering the building.

President Saïed has invoked undefined imminent threats in asserting these authorities, but he has long been a public critic of directly elected parliaments, political parties, and Tunisia’s post-2011 political system and leaders.<sup>25</sup> Saïed’s anti-corruption message, pledges of systemic change, and outsider credentials appear to have endeared him to the voters who elected him in 2019, but the extent of popular support for various alternative political systems is uncertain.

Although President Saïed has pledged since July 25 to protect individual freedoms, human rights advocates have expressed alarm about the concentration of powers in his hands and the apparent lack of due process in recent actions pursued against politicians, political parties, business figures, and journalists.<sup>26</sup> Several members of parliament have been arrested and/or charged by military prosecutors, some after they criticized Saïed.<sup>27</sup> Dozens of officials and businesspersons reportedly have faced opaque travel bans or house arrest orders, and local journalists have reported increased harassment.<sup>28</sup> In August, state security forces raided the national anticorruption body, suspended its activities indefinitely, and ordered its director under house arrest without formal legal justification.<sup>29</sup>

It remains to be seen whether President Saïed can deliver improvements in Tunisians’ daily lives, and how he might respond if more of the public turns against his leadership. Tunisia’s COVID-19 vaccination program has registered significant advances since July, after President Saïed placed the military in charge of pandemic response and donors, including the United States, increased vaccine deliveries.<sup>30</sup> Addressing

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<sup>22</sup> Reuters, “Tunisia says health care system collapsing due to COVID-19,” July 8, 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Amnesty International, “Tunisian authorities must accelerate fair access to vaccines, as Covid-19 cases soar,” July 15, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Article 80 authorizes and limits presidential authorities “in the event of imminent danger.” The text states that parliament “shall be deemed to be in continuous session throughout such a period,” does not explicitly grant the president authority to dismiss the cabinet, and states that measures “shall guarantee, as soon as possible, a return to the normal functioning of state institutions.”

<sup>25</sup> Mohamed-Dhia Hammami, “Past as Prologue: Kaïs Saïed’s Prior Statements Point To Upcoming Political Moves,” POMED, August 10, 2021.

<sup>26</sup> HRW, “Tunisia: President’s Repressive Policies Abrogate Rights,” op. cit.; Amnesty International, “Carving up the Constitution represents a threat to human rights,” October 2, 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Tunisian laws permit military courts to try certain categories of offenses by civilians, a practice international human rights groups have criticized. Hamza Mighri and Sharan Grewal, “Reforming Tunisia’s Military Courts,” Brookings, November 2019.

<sup>28</sup> HRW, “Tunisia: President’s Repressive Policies Abrogate Rights,” op. cit.; *Middle East Eye*, “Tunisia: Police raid opposition TV channel as more arrest warrants issued for journalists,” October 6, 2021; *Nawaat*, “Concerns over Press Freedom as Journalists Harassed, Detained,” August 2, 2021.

<sup>29</sup> HRW, “Tunisia: President’s Repressive Policies Abrogate Rights,” September 11, 2021. The house arrest order has reportedly since been lifted (TAP, “Chawki Tabib Sees House Arrest Lifted,” October 10, 2021).

<sup>30</sup> As of September 28, Tunisia had administered over 8 million COVID-19 vaccine doses, or 68 per 100 inhabitants, one of the higher rates in Africa, according to the World Health Organization (WHO) COVID-19 Dashboard.



deep-seated economic challenges may prove more challenging. In the near term, President Saïed's actions appear to have interrupted already tense negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) over a new lending program, elevating the chance of a fiscal and/or debt repayment crisis.<sup>31</sup> President Saïed has reportedly ordered local traders to charge less for food and medicine, and floated an offer of amnesty for corrupt individuals if they agree to finance infrastructure projects, but he has not articulated a broader economic plan. Previous governments have struggled to address economic grievances such as high unemployment and cost of living while adhering to donor-backed appeals for greater fiscal discipline.

Tunisian views of President Saïed's moves are reportedly divided and likely to be fluid.<sup>32</sup> Pro-Saïed protesters have called for parliament's full dissolution. Leaders of the largest party in parliament, self-described Muslim Democratic Al Nahda (alt. Ennahda, "Renaissance"), have decried President Saïed's actions as a "coup" and called for reinstatement of the legislature and a national dialogue on political reforms.<sup>33</sup> As noted above, several other political parties have grown more critical of President Saïed's actions in recent weeks, as has the UGTT, Tunisia's largest civic organization, which played a central role in mediating previous political crises. Yet, polls suggest that the president remains broadly popular, and that his political opponents—notably Al Nahda leader and speaker of parliament Rached Ghannouchi—suffer from a comparatively deep deficit of public trust.<sup>34</sup> Reflecting these dynamics, Al Nahda and other parties have exhibited internal schisms over how to respond.

### *A Strained Political Prelude*

Voters in the 2019 elections largely rejected established parties and candidates in favor of independents and non-career politicians. President Saïed, an independent, is a constitutional scholar who, prior to his election, was known primarily for his critique of Tunisia's post-2011 political system and his socially conservative views.<sup>35</sup> Saïed campaigned in 2019 as an anti-corruption and anti-establishment figure, citing few policy specifics. After narrowly besting a crowded field of candidates in the first round of the presidential vote, he won a landslide in a run-off against Nabil Karoui, a secularist media mogul with ties to the Ben Ali regime, who spent most of the campaign period in jail on money laundering charges.

The parliamentary election results similarly diminished the weight of mainstream parties and scrambled prior political alliances, rendering a durable coalition and clear policy mandate elusive. Al Nahda won a plurality of seats (52 out of 217), and Ghannouchi was elected speaker of parliament. However, the results cemented a continuing decline in Al Nahda's electoral weight since 2011, and rising internal tensions have belied the party's reputation as a disciplined political force.<sup>36</sup> The 2019 elections saw the rise of the Free Destourian ("Constitutional") Party, led by Abir Moussi, a former top official in the Ben Ali-era ruling party who has decried Tunisia's 2011 uprising as a foreign plot, along with a conservative Islamist coalition known as Karama ("Dignity"). Moussi has regularly sought to disrupt parliamentary proceedings, while an independent MP assaulted Moussi on the floor of parliament in mid-2021 and Karama's leader Seifeddine Makhlouf insulted her in misogynistic terms.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Reuters, "Now in charge, Tunisian president faces looming fiscal crisis," August 17, 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Zogby Research Services, *Tunisia's Bumpy Road*, public opinion poll released on October 4, 2021.

<sup>33</sup> *The Independent*, "Tunisian opposition leader urges president to 'pull back from the brink' and engage in dialogue," August 10, 2021.

<sup>34</sup> Zogby Research Services, *Tunisia's Bumpy Road*, op. cit.

<sup>35</sup> See, e.g., POMED, "A Guide to Tunisia's 2019 Presidential Election," September 2019.

<sup>36</sup> Anne Wolf, "Is Rached Ghannouchi Ennahda's President for Life?" POMED, July 2021; and Hatem Nafti, "Ennahda défait par l'épreuve du pouvoir," *OrientXXI*, March 18, 2021.

<sup>37</sup> TAP, "Assault On Abir Moussi - LTDH Calls On the Ministry of Women and Public Prosecutor to Take Necessary Measures," July 1, 2021.

Prior to 2019, Al Nahda and Nidaa Tounes (“Tunisia’s Call”), a big-tent secularist party, dominated Tunisia’s political landscape and shared power in a series of “consensus” coalition governments. This uneasy partnership delivered the landmark local-level elections in 2018 and the adoption of a new law against gender-based violence in 2017. However, political leaders did not respond as effectively to public demands for job creation, investment in impoverished interior regions, and accountability for corruption and other abuses.<sup>38</sup> Al Nahda and Nidaa Tounes passed a controversial 2017 law granting amnesty for public officials implicated in corruption under Ben Ali, and Nidaa Tounes effectively disbanded Tunisia’s post-2011 Truth and Dignity commission before its slated completion. Partisan disagreements prevented the establishment of a constitutional court, one of several new institutions mandated under the 2014 constitution. In its absence, Tunisia lacks an institution empowered to judge constitutional disputes.

Parliamentary gridlock and internecine disputes appear to have deepened public frustrations with government actors.<sup>39</sup> With no party able to claim a clear legislative mandate, members of parliament twice spent months negotiating the selection of a prime minister before settling on two successive technocrats named by President Saïed—most recently Hichem Mechichi, whom the president dismissed on July 25.<sup>40</sup> According to local anticorruption activists, parliamentary immunity (now suspended) has protected several members from charges of tax evasion or embezzlement.<sup>41</sup>

As alluded to above, the proximate trigger for President Saïed’s July 25 seizure of power was a worsening dispute with Mechichi over control of executive powers. The 2014 constitution divides executive authorities between the president and prime minister, who is confirmed by parliament. The standoff echoed similar frictions under Saïed’s predecessor, President Béji Caïd Essebsi (in office 2014–2019). The constitutional court, if it existed, would be the final authority on how to resolve disagreements regarding constitutional divisions of responsibility. In early 2021, President Saïed rejected a bill that could have sped the process of establishing the court. He also publicly floated a return to Tunisia’s 1959 constitution, which established a strong presidency with few checks and balances.

## The Economy

The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened Tunisia’s economic challenges through its disruptive impact on global tourism and trade, along with the effects of local lockdown measures. Tunisia’s economy shrank by an estimated 8.6% in 2020, following years of anemic growth, according to IMF data. These pressures have spurred burgeoning fiscal and debt repayment challenges; gross public debt, which stood at 74% of GDP in 2019, has risen to an estimated 90% of GDP in 2021. Textiles, agriculture, tourism, and phosphate mining are key sectors of Tunisia’s economy; Tunisia produces some oil, but is a net energy importer.

Economic challenges prior to 2020 had already shrunk the size and purchasing power of Tunisia’s once robust middle class.<sup>42</sup> Nominal per-capita GDP dropped below the World Bank’s upper middle-income threshold (currently \$4,096) in 2015, and stood at \$3,323 in 2020, per IMF data. The unemployment rate has hovered around 15% in recent years and rose above 17% in 2020; the rate is reportedly more than twice as high among young people. Some austerity measures implemented at the urging of donors—such as devaluation of the dinar and tax increases—arguably deepened economic grievances without delivering greater fiscal sustainability.<sup>43</sup> The IMF has urged Tunisia to downsize state-owned enterprises and phase

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<sup>38</sup> See Sarah Yerkes and Marwan Muasher, “Tunisia’s Corruption Contagion: A Transition at Risk,” CEIP, October 25, 2017.

<sup>39</sup> *The Arab Weekly*, “Violence marks new low in Tunisian parliamentary politics,” December 7, 2020.

<sup>40</sup> Under the constitution, the largest party in parliament nominates a prime minister, who must then be confirmed by a legislative majority. If this does not happen, the president may put forward a nominee, again subject to parliamentary confirmation.

<sup>41</sup> See, e.g., Tweet by iWatch on Twitter, August 1, 2021, 3:12pm.

<sup>42</sup> Middle East Eye, “‘Two classes left - rich and poor’: Sinking Tunisia’s currency,” May 4, 2018.

<sup>43</sup> Fadil Aliriza, “In surveys, Tunisians tell of continuous economic grievances,” MEI, September 27, 2021; *The Economist*,

out energy subsidies, but prior attempts to do so have sparked intense opposition from the UGTT and the public.<sup>44</sup>

Tunisia's economy has struggled since 2011 amid domestic tensions, the war in Libya (previously a destination for Tunisian workers), and economic strains in the European Union, Tunisia's largest trade partner. Investor perceptions of political risk, terrorism threats, and labor unrest have challenged efforts to promote private sector growth and address corruption and inequalities that fed discontent during the Ben Ali era. Successive governments do not appear to have substantively advanced reforms of state regulations that reportedly enabled corruption and cronyism under Ben Ali.<sup>45</sup> Wealth remains concentrated along the urban and tourist-friendly coast, while the interior suffers from relative poverty and a lack of investment. Many Tunisians are highly educated, but the economy has generally created low-skilled and low-paid jobs, fueling unemployment and under-employment.

## Security Concerns

Internal security has generally improved since a string of large terrorist attacks in 2015-2016,<sup>46</sup> which may be attributable to improved internal coordination and capacity-building assistance from donors including the United States. Small-scale terrorist attacks have nonetheless occurred in recent years, including an unattributed suicide bombing near the U.S. Embassy in Tunis in early 2020 that killed a Tunisian police officer, and near-simultaneous suicide bombings against two police posts in Tunis in mid-2019, which the Islamic State (IS, aka ISIS/ISIL) claimed. Local groups affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State remain active in border areas, where they periodically attack Tunisian security forces. Turmoil in neighboring Libya, ongoing militant activity in border regions, and the return of Tunisian Islamist fighters from abroad (primarily Syria, Iraq, and Libya) continue to pose challenges. The State Department warns U.S. citizens to avoid travel to parts of southern, western, and central Tunisia, citing terrorist threats.<sup>47</sup> Tunisia's southernmost desert area is a military zone, where all travel is restricted.

Despite its small population, Tunisia was reportedly a top source of foreign fighters at the height of IS territorial influence in Iraq and Syria (2014-2015). U.N. investigators estimated in 2015 that 4,000 Tunisians were fighting in Syria, along with up to 1,500 in Libya, 200 in Iraq, 60 in Mali, and 50 in Yemen.<sup>48</sup> Tunisian officials reported as of 2019 that 1,000 foreign fighters had returned since 2011, and that authorities had prevented at least 17,000 others from leaving for combat zones abroad.<sup>49</sup> Youth marginalization and the release of terrorism suspects under a general amnesty in 2011 may have fueled the emergence of domestic Islamist extremist organizations and subsequent combatant outflows.<sup>50</sup>

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"Fiddling While Carthage Burns," October 2, 2021.

<sup>44</sup> IMF, "Key Questions on Tunisia," April 10, 2020; *New York Times*, "Belt-Tightening Demands Put Tunisia's Democracy at Risk," May 3, 2018.

<sup>45</sup> See World Bank, *The Unfinished Revolution*, May 2014.

<sup>46</sup> In 2015, terrorist attacks at the Bardo Museum in Tunis and the coastal city of Sousse killed dozens of people including foreign tourists. These were the deadliest attacks in Tunisia since an Al Qaeda bombing of a synagogue on the island of Djerba in 2002. In early 2016, Tunisian security forces and local inhabitants defeated a militant assault on the border town of Ben Guerdane (near Libya) that prompted fears of an IS-linked insurgency. The 2015-2016 attacks were reportedly planned from Libya; a U.S. military strike on the Libyan town of Sabratha reportedly killed a number of Tunisian fighters in February 2016.

<sup>47</sup> State Department, "Tunisia Travel Advisory," July 12, 2021.

<sup>48</sup> U.N. Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (UNOHCHR), "Foreign fighters: Urgent measures needed to stop flow from Tunisia – UN expert group warns," July 10, 2015.

<sup>49</sup> Tunisie Afrique Presse (TAP), "A thousand Tunisians have returned from conflict zones from 2011 until October 2018, says Mokhtar Ben Nasr," February 18, 2019.

<sup>50</sup> See Aaron Zelin, *Your Sons Are at Your Service: Tunisia's Missionaries of Jihad*, Columbia University Press: 2020.



## U.S. Relations and Aid

The United States and Tunisia have cultivated warm ties since 2011, underpinned by U.S. support for Tunisia's nascent democracy and security cooperation to counter regional terrorism threats.<sup>51</sup> According to the State Department, "one of the United States' priorities is to help Tunisia provide a secure environment conducive to the development of democratic institutions and practices, and to inclusive economic growth."<sup>52</sup> Prior to July 25, Biden Administration officials pursued several high-level engagements with Tunisian counterparts, albeit constrained by COVID-19-related restrictions.<sup>53</sup> Vice President Kamala Harris spoke to President Saïd in May 2021, at which time she "underscored the United States' sustained commitment to supporting Tunisia's democracy," and voiced support for Tunisia's IMF negotiations along with "timely implementation" of economic reform commitments.<sup>54</sup>

As noted, since July 25, the Biden Administration has called for a "swift return to the path of Tunisia's parliamentary democracy," while acknowledging health and economic challenges that presaged President Saïd's recent actions.<sup>55</sup> On October 7, the State Department urged the president and new prime minister "to respond to the Tunisian people's call for a clear roadmap for a return to a transparent, democratic process, involving civil society and diverse political voices," stating that it was "concerned and disappointed by recent reports from Tunisia on infringements on freedom of the press and expression."<sup>56</sup>

## U.S. Aid and Security Cooperation

U.S. bilateral aid for Tunisia grew after 2011, and rose further after the new constitution was adopted and elections were held (**Table 1**). As noted above, the MCC has approved a \$499 million aid compact with Tunisia, but signature has been postponed for now. The compact would seek to strengthen Tunisia's transportation, trade, and water sectors. Recent U.S. bilateral economic aid administered by the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has focused on promoting good governance, encouraging private sector growth, and countering violent extremism. USAID upgraded its presence in Tunis to a full bilateral mission in 2019, and pledged up to \$352 million in assistance over the following five years.<sup>57</sup> In the initial years following Tunisia's 2011 uprising, Congress provided \$100 million for a Tunisian-American Enterprise Fund with a mandate to invest in small- and medium-sized

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<sup>51</sup> The United States and Tunisia have a Joint Economic Commission and a Joint Military Commission. President Obama initiated a Bilateral Strategic Dialogue (alongside similar dialogues with other North African countries) and designated Tunisia a Major Non-NATO Ally in 2015.

<sup>52</sup> State Department, "U.S. Relations With Tunisia," November 6, 2020 [current].

<sup>53</sup> In June, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Wendy Sherman undertook a "virtual visit" to Tunisia focused on democracy, human rights, economic challenges, and pandemic response coordination, and Secretary Blinken reportedly met with Tunisia's foreign minister on the sidelines of Libya talks in Germany. State Department, "Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman's Engagements with Tunisian Government Officials and Civil Society Leaders," June 25, 2021; TAP, "Jerandi Holds Talks in Berlin With U.S. Secretary of State," June 24, 2021.

<sup>54</sup> White House, "Readout of Vice President Kamala Harris Call with President Kais Saïd of Tunisia," May 11, 2021.

<sup>55</sup> White House, "Readout from NSC Spokesperson Emily Horne on Senior Administration Officials Travel to Tunisia," August 13, 2021. Prior to the NSC delegation, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan spoke with President Saïd to convey "President Biden's strong support for the people of Tunisia and for Tunisian democracy based on fundamental rights, strong institutions, and a commitment to the rule of law" (White House, "Readout by NSC Spokesperson Emily Horne of National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's Call with President Kais Saïd of Tunisia," July 31, 2021). On July 26, Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke to President Saïd and encouraged him "to adhere to the principles of democracy and human rights that are the basis of governance in Tunisia" (State Department, "Secretary Blinken's Call with Tunisian President Kais Saïd," July 26, 2021).

<sup>56</sup> State Department press briefing, October 7, 2021.

<sup>57</sup> USAID, "U.S. Signs Landmark Agreement with the Government of Tunisia," August 30, 2019.

enterprises, and provided funds for three U.S. loan guarantees that allowed Tunisia to access up to \$1.5 billion in financing from international capital markets.<sup>58</sup>

U.S.-Tunisia security cooperation has expanded since 2011 as Tunisia has sought to maintain its U.S.-origin defense materiel, reform its security institutions, and respond to terrorist threats. Congress has appropriated \$85 million annually in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) aid for Tunisia in recent years, more than for any other country within U.S. Africa Command's area of responsibility. Congress has also recently provided \$13 million per year in State Department-administered bilateral aid for law enforcement strengthening and reform, and the State Department has allocated additional internal security aid under its Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund and the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP). Tunisia has been a top recipient within Africa of Defense Department (DOD)-administered global train-and-equip assistance (currently authorized under 10 U.S.C. 333). DOD has provided additional border security support for Tunisia under nonproliferation authorities.

Over the past decade, the State Department has licensed, with congressional assent, military sales to Tunisia of Wolverine light attack aircraft, Kiowa Warrior helicopter equipment and support, and Black Hawk helicopters.<sup>59</sup> The United States also has provided grant-based equipment transfers through the Excess Defense Articles (EDA) program, including Kiowa helicopters and C-130 aircraft; Tunisia's Major Non-NATO Ally status confers priority in global EDA transfers (under 22 U.S.C. 2321j). Tunisia hosted a U.S. multinational military maritime exercise, Phoenix Express, in May 2021.

**Table I. U.S. Bilateral Foreign Assistance to Tunisia, State Department and USAID**

allocations by year of appropriation, current \$ millions

	FY2015	FY2016	FY2017	FY2018	FY2019	FY2020	FY2021 (enact.)	FY2022 (req.)	FY2022 (H.R.4373)
<b>Total</b>	61.4	141.9	205.2	165.3	191.4	191.4	191.4	197.1	197.1
DA	-	-	-	-	-	40.0	45.0	-	45.0
ESF	20.0	60.0	89.0	79.0	85.0	45.0	40.0	85.0	40.0
INCLE	7.0	12.0	13.0	13.0	13.0	13.0	13.0	22.8	22.8
NADR	2.2	2.6	6.1	6.1	6.1	6.1	6.1	2.0	2.0
IMET	2.2	2.3	2.1	2.2	2.3	2.3	2.3	2.3	2.3
FMF	30.0	65.0	95.0	65.0	85.0	85.0	85.0	85.0	85.0

**Source:** State Department Congressional Budget Justifications, FY2017-FY2022; conference report accompanying Division K of P.L. 116-260 (FY2021); H.Rept. 117-84 (accompanying H.R. 4373).

**Notes:** From FY2019 to FY2021, Congress annually directed \$50 million in additional prior-year funds for Tunisia (\$50 million in prior-year Relief and Recovery Fund under the FY2019 act, and \$50 million in prior-year ESF under the FY2020 and FY2021 acts). Table does not include funding administered by other federal entities (such as the Department of Defense) or funds allocated on a regional or global basis. DA = Development Assistance; ESF = Economic Support Fund; FMF = Foreign Military Financing; IMET = International Military Education & Training; INCLE = International Narcotics Control + Law Enforcement; NADR = Nonproliferation, Antiterrorism, Demining, and Related Programs.

Starting with FY2016, Congress has specified a minimum level of aid to Tunisia in annual appropriations measures, most recently providing \$191 million in FY2021 appropriations and \$50 million in additional prior-year funds under P.L. 116-260. Congress also has continued to make funds available for U.S. loan guarantees for Tunisia (including under P.L. 116-260), although the United States has not provided one

<sup>58</sup> USAID, "Tunisia signs \$500 million loan guarantee agreement with the United States," June 3, 2016. See also CRS Report R46796, *Congress and the Middle East, 2011-2020: Selected Case Studies*.

<sup>59</sup> Defense Security Cooperation Agency public releases, <https://www.dsca.mil/tags/tunisia>.

since Tunisia's last IMF program was agreed to in 2016. Congress has made additional funds available for Tunisia under the State Department-administered Relief and Recovery Fund (RRF)—aimed at areas under threat from the Islamic State—and DOD's Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund. Congress has separately authorized and appropriated funds for DOD to reimburse Tunisia for costs associated with securing its border with Libya (most recently appropriated under P.L. 116-260, §9026 of Division C).

**U.S. COVID-19 Assistance.** The United States delivered 1 million donated doses of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine to Tunisia on July 30, 2021, and nearly 700,000 doses of the Pfizer vaccine in mid-September, working through the multilateral COVAX initiative.<sup>60</sup> The State Department and USAID have allocated at least \$1.4 million in COVID-19-related health assistance for Tunisia since early 2020, and DOD delivered oxygen cylinders in July.<sup>61</sup>

## Outlook and Possible Issues for Congress

At this stage, it is unclear whether Tunisia is likely to return to a democratic political system, move further into presidential authoritarianism, or experience greater instability as the economy worsens and tensions among rival political factions escalate. President Saïed's use of the military to block access to the parliament building and the recent rise in prosecutions of civilians before military courts have drawn attention, with some observers describing military leadership as signaling support for Saïed's political moves. Tunisia's army, historically perceived as apolitical, played a central role in the 2011 uprising by withdrawing its support for then-President Ben Ali. President Saïed also has asserted control over the internal security services including the police, which have a checkered reputation as perpetrators of abuses in the post-2011 era and as tools of political repression under Ben Ali.

Still, President Saïed's power and claim to legitimacy arguably rest on his assertion of popular support. Public demonstrations and coalition building among political and civic actors may therefore be crucial in determining his future scope of action. It is also possible that the president and his supporters will increasingly crack down on opponents, impeding mobilization. The president also may conceivably misinterpret, misrepresent, or disregard the extent of public backing, should it falter.<sup>62</sup>

Tunisia's current political and economic uncertainty raise questions for U.S. policymakers, including Congress. Over the past decade, Congress has authorized and appropriated growing foreign assistance and security cooperation funds for Tunisia and conducted oversight of U.S. policy; Members also have directly engaged with Tunisian leaders and civil society. Congress's appropriation of bilateral aid for Tunisia at a specified level in recent years has had the practical effect of ensuring funds for Tunisia amid competing global priorities. Appropriations for Tunisia have been split between security and economic (including governance) assistance. Congress to date has not enacted specific restrictions or conditions on aid to Tunisia (other than those applying generally), in contrast to some countries in the region.

In committee reports accompanying foreign aid appropriation and defense authorization measures, Members of Congress have expressed an intent to support Tunisian democracy.<sup>63</sup> At the same time, democracy promotion is not the sole U.S. stated policy goal in Tunisia or the region. Other priorities include, for example, counterterrorism cooperation and countering the regional influence of rival powers. Developments in Tunisia have unfolded amid complex challenges nearby, including ongoing instability in

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<sup>60</sup> State Department, COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution: Tunisia, at <https://www.state.gov/countries-areas/tunisia/>.

<sup>61</sup> COVID-19-related aid figure provided to CRS by the State Department; U.S. Embassy in Tunisia, "U.S. Donation of 310 Oxygen Canisters Over One Million Liters to the Ministry of Health," July 27, 2021.

<sup>62</sup> See, e.g., Reuters, "Tunisian president says 1.8 million people protested for him on Sunday," October 4, 2021. News reports suggest that the pro-Saïed protesters in question numbered in the thousands.

<sup>63</sup> See, e.g., aforementioned H.Rept. 117-84 (State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations bill), and S.Rept. 112-26 (National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2012).

Libya, renewed hostilities between Morocco and the Polisario Front, simmering political unrest in Algeria, and a diplomatic crisis between Morocco and Algeria.

Among the issues for Congress is whether recent developments in Tunisia undermine or strengthen the case for U.S. aid and engagement, and whether a shift in their scope or emphasis is warranted. As discussed, the extent to which U.S. aid presents opportunities for leverage is debatable: President Saïed has shown little evidence of being susceptible to external pressure or encouragement, and U.S. funds largely seek to advance U.S. policy goals such as supporting civil society, local entrepreneurship, COVID-19 response, law enforcement capacity, and Tunisia's ability to provide for its own security.<sup>64</sup> Nor is the United States the sole or necessarily most influential external actor in Tunisia: the European Union is Tunisia's top donor and trade partner, and the Gulf states and Turkey (among others) have sought influence and provided aid and/or investment.<sup>65</sup> In mid-August, amid U.S. statements of concern over Tunisia's political trajectory, President Saïed hosted a delegation from China's Huawei technology firm, whose international activities the United States has sought to constrain.<sup>66</sup> As discussed, Tunisian views on the desirability of external pressure vary. U.S. aid and security cooperation may nonetheless be viewed as an expression of U.S. foreign policy ideals and priorities, and in light of current events may be weighed not only for their impact in Tunisia but also for their possible effect on perceptions within Tunisia and beyond its borders.

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<sup>64</sup> See State Department, FY2022 *Congressional Budget Justification*.

<sup>65</sup> See European Commission, "Tunisia," n.d.; World Bank, "Trade Summary for Tunisia," 2019 (latest); *The Africa Report*, "Turkey's push to win over the Maghreb: The gateway to Africa," September 4, 2020; Youssef Cherif, "Tunisia, Battlefield of The Gulf Countries," *OrientXXI*, April 12, 2018.

<sup>66</sup> TAP, "Huawei announces creation of research, development and innovation centre in Tunisia," August 19, 2021.