

# TUNISIA: EXAMINING THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY AND NEXT STEPS FOR U.S. POLICY

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## HEARING BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON MIDDLE EAST, NORTH AFRICA, AND GLOBAL COUNTERTERRORISM OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES ONE HUNDRED SEVENTEENTH CONGRESS FIRST SESSION

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## **TUNISIA: EXAMINING THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY AND NEXT STEPS FOR U.S. POLICY**

**Thursday, October 14, 2021**

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE MIDDLE EAST,  
NORTH AFRICA, AND GLOBAL COUNTERTERRORISM,  
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,  
*Washington, DC.*

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 1:06 p.m., via Webex, Hon. Theodore E. Deutch (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Mr. DEUTCH. The Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Global Counterterrorism will come to order.

Without objection, the chair is authorized to declare a recess of the subcommittee at any point, and all members will have 5 days to submit statements, extraneous material, and questions for the record, subject to the length limitation in the rules.

As a reminder to members, please keep your video function on at all times, even when you are not recognized by the chair.

Members are responsible for muting and unmuting themselves, and please remember to mute yourself after you finish speaking. Consistent with H. Res. 8 and the accompanying regulations, staff will only mute members and witnesses as appropriate when they are not under recognition to eliminate background noise.

I see that we have a quorum. We will now proceed. I will recognize myself for opening remarks.

Pursuant to notice, we are holding a hearing on the current situation in Tunisia.

In December 2010, the Arab Spring erupted in Tunisia. Mohamed Bouazizi, a young street vendor, resorted to self-immolation to protest police harassment, and, within 10 days from that moment, President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, the country's long-standing authoritarian dictator, fled to Saudi Arabia. In the days and months following, democratic protest movements took hold across the Middle East and North Africa, from Egypt to Bahrain, Syria to Libya to Yemen.

Unfortunately, the widespread hope for a democratic future that took root in 2011 has reverted to either continued authoritarianism or civil war in the decades since. Tunisia alone has stood as the bastion of success in the region. It was lauded for its first free election in October 2011 and has maintained peaceful transitions of power and democratic rule since then.

As we approach the 11th anniversary of the start of the Arab Spring, it has become apparent that Tunisia's democracy is at risk. On July 25, President Kais Saied, a constitutional law professor elected in 2019, began asserting sweeping and troubling executive

authorities by invoking a disputed reading of his constitutional emergency powers to freeze the Parliament, suspend parliamentary immunity, and dismiss the Prime Minister and some Cabinet members.

On August 24, ahead of the anticipated 30-day deadline for lifting the current state of exception, President Saied extended it indefinitely. In September, President Saied announced plans to draft a new electoral code and appoint transitional leadership, all while maintaining the exceptional powers that he seized in July.

Most recently, President Saied named the Arab world's first female Prime Minister, Najla Bouden, and swore in a new Cabinet. Yet Tunisian Parliament remains suspended, and many parliamentarians remain in detention on politicized charges, with no indication from Saied as to when or even if there is a plan to reopen Parliament or free detained MPs.

Despite some positive movement in recent weeks, I remain deeply concerned about President Saied's actions. It is a slippery slope when leaders take action under the assumption that they alone can fix the problems that their nation is facing.

We all know here in this deliberative body that progress does not move in a straight line. Democracy, government by and for the people, is not a destination or a box to check; it is a process, a form of government that must be worked on and fought for. We fight for our own democracy every day.

Tunisia, the democratic example of the post-Arab Spring world, has made incredible gains over the past 11 years, but its people and leaders must continue to fight for the representative government that they want and that they deserve.

I recognize that a democratic form of government does not nullify or mitigate the legitimate continued grievances of the Tunisian people, including corruption, political paralysis, economic stagnation, and inadequate COVID-19 response efforts.

I stand committed and ready to support the Tunisian people in both endeavors: supporting Tunisia's democratic transition and constitutional reform process; and bolstering the international response to the political and economic challenges facing the country. Both are vital to Tunisia's success.

It is important to note here that there is longstanding bipartisan support for Tunisia and the U.S.-Tunisian relationship in this Congress and here on this committee. We provide substantial support to Tunisia. We all want to see a stable, prosperous Tunisia, and we want to see the Tunisian people chart their own successful future.

I am very grateful that we have with us this afternoon a distinguished panel of witnesses who are immensely qualified to help us understand the current political crisis in Tunisia, the root causes of the tension, and hopefully to offer suggestions that will protect U.S. interests while also promoting the long-term well-being of the Tunisian people. And I want to thank them for their participation today.

Unfortunately, Ranking Member Wilson is unable to be with us today, but I want to note his longtime interest in and support for Tunisia. And, in his absence, I am pleased to yield to my colleague, Vice Ranking Member Steube, for his opening remarks.

Mr. STEUBE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you for calling this hearing.

The U.S. has helped the Tunisian people with generous development and security assistance to help grow Tunisia's institutions and improve its economy. However, we are not seeing the results of our significant U.S.-tax-dollar assistance today.

While the U.S. has invested considerably in Tunisia in terms of foreign aid and assistance, U.S. policy never concentrated on promoting trade and free-market economic development in the country, which could have actually caused Tunisia's democracy to succeed.

The United States poured millions of taxpayer dollars into foreign aid in Tunisia, but, without real free-market reforms, Tunisia's leftist unions continued to push for deepening State control of the economy and Socialism, which allowed the economy to stagnate.

The Tunisian Constitution does not say that the President can suspend the Constitution or freeze Parliament. It does not say he can fire the Prime Minister, but to consult with him. However, that is exactly what President Saied did when he announced this summer a new Cabinet that will ultimately answer to him rather than Prime Minister Bouden. He swept aside much of the Constitution, similar to a coup.

Tunisia's President is not our friend. He has pushed an anti-American, anti-Israel agenda since running in his campaign and since taking office. Rather than putting forward real free-market reforms, the President has essentially announced that he will double down on a Socialistic agenda, and he has even threatened private businesses to lower prices or else. This does not bode well for Tunisia's future.

The Tunisians' democracy and Constitution, as well as U.S. tax dollars, are now being tested. President Saied dismissed the Prime Minister and froze Parliament, triggering international concern that Tunisia could backslide away from democracy. However, these moves were supported by some Tunisians. Thus, Tunisia's friends face a conundrum in trying to identify what best serves the will of the Tunisian people.

The recent appointment of a new Prime Minister and Cabinet was a good step to resolving this political crisis. However, there are still many outstanding issues that need to be addressed. I hope our witnesses today will offer some thoughts on the appropriate role that the United States and our partners can play in encouraging Tunisia to resolve these issues. I also hope our witnesses can help contextualize this discussion.

I believe it is past time for us to revisit and reconsider our foreign assistance to Tunisia, what should be the goals of the U.S.-Tunisia relationship, and why the United States should be involved in helping Tunisians address the underlying challenges that created their current level of discontent with the government and the economy, especially when one can easily dismiss the Constitution, and with some Tunisians supporting this move.

I would like to thank our witnesses for being here today to offer their insights. In particular, I would like to welcome back Eddy

Acevedo, the former longtime Middle East Subcommittee staff director who is appearing before us as a witness today.

And, with that, I yield back to the chairman. Thank you.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Steube.

I will now introduce our distinguished witnesses.

First, Dr. Elie Abouaoun is the director of the U.S. Institute of Peace Middle East and North Africa Programs, based in Tunis, Tunisia. He has previously served as the executive director of the Arab Human Rights Fund, as well as the acting country director and program manager of the Danish Refugee Council in Iraq. Dr. Abouaoun has been a visiting lecturer at Saint Joseph University in Lebanon on human rights, civil society, advocacy, and citizenship and is a doctor of dental surgery.

Next, Dr. Amna Guellali is the deputy regional director for Middle East and North Africa at Amnesty International. She previously served as senior Tunisia and Algeria researcher at Human Rights Watch, where she investigated human rights abuses in both countries; as an analyst at the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court of The Hague; and as a senior researcher in the department of international law at the Asser Institute. She has also served as legal officer at the regional delegation of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Tunis. Dr. Guellali holds a Ph.D. from the European University Institute in Florence and was awarded POMED's Leaders for Democracy award in 2017.

Ms. Alexis Arieff is a specialist in African affairs at the congressional Research Service, where her analysis focuses on North, West, and Central Africa. Before joining CRS 12 years ago, she previously worked as a researcher on Africa for the Committee to Protect Journalists, as well as a research fellow in the International Crisis Group's West Africa field office and as a contributing writer for Freedom House. Ms. Arieff has been detailed to policy offices at the State Department and Defense Department and has served as an international election observer in Tunisia and Guinea. She was a Fulbright scholar in Conakry, Guinea, in 2008–2009 and holds an M.A. in international relations from Yale University.

And, finally, it is my great honor to present Mr. Eddy Acevedo. Mr. Acevedo serves as the chief of staff and senior advisor to the president and CEO, Ambassador Mark Green, at the Wilson Center. Prior to joining the Wilson Center, Acevedo served as the senior director of communications and policy at the McCain Institute for International Leadership and in multiple senior management positions at U.S. Agency for International Development.

But for those of us on this committee, most importantly, Mr. Acevedo, from 2011 to 2017, served right here on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, first as the senior professional staff member overseeing the Western Hemisphere portfolio and then as the senior foreign policy advisor and subcommittee staff director for the Subcommittee on Middle East and North Africa, this very subcommittee, for then chair and my dear friend, Chairman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen. And we welcome Mr. Acevedo back to the subcommittee with open arms.

Thanks to all of you for being here today.

I will now recognize the witnesses for 5 minutes each. Without objection, your prepared written statements will be made a part of the record.

Dr. Abouaoun, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

**STATEMENT OF ELIE ABOUAOUN, PH.D., DDS, DIRECTOR, MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA PROGRAMS, UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE**

Dr. ABOUAOUN. Thank you very much.

Good afternoon, Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Steube, and members of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Global Counterterrorism. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the unfolding political crisis in Tunisia.

I am the director of the Middle East and North Africa programs of the U.S. Institute of Peace, based in Tunis. However, the views expressed here are my own.

On July 25, following nationwide protests amidst a deep political, social, and public health crisis, the President of the Republic, Kais Saied, invoked Article 80 of the Constitution to lift parliamentary immunity, suspend the Parliament for 30 days, and dismiss the Prime Minister.

The decision was greeted with jubilation on the streets of Tunisia. However, fears of democratic backsliding were exacerbated on August 24 when the President extended his extraordinary powers indefinitely.

Finally, on September 22, Mr. Saied replaced much of the Constitution with a three-page decree that officially dissolved the Parliament and granted himself control over all executive and legislative functions, while renewing his pledge to bring about rule of law, end impunity, and restore the proper functioning of the State.

A potentially positive development was the appointment days ago of Prime Minister Najla Bouden Ramadhane, but it remains to be seen how much influence she will have in decisionmaking.

Even prior to July 25, Tunisia was not a consolidated democracy. The 2011 revolution resulted in more personal freedoms and political pluralism, but these elements alone did not constitute a consolidated democracy and did not necessarily portend economic prosperity. And, while far less frequent than pre-2011, the government's use of the security sector and the judiciary to suppress dissent continued post-revolution.

After his September decision, the President has lost the support of the major civil society organizations, private sector, and nearly all of the political parties, including the largest elected party in the Parliament, Ennahda, an Islamist party distinct from the Muslim Brotherhood.

In line with their President, there is a consensus among Tunisians that the expectations of the 2011 revolution have not been met yet. However, there is disagreement about what kind of intervention is necessary to put the country on a path to prosperity and democracy. The President's focus on remaking the political system overlooks the need for more structural economic and social change.

In addition, the public's perception that the Tunisian State has unlimited resources creates unrealistic expectations that no political system can accommodate. A more reliable course of action for Tunisia to achieve political stability would be to focus on economic growth and to lay out a comprehensive and inclusive political roadmap emphasizing the return to normal institutional governance, including the democratically elected Parliament, that delivers justice and accountability for what happened since 2011.

For the last 10 years, the U.S. has made several strategic investments in Tunisia, especially in the areas of security and justice, military assistance, financial support, economic growth, democratic governance, and civil society strengthening.

While using its points of leverage carefully to decelerate Tunisia's slide toward autocracy, the U.S. must continue to proactively support Tunisia's stability and the promotion of plurality and democratic norms.

In the current context, abandoning engagement with security forces would not be in the interests of the United States or Tunisia. Indicators of when security assistance should be considered include a deterioration of human rights, continued absence of a plan to restore democratic order, or other indications that Tunisia's old regime police State is being restored.

One of the largest successes from U.S. investment in Tunisia since 2011 is a flourishing and professional of civil society. Now more than ever, the civil society and key public institutions need America's steadfast technical support and encouragement.

Unlike other countries in the region, where similar power grabs did not trigger the same level of concern, it is promising that many Tunisians might realize that President Saied's decisions will likely be dangerous for the country.

Furthermore, despite the polarization and tension in Tunisia, there has not been an outbreak of unrest. Notably, the government has not resorted to tactics of large-scale violence and intimidation, which is encouraging.

Last, beyond some inflammatory media discourse, there has not been any action taken by Tunisia to downsize the partnership with the United States.

The most constructive way to influence the President's actions is through concerted multilateral pressure, international and regional. As a democratic and friendly Tunisia is in the national security interests of the United States, pressure on the President must be targeted, firm, quiet, and multilateral.

Thank you very much, and I am looking forward to any questions.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Abouaoun follows:]



**United States Institute of Peace**

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

**Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the  
Middle East, North Africa, and Global Counterterrorism**

**Dr. Elie Abouaoun  
Director of Middle East and North Africa Programs  
United States Institute of Peace  
October 14, 2021**

Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson and members of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa and Global Counterterrorism, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the unfolding political crisis in Tunisia. This hearing is timely and important as Tunisia is at a critical moment in its democratic transition that began nearly eleven years ago.

I am the Director of the U.S. Institute of Peace's Middle East and North Africa Programs based in Tunis, although the views expressed here are my own. The U.S. Institute of Peace was established by Congress over 35 years ago as an independent, nonpartisan national institute to prevent and resolve violent conflicts abroad, in accordance with U.S. national interests and values.

Tunisia, as the only Middle East and North Africa country to emerge from the 2011 uprisings with a relatively successful democratic transition, is now facing another defining moment that could either springboard the country onto a path of recovery or spark a downward spiral into dysfunction and instability. As one of the few politically plural countries in the region, a key U.S. counterterrorism ally, and located in a region on the frontline of the global great power competition, it is important that the United States' relationship with this North African country is handled with great care.

Even before the President's decision to suspend the Parliament on July 25, Tunisia was dealing with several destabilizing factors that have long-term implications for American interests, such as violent extremism, irregular migration to Europe, deep-seated socioeconomic grievances, and a political crisis making the country's future uncertain. All these factors have the potential to increase fragility in an already volatile region. My testimony today will shed light on the current realities on the ground in Tunisia and their potential impact on the country and U.S. vital interests in North Africa.

### **Overview**

On July 25, following nationwide protests amidst a deep political and social crisis exacerbated by the public health crisis, the President of the Republic of Tunisia, Kais Saied, invoked Article 80 of the Tunisian Constitution which, as he interprets it, gave him the power to lift parliamentary immunity, suspend the parliament for 30 days, and dismiss the Prime Minister.

In the days leading up to this move, nationwide protests were fueled by public outrage over the country's paralyzed institutions, a deteriorating economy, and continued impunity for corruption and abuse amidst the deadliest wave of COVID-19 to date. The President's decision was greeted with jubilation on the streets of Tunisia. Initial reactions from political parties and major civil society organizations were mixed. Some supported this unprecedented executive action to correct the perceived downward trajectory of the country. Others immediately condemned it as a constitutional coup. Many in the international community immediately voiced concerns that Tunisia was at grave risk of sliding back into authoritarianism.



Fears of democratic backsliding were exacerbated on August 24 when President Saied extended his extraordinary powers indefinitely, ignoring calls from within and outside the country for a clear roadmap back to inclusive politics and constitutional order. Finally, in a breach of democratic norms, on September 22 President Saied replaced much of the Tunisian Constitution with a three-page decree that officially dissolved parliament and granted himself control over all executive and legislative functions. At the same time, President Saied renewed his pledge to bring about rule of law, end impunity, and restore the proper functioning of the state. Saied's actions and statements indicate he is determined to amend the Tunisian Constitution by changing the current "representative democracy" to a "direct democracy" thus fulfilling his campaign pledge to address the issues underlying Tunisia's 2011 revolution.

While many have condemned the president's most recent actions as outside the bounds of the constitution, his takeover has enjoyed large levels of support from those who wanted strong government action to improve living standards and hold corrupt elites accountable. Tunisians' support for the President's actions is illustrative of their disappointment in both the political transition and the government performance since 2011.

However, there is growing concern within the country and internationally that President Saied has overreached in removing all constitutional checks and balances. In recent weeks, ambassadors of the G7 countries and the U.S. have publicly and privately urged President Saied to appoint a government and return to constitutional order. In response, President Saied announced in various public speeches that he would not tolerate foreign interference as he faces rising pressure from Western governments. The President's intransigence has led many to wonder how democratic allies, like the United States, can induce more constructive actions.

A potentially positive development was the appointment of Ms. Najla Bouden Romdhane, a university professor and senior official in the Ministry of Higher Education, as the new Prime Minister. However, based on the President's decree, the Prime Minister's role is to carry out the orders of the President. This raises questions about the amount of influence that Romdhane will actually have in political decision-making. A new government was sworn in on October 11 and it remains to be seen how much influence the new ministers will have going forward.

#### **Tunisian Views**

Many Tunisians, while cherishing personal freedoms of the post-revolution period, agree with the president's assertion that the post-2011 political system weakened and divided the executive branch to such a degree that it hindered economic growth, facilitated corruption, and impeded social mobility.

Just as in 2011, the underlying concerns of the public remain economic stagnation and pervasive corruption rather than the democratic transition itself. President Saied was elected because of his brash promises to address both issues through radical reform. In his 2019 Presidential campaign and in the months leading to the July 25 Presidential decree, Saied promised to bring accountability into politics and end impunity for the political and business elite.

President Saïed used the public's grave concerns about continued high levels of underemployment and unemployment as well as a mishandled COVID-19 pandemic response campaign to build a public case for overhauling the political system and casting the post-revolution political order as a primary culprit for the country's woes. His argument came at a time when public sentiments of despair, hopelessness, and frustration with the post-2011 political class had reached a breaking point. His decisive actions on July 25 provided a source of hope for a population desperate for good governance.

Even prior to July 25, Tunisia was still a country in transition and not a consolidated democracy. The 2011 revolution resulted in greater freedom of speech, freedom of expression, and political pluralism. But these elements alone did not constitute a consolidated democracy and did not necessarily portend economic prosperity. And while far less prevalent than pre-2011, the government's use of the security sector and the judiciary to suppress dissent continued post-revolution.

After his actions in September, however, the President has lost the support of the major civil society organizations and nearly all of the political parties. Similarly, displeasure with the President has increased from the private sector. That said, large scale mobilization against the President has not occurred due to widespread fear of popular backlash. Added to the fact that he has removed all checks on his power and appears to have the support of the internal security forces, the chilling effect that this has had on civil society's willingness to firmly and publicly oppose his authoritarian moves cannot be overstated.

In line with President Saïed's stance, there is a consensus among Tunisians that the expectations of the 2011 revolution have not been met. However, there is disagreement about what kind of intervention is necessary to put the country on a path to prosperity and democracy. The President's focus on remaking the political system overlooks the need for more structural change, such as reforming the systems that have perpetuated deep injustices and prevented prosperity. Such reforms would require confronting the crony capitalism and state capture of the old regime which has only expanded in the post-revolution era.

In addition, the public's perception that the Tunisian state has unlimited resources to address major issues simultaneously creates unrealistic expectations that no political system can accommodate. A more reliable course of action for Tunisia to achieve political stability would be to focus on economic growth while reducing regional disparities and increasing economic sovereignty and opportunities for upward social mobility. This can be done through a series of reforms: rightsizing and restructuring the public sector; rehabilitating and expanding the public education system that is the country's primary ladder for social mobility; addressing corruption, cronyism and monopolies; improving agricultural policy for small farmers; and addressing rapid environmental degradation. These actions will enable a larger market for unemployed young people to seek economic opportunities.

Reforms would also require breaking down legal and extra-legal barriers for small and medium sized businesses to enter the market and thrive. This must come with more transparency, efficiency, and rule of law. Policing must also be reformed in line with international democratic and human rights norms.

None of these reforms, which will take decades, can be accomplished sustainably if done through extra-legal and autocratic means. Such deep changes require consultation with and buy-in from the public if they are to succeed. History has shown that bold reform via “strongman rule” rarely yields long-term stability or prosperity and often creates larger problems in the process.

#### **What is at Risk for Tunisia**

The most clear and present danger now is that Tunisians and their allies in the West do nothing to encourage the President to return to a governing process that is inclusive, democratic, and legitimate.

Some have advocated for the removal of President Saied, but this could embolden the Ennahdha party and the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as remnant forces from the old regime which has its own dangerous implications for the country.

The role of the security forces and their influence on political stability must also be considered. Thus far, the Tunisian military appears willing to support their commander-in-chief’s controversial takeover. But questions remain about how long and under what circumstances the military will remain loyal to the President. This is a critical area to watch closely.

The Interior Ministry, which oversees the internal security forces including the Police and National Guard, also appears loyal to President Saied. However, the police forces are less disciplined than the military and their command structures are more complex. If opposition within the security forces were to rise, this could create divisions within the security establishment that that would be destabilizing and even lead to the resurgence of terrorist groups. Intervention from the military or the security establishment would create far more instability than good for the country and would most likely not result in a return to democratic norms.

#### **Moving Forward**

The best-case scenario now would be for President Saied to lay out a comprehensive and inclusive political roadmap emphasizing the return to normal institutional governance (not personalist) that delivers justice and accountability for the transgressions that have occurred over the last eleven years with a clear vision for how to move forward with badly needed economic and social reforms. The debate about the precise shape and form of the political system can be worked out later. Matters such as implementing a new electoral law, holding elections, and passing a reformed constitution will all take time and can only be legitimate if done inclusively. In the meantime, what is most urgent to address is the economic desperation of the country, which is only worsening.

However, the President’s actions and words since his election indicate he is unlikely to reverse his course voluntarily. At the same time, unilateral pressure from any one country like the U.S. or from the EU or elsewhere will only fuel a prevailing conspiratorial narrative in a country where the anti-Western sentiment remains high. Therefore, the most constructive way to influence President Saied is through concerted multilateral (international and regional) pressure conveyed consistently to him and other power structures of the state through quiet diplomacy.

### **Leverage and Diplomacy**

Since 2011, the U.S. has made several strategic investments in Tunisia especially in the areas of security and justice sector reform, military assistance, financial support, economic growth, democratic governance, and civil society organizations strengthening.

Just prior to July 25, the U.S. was preparing to sign a Millennium Challenge Corporation compact with Tunisia worth nearly \$500 million. This would help modernize Tunisia's ports and facilitate more equitable access to international trade for all Tunisians. This is now on hold. A new United States sovereign loan guarantee was also in the making at the time of the President's takeover. USAID has a large "Development Objective Agreement" (DOAG) with the Tunisian government that supports democracy, governance, and economic growth across the country. The IMF and World Bank continue to provide hundreds of millions of dollars annually to support Tunisia's public financing and to improve governance. Finally, the U.S. continues to invest heavily in Tunisia's security forces and military, providing critical infrastructure and capabilities to meet evolving threats. As a burgeoning democracy, Tunisia was also made a Major Non-NATO Ally. Much if not all of this is now at risk.

While using its points of leverage carefully to decelerate Tunisia's slide toward autocracy, the U.S. must continue to proactively support Tunisia's stability, its democratic activists, and the security sector for better respect of human rights.

The performance and effectiveness of both the security sector and the military in combatting violent extremism and preventing spillover from Libya have improved significantly with U.S. assistance. Despite continued serious human rights violations before and after July 25, there are in fact several senior-level security officials who are reform-minded and pushing for more rights-respecting agendas. In the current context of a potential return to autocracy, abandoning the U.S. engagement with security forces would not be in the interests of the U.S. or Tunisia. With public unrest in Tunisia likely in the near future and impunity for police abuse a continuing issue that drives violent extremism, U.S. assistance to the security forces and justice sector should be supporting reforms and respect for human rights, accountability, and the rule of law rather than mere material assistance.

Also, there should be a redoubling of support to civil society. One of the largest successes from U.S. investment in Tunisia since 2011 is the flourishing and professionalization of civil society. International organizations have found strong and productive partners in civil society that have contributed significantly to advancing fundamental rights and freedoms, preventing democratic backsliding, and chipping away at the legacy of authoritarianism. Now more than ever in this most perilous moment for the country, Tunisian civil society and key public institutions need America's steadfast technical support and encouragement.

It is promising that many Tunisians have realized that President Saied's July 25 decision and subsequent measures are dangerous for the country. In other countries in the region, similar power grabs did not trigger the same level of concern for the future within the general public, even years after they happened.

Furthermore, despite the polarization and tension in Tunisia, there has not been an outbreak of widespread violence and unrest. Notably, the government has not resorted to tactics of large-scale violence and intimidation, which is encouraging. That being said, self-censorship is prevalent and public dissent -- so far -- is orderly and peaceful. Thus, the government has not yet been tested.

Lastly, the main elements of the U.S.-Tunisia relationship have not been negatively affected thus far, beyond some inflammatory media discourse. On the whole, there has not been any action taken by Tunisia to downsize the partnership with the United States. My engagement with interlocutors throughout the government indicate their keen desire to continue a partnership with the U.S.

These are indications that the U.S. should support Tunisians to prevent this gradual slide back into autocracy, and that it is not in the interest of the United States to withdraw aid from or sanction Tunisia at this stage. Instead, the U.S. should increase support and technical assistance for civil society and others who can help prevent violence, maintain stability, increase trust, and move Tunisia back toward constitutional order. Indicators of when security assistance should be reconsidered include a deterioration of human rights, a crackdown on basic freedoms, the continued absence of a plan to restore democratic order, or other indications that Tunisia's old regime police state is being restored.

Leaving Tunisia on its own will lead to instability as President Saied is unable to deliver on the economic and social fronts. Too much pressure or the wrong kind of it could further destabilize the country, harm the Tunisian people, create threats to regional security, and nullify the successes that U.S. investment in Tunisia's democracy and stability has had to date.

As a democratic and friendly Tunisia is in the national security interests of the United States, pressure on the President must be targeted, firm, quiet and multilateral.

*The views expressed in this testimony are those of the author and not the U.S. Institute of Peace.*

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Dr. Abouaoun.  
 Next, we will go to Dr. Guellali.  
 You are recognized for 5 minutes.

**STATEMENT OF AMNA GUELLALI, PH.D., DEPUTY REGIONAL  
 DIRECTOR FOR MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA, AM-  
 NESTY INTERNATIONAL**

Dr. GUELLALI. Sorry. It took me some time to unmute myself.

Thank you very much, Chairman Deutch and members of the subcommittee. On behalf of Amnesty International, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony and for convening this important hearing on the current circumstances in Tunisia, a country where I am residing right now, and I am also Tunisian.

Since President Kais Saied claimed exceptional powers on July 25, Tunisia has been undergoing troubling political turmoil. However, one must not forget that the country's system of governance was increasingly dysfunctional long before then.

For a significant number of Tunisians, the daily spectacle of a Parliament that was, at best, paralyzed and, at worse, the scene of violence and insults had become insufferable, and many considered that President Saied's move to suspend Parliament was a legitimate attempt to give a new impetus to the country's political transition.

In issuing Decree 117 on September 22, President Saied has taken an even more radical turn, suspending most of the Constitution and formally granting himself nearly unfettered powers to legislate and govern. He has barred people from challenging his decrees and decisions. This absence of any supervisory powers, including any authority to review the President's decision, is an outright weakening of human rights protections in the country.

Amnesty International has documented several violations of human rights since the announcement of these exceptional powers. In the name of fighting corruption and ensuring security, authorities imposed arbitrary travel bans against at least 50 Tunisians. They have also placed at least 12 others under abusive house arrest, including high-profile figures such as the former president of a State body to fight corruption.

One particularly worrying incident concerns Slimane Bouhafis, an Algerian activist and U.N.-recognized refugee in Tunisia who was forcibly abducted by unknown men from his home in Tunis in August and forcibly returned to Algeria, where he is now imprisoned and faces persecution. President Saied has so far said nothing publicly about the incident, and authorities have not announced any formal investigation into it.

However, while discussing these violations, we must also remember that Tunisia was not a paradise for human rights prior to July 25. Arbitrary travel bans and house arrests, violations of freedom of speech, and trials of civilians before military courts were already common under previous governments.

Regarding freedom of peaceful assembly, Tunisia's security forces have responded unevenly to demonstrations since July 25. During recent protests against Saied, security forces restrained from carrying out dispersal or responding with force. This contrasts with

the way security forces have conducted themselves during the socioeconomic protests that swept the country in 2021, when they arrested more than 2,000 protesters and allegedly mistreated some of them.

As a conclusion, I would say that Tunisia suffered serious human rights violations both before and after July 25. Despite recent positive steps, such as the lifting of some arbitrary house arrests, the long-term outlook is still troubling. Nearly all powers remain concentrated in the hands of President Saied. And, meanwhile, the economy crisis could swiftly transform into a political one, as ordinary Tunisians grow increasingly desperate, leading people to take to the streets and raising the chances of violent crackdowns by the authorities.

So, in this situation, we hope that the United States will continue to support Tunisia's path toward the respect of human rights during this period of upheaval. And I would like to make the following recommendations to the Congress and to U.S. authorities in general: to urgently and publicly call on Tunisian authorities to immediately and unconditionally release all those who are detained solely for expressing their human rights; to halt investigations and prosecutions of civilians before the military justice system and to lift all arbitrary travel bans and house arrests; to also push for immediate—to urge the President to rein in security forces, who have long carried out abuses with impunity against Tunisians and might be emboldened by the State of emergency; and hold accountable all those reasonably suspected of committing crimes under international law; to push for the immediate opening of a thorough, impartial, and transparent investigation into the forced abduction and unlawful transfer to Algeria of a U.N. refugee and make the results of the investigation public; and, finally, to support and amplify the call by civil society organizations and activists on the ground for the government to commit to a reform agenda on all levels.

So thank you again for allowing me to testify today, and I look forward to answering the questions.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Guellali follows:]

**AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL**



**Written Testimony Submitted to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs,  
Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Global Counterterrorism**

**For a Hearing on "Tunisia: Examining the State of Democracy and Next Steps for U.S. Policy"  
October 14, 2021 – 1:00 pm**

**Testimony of Amna Guellali, Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa  
Amnesty International**

Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, and members of the subcommittee, on behalf of Amnesty International, I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony and for convening this important hearing on circumstances in Tunisia.

Since Tunisia's president, Kais Saied, claimed exceptional powers on July 25th, Tunisia has been undergoing troubling political turmoil. But it is also true that Tunisia's system of checks and balances was increasingly dysfunctional long before then. For a significant number of Tunisians, the daily spectacle of a parliament that was at best paralyzed and at worst the scene of violence and insults, had become insufferable and many considered President Saied's move to suspend parliament a legitimate attempt to give a new impetus to the country's political transition. After his announcement on July 25th, people took to the streets to celebrate the apparent downfall of a much-criticized ruling elite.

**Recent developments and civil society response**

In [issuing Decree 117](#) on September 22nd, Saied has taken an even more radical turn, suspending most of Tunisia's constitution and formally granting himself nearly unfettered powers to legislate and govern. In addition to leaving parliament frozen, he has barred people from challenging his decrees and decisions via the administrative court – an institution that has traditionally enabled people to overturn administrative decisions or seek compensation for grievances that arise from them – and dissolved a temporary body set up to verify the constitutionality of laws. This unprecedented concentration of powers creates an environment conducive to human rights abuses. The absence of any supervisory powers, including any authority to review the presidential decisions, is an outright weakening of human rights protections.

Meanwhile, President Saied has risked turning Tunisians against one another through frequent divisive rhetoric, branding his opponents and critics as "traitors", "insects", "demons", and other such epithets. Civil society organizations and activists, which played a critical role in shaping the state of human rights and governance in Tunisia since the 2011 uprising, have been overwhelmingly stonewalled from any meaningful engagement with Saied, who has rejected calls for an inclusive and transparent dialogue in his claimed goal of constitutional reform and shaping a new system of governance. Broadly, Tunisian civil society organizations – including the powerful [Tunisian General Labour Union](#) – have [criticized and called for an end to](#) Saied's assumption of unfettered power and subsequent abuses.

The new government announced on October 11th under Saied's appointed Prime Minister Najla Bouden Romdhane faces daunting challenges. First and foremost are the looming economic crisis and COVID-19. Following ten years of often unstable politics and a failure by leaders to enact economic reforms,



Tunisia's economy is in shambles. According to the country's central bank, the "severe shortage of external financial resources" is threatening Tunisia's ability to finance its state budget for the current year.

#### **Human rights abuses and concerns**

Amnesty International has documented flagrant violations of human rights since July 25th by Tunisian authorities. In the name of fighting corruption and ensuring security, [authorities imposed arbitrary, unlawful travel bans](#) against at least 50 Tunisians. Authorities have placed at least 12 people under house arrest, including high profile figures such as the former president of a state body to fight corruption. In at least several of these cases, such measures have been imposed without a clear required explanation to those affected.

Since July 25th, Tunisia's military justice system has begun investigating or prosecuting [at least nine civilians](#), including three for publicly criticizing President Saied. At least six of those detained and being tried before the military courts are members of parliament critical of Saied. Security forces have also [raided press offices](#), including those of Al Jazeera.

One particularly worrying incident concerns Slimane Bouhafs, an Algerian activist and UN-recognized refugee in Tunisia [who was forcibly abducted](#) from his home in Tunis in August to Algeria by unknown men, where he is now imprisoned and faces persecution as a Christian convert. He had previously been imprisoned in Algeria, and sought refuge in Tunisia. President Saied, who has vowed to respect human rights, has so far said nothing publicly about the incident, and authorities have not announced an investigation into it. Tunisia's awareness of, cooperation in, or acquiescence to his forcible transfer to Algeria despite his refugee status would constitute a grave violation of international law.

However, while discussing these violations, we must also remember that Tunisia was not a paradise for human rights prior to July 25th. Arbitrary travel bans and house arrests, violations of freedom of speech, and trials of civilians before military courts were already common under previous governments.

#### **Conduct of Tunisian armed forces and the military justice system**

Regarding freedom of peaceful assembly, Tunisian security forces have responded unevenly to demonstrations since July 25th. Recent protests against Saied on September 26th and on October 10th saw security forces' general restraint from carrying out dispersal or responding with force; the same went for protests in support of Saied. Still, instances of use of excessive force by security forces were documented during protests on September 1st and in [apparent targeting of journalists](#). This contrasts with the [violent use of force](#) by security forces in January 2021 in response to socioeconomic protests that swept the country, during which they arrested more than 2,000 protesters and allegedly mistreated hundreds of them in custody.

Amnesty is also worried by the increasing unlawful use of the military justice system to prosecute civilians, including public critics of Saied. While civilians have frequently been tried in military courts since the 2011 uprising, there has been an apparent spike in such cases since July 25th. At least nine civilians are currently facing trial or risk of trial before military courts, which lack independence and fail to fulfil the requirements of fair trial under international law. As president, Saied controls Tunisia's armed forces and military justice system, enabling use of both to unlawfully settle political scores.

In the wake of his consolidation of power, President Saïed has also made several controversial security service appointments of officers currently being prosecuted for commission of egregious human rights violations under former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Saïed has maintained the appointment of the head of the intelligence office, despite outcry from groups of victims and his ongoing trial at the transitional justice court in Gafsa in relation to alleged torture and other ill-treatment of detainees during protests in 2008.

This is of particular relevance to the United States, being one of the largest sources of security aid to Tunisia, having provided [over \\$1 billion in assistance](#) for Tunisian security forces since 2011.

#### **Conclusion and U.S. policy recommendations**

Tunisia suffered a number of serious human rights violations both before and after July 25th. Despite recent positive steps, such as the lifting of some arbitrary house arrests, the long-term outlook is still troubling. Nearly all power remains concentrated in the hands of President Saïed, who may act largely at whim and free of institutional checks. Meanwhile - and as Tunisia has shown in the past - the economic crisis could swiftly transform into a political one as ordinary Tunisians grow increasingly desperate, leading people to take to the streets and raising the chances of violent crackdowns by authorities.

We hope that the United States will continue to support Tunisia's path towards the respect of human rights during this period of upheaval, and we make the following recommendations:

- Urgently and publicly call on Tunisian authorities to immediately and unconditionally release all those detained solely for exercising their human rights; halt investigations and prosecutions of civilians by the military justice system; lift all arbitrarily-imposed travel bans and house arrests; and to never to resort to these or other abusive practices in the future.
- Publicly urge President Saïed to reign in security forces - who have long carried out abuses with impunity against Tunisians and might be emboldened by the imposed state of emergency - and hold accountable all those reasonably suspected of committing crimes under international law.
- Push for the immediate opening of a thorough, impartial, and transparent investigation into the forced abduction and unlawful transfer to Algeria of UN-designated refugee Slimane Bouhafis and make the results of the investigation public; and further work with both Algerian and Tunisian authorities to facilitate Bouhafis' safe return to Tunisia.
- Support and amplify the call by civil society organizations and activists on the ground in Tunisia for the government to genuinely commit to put forward a reform agenda on all levels - one that centers human rights and an end to impunity.

Thank you again for allowing me to testify today, and I look forward to answering any questions.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you very much, Dr. Guellali.  
 Ms. Arieff, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

**STATEMENT OF ALEXIS ARIEFF, SPECIALIST IN AFRICAN  
 AFFAIRS, CONGRESSIONAL RESEARCH SERVICE**

Ms. ARIEFF. Thank you.

Chairman Deutch, Congressman Steube, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting the congressional Research Service to testify today.

President Kais Saied's assertion of sweeping executive powers has fueled uncertainty about the future of Tunisia's young democracy, which successive U.S. administrations and Congress have sought to foster, as you know.

Reactions within Tunisia have varied. Many Tunisians share the view that their political system and leaders have failed to deliver on the promise of the country's 2011 uprising. Economic hardships were severe even prior to the depredations of COVID-19, while political disputes have impeded institutional reform and anti-corruption efforts.

The extent of agreement on what should replace the status quo is less certain, however. Opposition to President Saied's approach may have grown in recent weeks, with some previously ambivalent political parties and Tunisia's powerful trade union federation voicing acute concerns about his intention to govern by decree and amend the Constitution and electoral law.

Yet President Saied appears at present to enjoy greater popular support than many of his chief antagonists, and he faces few evident institutional constraints. His opponents are internally divided and mutually distrustful.

In recent weeks, thousands of Tunisians have turned to the streets in rival protests for and against the President, and public opinion is likely to continue to evolve. The potential for broad coalition building or, conversely, escalating confrontation is in question.

Even with his apparent control of the State security apparatus, President Saied's power and claim to legitimacy arguably rest on his assertion of popular backing. It remains to be seen whether the President can deliver on his pledge to improve people's daily lives and how he might respond if more of the public turns against his leadership. The President has not articulated a clear roadmap for political reforms or an economic plan amid stalled negotiations with the IMF over a new lending package.

Among the issues that Congress may consider is whether recent developments undermine or strengthen the case for U.S. aid and engagement and whether a shift in scope or emphasis is warranted.

Recent developments played out after the House Appropriations Committee reported its Fiscal Year 2022 aid appropriations measure, which would provide at least \$197 million in economic and security assistance for Tunisia. This is equivalent to the Biden administration's budget proposal earlier this year and would continue a practice in which Congress has annually provided a minimum floor of aid for Tunisia, with the practical effect of ensuring funds amid competing global priorities.

The Defense Department has provided additional security cooperation in recent years. And the U.S. Millennium Challenge Cor-

poration has approved, but not yet signed, a 5-year, nearly \$500 million development aid compact to strengthen Tunisia's transportation, trade, and water sectors.

The extent to which U.S. aid and security cooperation present opportunities for leverage is debatable. President Saïed has shown little evidence of being open to external pressure or incentives. He campaigned as an anti-system candidate, won in a landslide, does not have a political party, and appears to rely on a small circle of advisors. He has castigated domestic critics as "corrupt" and "treacherous."

Moreover, U.S. aid seeks to advance U.S.-stated 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.

Encouragement of Tunisia's democracy has been one, but not the only, stated aim of U.S. engagement over the past decade. Nor is the United States the sole or necessarily most influential external actor. Tunisians, for their part, have engaged in much debate over the desirability of external pressure at this juncture.

U.S. aid and diplomatic messaging may nonetheless be viewed as an expression of U.S. ideals and priorities. In the case of some countries, Congress has imposed legislative restrictions, or conditions, on certain types of U.S. assistance, often simultaneously granting the executive branch flexibility to waive or bypass them on humanitarian, national security, or other grounds. Congressional oversight represents an additional potential tool.

Looking ahead. Over the past decade, Tunisians have repeatedly defied observers' expectations by navigating a peaceful way out of political crises, yet these crisis resolutions involved elite bargaining that arguably excluded the concerns of many ordinary people. Consensus on effective economic reforms and accountability has been much more elusive, presaging the desperation and frustrations that many Tunisians have voiced.

Whether Tunisia can again deliver a course correction while also addressing deep-seated economic and institutional challenges, and what actions from the international community are most likely to help support such an outcome, is a pressing question today.

This concludes my testimony. I look forward to your questions.  
[The prepared statement of Ms. Arieff follows:]



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

7-5700

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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 Kais 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

<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 Home 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, 9:21am; statement by Representative Rashida Tlaib on Twitter, July 26, 2021, 3:06pm; 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, "McCauley 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

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., Ouiem 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 other systems,” 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 Kais 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 Kais 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

<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: Kais 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 Makhoulf insulted her in misogynistic terms.<sup>37</sup>

<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

<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>

<sup>44</sup> "Fiddling While Carthage Burns," October 2, 2021.

<sup>45</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>46</sup> See World Bank, *The Unfinished Revolution*, May 2014.

<sup>47</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>48</sup> State Department, "Tunisia Travel Advisory," July 12, 2021.

<sup>49</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>50</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>51</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

<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 1. 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

<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.

<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.



Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Ms. Arieff. I appreciate it very much. Thanks for the thoughtful and thorough presentation, what we have come to expect from CRS. And we are always grateful for all you provide to help us do our jobs better. Thank you very much.

And, finally, our last witness—let me find—and there he is. It is really a pleasure to welcome back as a witness to the committee that he served so well for so many years Eddy Acevedo.

Welcome back, Eddy. It is really great to have you. Sorry to call you that, but that is the way we feel about it.

**STATEMENT OF EDDY ACEVEDO, CHIEF OF STAFF AND SENIOR ADVISOR, WILSON CENTER, FORMER NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISOR AND SENIOR DEPUTY ASSISTANT ADMINISTRATOR FOR LEGISLATIVE AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS AT USAID**

Mr. ACEVEDO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Deutch, Congressman Steube, and members of the subcommittee, I feel like I am returning home. I spent nearly a decade working in this body, in the people's House, as a former staffer, and the majority of that time, I had the honor of serving on this committee under Chairman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen.

So thank you for convening this timely and important hearing and inviting me to testify. I know all the work behind the scenes that goes on to prepare for these hearings, so I want to especially thank Gabriella Zach and Casey Kustin or, as Ileana used to call her, Deutchette, for all of their hard work and their friendship.

Over 6 years ago, Mr. Chairman, this same subcommittee convened a hearing entitled "Tunisia's Fragile Democratic Transition," where we collectively praised Tunisia for adopting a new Constitution, electing a new Parliament, holding elections, and even transferring power peacefully from one government to another.

Now, however, Tunisia is on a slippery slope as we witness some democratic backsliding. Recent actions by President Saied call into question if Tunisia is still heading down a democratic path.

We have seen this playbook before. A recent example is in Haiti, where Presidents have ended up ruling by decrees filled with empty promises and undemocratic norms, allowing the Haitian Parliament to become nonfunctional and failing to hold timely elections.

In Tunisia, it is true that people feel let down by the democratic transition. Most expected their newfound freedoms to be tied to economic prosperity. Instead, Tunisians are witnessing high unemployment, a struggling economy, and find it difficult to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

So, ultimately, why does Tunisia matter?

One, we are friends with the people of Tunisia, who are yearning for a free, democratic, and prosperous future, which does not occur often in the Middle East.

Two, a stable Tunisia is important to regional security, migration, and it counters ambitions of potential malign actors. Russia already has a port in Syria; another access point through Tunisia can threaten the stability of the Mediterranean. Tunisia has welcomed Huawei and wants stronger economic ties with China, even though its largest trading partner is the European Union. Further

instability and chaos in Tunisia may lead to a migration crisis in North Africa and throughout Europe.

Three, from a counterterrorism standpoint, we cannot forget Tunisia in the broader scheme of the fallout from the Afghanistan withdrawal if ISIS or its next iteration reemerges. Tunisia previously had the highest numbers per capita of ISIS foreign fighters heading to Syria or Iraq to fight for the caliphate. In addition, ISIS previously used training camps in Libya to carry out several attacks in Tunisia, and we also witnessed recently some suicide bombings throughout the country as well. So a less secure environment only makes it more difficult for the development professionals to operate.

During my time at USAID, Tunisia was a top priority. Former Administrator Ambassador Mark Green elevated our presence in Tunisia to a full USAID mission. In 2020, Ambassador Green then traveled to Tunisia to help reaffirm how important it was not only for the Agency but to the furthering of overall U.S. interests in the region.

This committee often faces many challenges in foreign policy and sometimes even questions what leverage we have to demonstrate our values and our principles, especially when they come to democracy and human rights. But, in Tunisia, we do have leverage. We can apply a carrot-and-stick approach to incentivize good behavior or be prepared to apply pressure in case the situation worsens.

Here are just some recommendations.

One, if democratic principles continue to be undermined, spaces for civil society organizations close, and there is no path to restore democratic order in Tunisia by reinstating the Parliament, then the U.S. should reassess the designation of Tunisia as a major non-NATO ally or reevaluate our INL security programs and our foreign military financing initiatives.

Two, we can reexamine any future funds for Tunisia's sovereign loan guarantee program.

Three, the Millennium Challenge Corporation has seemingly paused discussion of the nearly \$500 million compact. Recent actions jeopardize Tunisia's eligibility, according to the MCC indicators and scorecard.

Four, Tunisia is seeking a \$4 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund. We should use our voice, vote, and influence to seek restoration of democratic and constitutional order.

Five, our democracy networks need resources to bolster political parties, civil society, human rights defenders, independent media, and journalists. USAID, through the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening, also known as the CEPPS mechanism, State Department's own Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Bureau, and the National Endowment for Democracy should all be allocating additional resources to respond to the current crisis. USAID can also dispatch its Office of Transition Initiatives to assess the current environment and needs that can be addressed by the Agency's Conflict Prevention and Stabilization Bureau.

In short, Mr. Chairman, we cannot wait to act any longer to determine whether or not President Saied is the democrat we all hoped for. Parliament must be reinstated, and the judiciary should be independent. Stability and prosperity in Tunisia is in our na-

tional security and foreign policy interests. If the U.S. does not step in now, we will leave the door open for our adversaries to potentially fill the void.

Tunisians have proven that they have what it takes to turn this around, but we must lend a helping hand before the crisis becomes untenable. We can no longer have a wait-and-see attitude. We want Tunisia to succeed, and we need it to succeed, but we must act now before it is too late.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Acevedo follows:]

**Testimony of Eddy Acevedo  
Chief of Staff and Senior Advisor to the President and CEO  
Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars<sup>1</sup>**

**House Foreign Affairs Committee  
Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Global Counterterrorism  
Hearing on Tunisia: Examining the State of Democracy and Next Steps for U.S. Policy  
October 14, 2021**

**Introduction**

Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, and Members of the Subcommittee, over a decade ago, courageous Tunisians went to the streets, ousted dictator Ben Ali, began the Arab Spring movement, and started out on a road towards democracy.

Today, Tunisia stands at a fork on that road. While we all knew their democratic transition would not be easy, we cannot underestimate the threats to democracy which the country currently faces - especially those surrounding the events of July 25th. These developments threaten both the progress made over the last decade and the nation's long-term prospects for democracy and stability.

**Recent History**

In 2019, President Kais Saied was elected President by a majority of voters, receiving over 70% of the vote. He is a constitutional law professor who helped draft Tunisia's constitution from 2014 and ran as a political outsider focused on fighting corruption. While his popularity among Tunisians remains high, his recent actions, on the other hand, have encroached on the very constitution he helped create.

Among his actions over the last few months, beginning on July 25th, President Saied has physically shut down the country's legislative branch, fired a Prime Minister, co-opted Tunisia's attorney-general function, ruling by decree, granted himself judicial power, and in the view of many observers violated Tunisia's constitution. Article 80 of the Tunisia Constitution specifically states that "the President of the Republic cannot dissolve the Assembly of the Representatives of the People and a motion of censure against the government cannot be presented."<sup>2</sup>

Then, on September 22, President Saied issued Decree 117 which essentially suspends the constitution and allows him to control all branches of government by decree and removes any checks against his power. While this measure may be called "temporary", there is no timeline on when it may end. Recently, at least one television station critical to the President was shut down. All of these actions -- most notably the closure of Tunisia's Parliament, which was elected the same year as Saied -- are not what we expect in a democracy. While his appointment of a new government, new ministers, and a new Prime Minister who is the first female prime minister in Tunisia and across the Arab world seems like a positive step forward, the decision is tainted by the lack of legitimacy. We must not allow ourselves to be placated if democratic principles are eroded elsewhere.

<sup>1</sup> The views expressed in this testimony are those of the author and does not reflect an official position of the Wilson Center.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Tunisia\\_2014.pdf](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Tunisia_2014.pdf)

Of course, we recognize and acknowledge the widespread frustrations of Tunisians with their elected legislative body and its representatives. Their anger about inflation, unemployment, corruption, and threat of Covid-19 is what Saied has tapped into. This is why for many months over 85% of Tunisians, according to polls, approved of the actions he took on July 25th. However, as we know from history and experience in other parts of the world: just because his actions may be popular among the masses does not mean they are legal nor democratic. Saied's recent decisions undoubtedly jeopardize future legitimacy of Tunisian policies, decisions, and institutions -- including his newly-formed cabinet, perhaps -- from this point forward. If constitutional order and the roles of all three separate branches of government are not respected, this may not end well. However there is still time to correct course and we must not lose hope. Tunisians have proven to be resourceful, and history has shown us that they are equipped to find a political solution to the current crisis.

Over six years ago on July 14, 2015, this same subcommittee convened a hearing entitled "Tunisia's Fragile Democratic Transition". At that hearing we collectively praised Tunisia for adopting a new constitution, electing a new Parliament, holding elections, and even transferring power peacefully from one government to another. Later that year in 2015, the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet, made up of civil society organizations, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.<sup>3</sup>

Tunisia became a success story that many of us hoped that other countries could emulate, but democracy is more than just elections. Democracies also need to embrace citizen-responsive democratic governance, respect human rights, ensure strong institutions, protect the rule of law, uphold a system of checks and balance, respect constitutional order, and achieve economic prosperity. Many Tunisians feel let down by the democratic transition because they expected that their newfound freedoms would also be tied to economic prosperity and this is where we fell short. Of course, the Covid-19 pandemic had the same lethal effect on Tunisia that it had on other countries in the world, but Tunisia's economy was struggling before the pandemic hit.

### **Regional Implications**

Some of the countries in the Arab world such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, UAE, Egypt, and Libya are watching the actions in Tunisia closely. For some, it is clear that it is not in their own best interests to promote a thriving democracy in the Middle East and North Africa. Instead, some of the public discourse in some Arab countries is adding fuel to the fire by making this a fight between secular and Islamist parties. This rhetoric can have a significant negative impact across the Middle East and North Africa region as opponents of democracy could exploit Tunisia's backsliding.

In addition, authoritarians outside the region may take advantage of this opportunity. For example, Russia views Tunisia as an important and strategic partnership. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov has visited Tunisia several times and continues to seek ways to strengthen economic ties. In a recent trip in 2019, Lavrov pressed Tunisia to sign agreements on bilateral trade, scientific and technical cooperation, and nuclear energy. In addition, Russia wants to expand the ability for Russian companies to secure contracts to handle Tunisia's infrastructure needs.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2015/summary/>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3483732](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3483732)

China's influence in Tunisia is concerning. It is clear that Tunisia is seeking more opportunities to increase economic ties with China. A document from the Tunisian Ministry of Foreign Affairs from April 2018 stated that "China is Tunisia's 30th largest customer and the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest supplier after France and Italy. Chinese investments in Tunisia: Chinese Direct Investment in Tunisia, which represents 12.9 million TD, remains below the Tunisian aspirations and the real capacities of the Chinese economy." <sup>5</sup>

### **Security**

The United States recognized the importance of our bilateral relationship with Tunisia by designating Tunisia as a Major Non-NATO Ally in 2015. Only 17 countries in the world have this unique and special designation which helps to enhance security and defense cooperation. However, the security situation in Tunisia remains fragile and must not be overlooked. Thanks to the United States through partnerships with the State Department's International Narcotics Bureau (INL) and Foreign Military Financing (FMF) programs, we have professionalized Tunisia's armed forces to improve the counter terrorism security posture in the country.

However, the current situation in Afghanistan could further destabilize Tunisia. Chairman of the Joints Chiefs General Mark Milley testified before Congress that al-Qaeda or ISIS can reemerge in Afghanistan, <sup>6</sup> and this can have negative consequences in Tunisia. In the past, the ongoing political and security crisis in Libya undermined Tunisia's security situation. ISIS previously used training camps in Libya which helped it carry out several high-profile terrorist attacks in 2015 in Tunisia: a mass shooting at a tourist resort, an attack at the Bardo National Museum, and a bus bombing. <sup>7</sup> Another challenge is that Tunisia previously had the highest numbers of foreign fighters heading to Syria or Iraq, per capita, to fight for ISIS. <sup>8</sup>

We must continue to follow, analyze, and watch closely the developments in Afghanistan because if ISIS or its next iteration returns, Tunisia can once again become a transit point for many terrorists. As we know, the Tunisian youth feel disenfranchised and if the economy continues to suffer, ISIS or other related terrorist organizations can take advantage and recruit young Tunisians.

### **Economy and COVID-19**

The Tunisian economy is driving much of the frustration, instability and unrest among the people. Poverty numbers have increased. Foreign direct investment and economic growth are on the decline. Unemployment is on the rise and close to 18%<sup>9</sup>. Youth unemployment is a serious concern at 36%<sup>10</sup>. Tunisia's youth bulge peaked around 2004, which means that the youth bulge generation is between 25-34 years old and is at a critical stage of school-to-work transition.

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.diplomatic.gov.tn/fileadmin/user\\_upload/pdf/Bilateral\\_relations\\_between\\_Tunisia\\_and\\_China.pdf](https://www.diplomatic.gov.tn/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/Bilateral_relations_between_Tunisia_and_China.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/574496-milley-real-possibility-terrorist-groups-could-rebuild-as-soon-as-early-spring>

<sup>7</sup> <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2015/257517.htm>

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/no-nationality-heeded-the-call-to-come-fight-for-isis-like-tunisians-did-now-theyre-stuck/2019/05/10/839a942e-5d4a-11e9-98d4-844088d135f2\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/no-nationality-heeded-the-call-to-come-fight-for-isis-like-tunisians-did-now-theyre-stuck/2019/05/10/839a942e-5d4a-11e9-98d4-844088d135f2_story.html)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2021/10/02/kais-saied-plans-to-transform-tunisia-it-may-go-bust-first>

<sup>10</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UFM.1524.ZS?locations=TN>

A Wilson Center report *Ready for Work: An Analysis of Workforce Asymmetries in the Middle East and North Africa* (2019)<sup>11</sup> lays out several reasons for the phenomenon of “graduate unemployment”. The report states that centralization of higher education and lack of coordination with the private sector left an enduring legacy of “skills mismatch” in the labor market.

Given this grim picture of workforce preparation, there are limited prospects for job growth. High public sector employment continue to burden the economy and creating more public sector jobs is not the answer for long-term prosperity. The Wilson Center report documents that firms in Tunisia are often small and informal and over 97% have four or fewer employees. Therefore, those who don’t gain access to the most prestigious careers are forced to rely on informal employment, and those that do often emigrate to Europe or elsewhere in the region. Tunisia needs reforms to improve the business climate and align education with the labor market, but the longstanding political crisis has prevented critical changes from taking place.

Over the last 10 years, Tunisia has struggled to keep its democracy afloat due to a struggling economy and political deadlock. And just like many other countries, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, mixed with the fragile economy, has fostered democratic backsliding in Tunisia. According to the CDC, Tunisia is a level 4 country which means it has a very high level of Covid cases and Americans are warned not to travel there.

The European Union is Tunisia’s largest trading partner and its largest investor, accounting for 85% of the foreign direct investment in the country.<sup>12</sup> This is important to note because any instability in Tunisia will directly impact our allies in the European Union either due to economic ties or through migration. Recently, we have witnessed the tragic loss of life of refugees and migrants from Tunisia or other countries who use Tunisia to try to get to Europe. Further instability and chaos in Tunisia may cause a migration crisis in North Africa and Europe.

Focusing on improving the Tunisian economy can be an incentive to restore democratic principles by creating jobs and employment, especially for the youth. In 2013, Congress created the Tunisian American Enterprise Fund<sup>13</sup> and appropriated \$100 million for this program. The mission of the Enterprise Fund is to support small and medium size companies and has demonstrated steady, if sometimes slow, success. We can leverage its influence and resources to promote economic growth and create employment opportunities that can help prevent democratic erosion.

#### **Development Assistance**

In Fiscal Year 2020 and Fiscal Year 2021, Congress appropriated approximately \$85 million each fiscal year in Development Assistance and Economic Support Funds for Tunisia. These funds are crucial to bolster institutions, help strengthen the political party system, and assist civil society organizations. These funds should continue to be strongly supported in a bipartisan manner. While this assistance is vital, strong institutions do not occur overnight so we need to be patient and set realistic expectations.

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/mep\\_workforce\\_report.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/mep_workforce_report.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/tunisia/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.taefund.org/en/>

During my time at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Tunisia was a top priority. Through the generosity of the American people and with the bipartisan support from Congress, we assisted the 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections with the help of domestic and international observers, we expanded voter rolls, promoted women owned businesses to strengthen economic prosperity, and invested in local programs to build trust in communities. In addition, former Administrator of USAID Ambassador Mark Green changed our presence in Tunisia from an Office of the Senior Development Advisor status to a full USAID Mission to elevate the presence of USAID in the country which helped USAID in 2019 sign a five-year Development Objective Agreement -- a "DOAG" -- with the Government of Tunisia. This agreement reaffirmed that Tunisia's development and trajectory towards a prosperous, self-reliant democracy needs to be Tunisian led but this assistance is vital, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>14</sup>

In 2020, Ambassador Green traveled to Tunisia to help reaffirm how important Tunisia was not only to USAID, but to the furthering of overall U.S. interests in the region as well. It was important to visit Tunisia because a USAID Administrator had not visited since 2011. During his trip, he met with civil society organizations, opened a youth center, and met with President Saied to discuss "USAID's expanding partnership with the Government of Tunisia, the President's vision for his country's economic and social development, and how USAID can continue to support the Tunisians on their path on the Journey to Self-Reliance to create a more democratic and prosperous future for all citizens."<sup>15</sup>

### **Recommendations**

We want Tunisia to succeed, and we need it to succeed; but we also need to be clear-eyed on what is transpiring and not let the country slip further. We can apply a carrot and stick approach. On one hand, we should be offering President Saied some carrots to incentivize good behavior to find a way out of this crisis to help restore democratic order. On the other hand, we must be prepared to use sticks just in case the situation worsens. Luckily, we have the necessary tools in place to be able to bring about changes, adopt reforms, protect human rights, and help Tunisians fulfill the democratic hopes which began the Arab Spring movement over a decade ago. Below are some recommendations which may be helpful to restore democratic order.

1. If President Saied continues to undermine democratic principles, commits human rights violations, closes spaces for civil society organizations, and does not signal a path to restore democratic order in Tunisia by reinstating the Parliament, then we must reevaluate and condition our aid package towards Tunisia. Tunisians are dissatisfied with their elected leaders - perhaps deservedly - but a democracy does not dismiss an elected body no matter how unfavorably the population views it. Therefore, the U.S. could use several initiatives to seek a change of behavior in Tunisia such as reassessing the designation of Tunisia as a Major Non-NATO Ally or reevaluating our INL and FMF programs.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/congressional-testimony/oct-29-2019-michael-t-harvey-aa-middle-east-fy20-budget>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/feb-18-2020-usaid-administrator-mark-green-trip-tunisia>



2. Our democracy networks and resources have to increase their efforts to bolster political parties, civil society, human rights defenders, independent media, and journalists during this crisis. USAID can use its Office of Democracy, Human Rights and Governance through its Rapid Response Mechanism to assist Tunisians. Through the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening, also known as the CEPPS mechanism, we can get assistance out the door quickly. USAID can also dispatch its Office of Transition Initiatives to assess the current environment and needs that can be addressed by the Conflict Prevention and Stabilization bureau. State Department's Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Bureau as well as the National Endowment for Democracy can also quickly use their emergency funds to help Tunisia. There are many tools in our tool belt to assist through a coordinated effort, but time is not on our side and we must use U.S. taxpayer money wisely.
3. Congress has previously supported Tunisia with \$500 million through its Sovereign Loan Guarantee program.<sup>16</sup> Since very few countries of the world have this type of assistance, any future additional funds through this program could incentivize the country's leaders to respect Tunisia's constitution and urge its institutions to operate freely.
4. Earlier this year, the Millennium Challenge Corporation also approved nearly \$500 million compact with Tunisia.<sup>17</sup> We must reevaluate and pause this compact if the situation on the ground does not change very soon.
5. Tunisia is seeking \$4 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund to alleviate its financial crisis. This offers a tremendous opportunity to extract concessions to restore democratic order.

### **Conclusion**

To summarize, stability and prosperity in Tunisia is in our national security and foreign policy interests. Institutions in Tunisia must be respected and the Parliament must be reinstated without delay. However, the slippery slope argument when it comes to democratic backsliding should give all of us a great cause for concern.

Tunisians have proven that they have what it takes to turn this around, but we must lend a helping hand before this crisis becomes untenable. Some small circumventions around constitutions, bypassing the rule of law, and undermining institutions could lead down a dangerous path and suddenly it's too late to recuperate this fragile democracy. So for those who have been in a "wait and see" mode, I would offer some caution: many authoritarians over decades started out the same way and by the time we noticed, it was too late.

If the U.S. does not apply pressure now and leverage our well-intentioned influence, we leave the door open for our adversaries to potentially fill the void. The United States and the international community in the past successfully helped Tunisia on its road to a democracy. Now, we need to double down on our diplomatic efforts alongside our European allies; we should not wait until the situation deteriorates further to act.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/j10476.aspx>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.mcc.gov/news-and-events/release/release-063021-mcc-board-approves-tunisia-compact>

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you very much, Mr. Acevedo, for your outstanding testimony today.

Thanks to all of the witnesses for being here and for sharing your important insight.

I will now recognize members for 5 minutes each. And, pursuant to House rules, all time yielded is for the purposes of questioning our witnesses. Because of the virtual format of this hearing, I will recognize members by committee seniority, alternating between Democrats and Republicans. If you miss your turn, please let our staff know, and we will circle back to you. If you seek recognition, you must unmute your microphone and address the chair verbally.

I will defer until the end of questioning, so we will start by recognizing Mr. Cicilline for 5 minutes.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you, Chairman Deutch, and thank you to our ranking member for holding today's really important hearing.

And this hearing is a reminder, really, of the continuing obligation that we have to help support emerging democracies around the world. And, as the chairman said, this is an evolving and continuous responsibility even in our own country. So thank you to all the witnesses for your extraordinary testimony.

I would like to begin with you, Dr. Abouaoun. I hope I pronounced that correctly.

A recent report from Freedom House shows democracy has now been on the decline around the world for more than 15 years in what has been described as a democratic recession.

And, as we continue to see increased fragility in democratic institutions around the world, particularly what we are seeing in Tunisia, what can we learn from our foreign policy approach in Tunisia that might enhance our ability to support democracies around the world? Are there lessons that we should learn from this experience?

That is for Dr. Abouaoun.

Dr. ABOUAOUN. Yes. Thank you for the question.

I think that the U.S. and others offered funding and supporting democratic transitions in this part of the world.

If I take a few lessons learned from the region of which I have expertise, I think that one of the lessons learned is that this funding should aim for longer-term, transformative intervention.

In most of the cases, the money was spent on mostly transactional interventions, and the democratic recessions that we likely pointed to is partly or caused by the fact that the democratic values are not [inaudible].

And for this to happen, we need to work on transformative interventions that require a longer-term approach than the ones that we have seen.

Thank you.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you.

Dr. Guellali, one of the primary causes, at least that has been reported, of the public discontent within Tunisia leading up to President Saied's announcement was the conduct of the police and the brutality. And I know you have spoken out a lot about that.

Could you speak a little bit in the hearing today about the history of police violence? Does it raise concerns currently? What steps are the government taking to curtail it? And are there things that

we should be doing, as the Congress of the United States, to support those efforts?

Dr. GUELLALI. Thank you very much, Mr. Cicilline.

I think that the history of police violence in Tunisia was really very important, because they played a central role, a pivotal role, during the years of dictatorship. And, while there were some efforts to reform the security services after the fall of the Ben Ali regime, security services still act in a very abusive way. And this has culminated, really, during the socioeconomic protests that swept the country in 2021, when the security forces really acted in a very brutal way to quell those protests and to halt them.

So I think what is really needed right now in Tunisia is for the security services to act in an accountable way. I think fostering the transitional justice process that has been in place in the country for the past 5 years or so is really important. Calling on the Tunisian authorities to hold accountable those of the security forces who have committed crimes is really important.

And I would like to bring your attention to the fact that President Saied, after the 25th of July, has appointed several security forces members to the high State security apparatus who are accused of perpetrating crimes against the people of Tunisia during the dictatorship. They have current trials before the transitional justice chambers, and they should be held accountable and—

Mr. CICILLINE. I just—

Ms. GUELLALI [continuing]. Not promoted.

Mr. CICILLINE. I just wanted to get one last question before I run out of time.

We saw firsthand in Afghanistan how corruption really can erode public confidence in government and ultimately jeopardize longtime stability.

Do any of the witnesses have ideas of what we can do to make sure that the funding we are providing is being used responsibly and that we can provide some kind of better oversight? Because I think that remains of grave concern to many Members of Congress.

Anyone who might have a thought?

Dr. GUELLALI. I believe that, in terms of what are the mechanisms that the Congress should enforce in order to have a better system of accountability, including on corruption, I think supporting civil society is really important, because civil society plays right now the role of checks and balances on the work and decisions of the President.

The President has barred Tunisian citizens from challenging his decisions by calling out any form of challenge, including through the judiciary. And so the fact that civil society is still able to play its role and hold him to account and play the role of checks and balances, I think it is really very important. And I believe that direct support for civil society can make a difference here.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you so much.

My time is up. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the accommodation. I yield back.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Cicilline.

I will now yield 5 minutes to the vice ranking member, Mr. Steube.

Mr. STEUBE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

My questions are for Mr. Acevedo.

Eddy, how can we best compete with Russia and China and Tunisia? And what are our best messaging points regarding the benefits of a relationship with the United States relative to others?

Mr. ACEVEDO. Thank you, Congressman. That is a great question.

I mean, I think, for us, we need more engagement. Right now, the U.S. Government has done a very good job in expressing concern over some of the actions occurring in Tunisia, but, at the same time, the U.S. Government hasn't really illustrated what are we asking from the Tunisian President and what are some of the democratic reforms that we would like, such as the reinstatement of the Tunisian Parliament.

I think the Russia/China aspect is one of the things that I am extremely concerned about, because we have seen in other parts of the world that they will quickly swoop in if they see that the U.S. is kind of late to the game in jumping in.

We have seen some of their recent actions in terms of: Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov has traveled to Tunisia many times over the last few years; Huawei was just in the country as well, and they kind of got a big, red-carpet welcome by this President.

So our engagement, it is what is needed, and us being able to articulate exactly what are the democratic reforms that we would like to see to ensure that stability in the country.

Mr. STEUBE. And, I mean, that kinds of leads me to my next question. What is the appropriate role of the United States, as an outside party, in the Tunisian political crisis?

Mr. ACEVEDO. So I can tell you, Congressman, from my personal experience, when I was at USAID, USAID had some really good programs in the country. We were working to decentralize the government as much as possible and push matters into the local level so that we can have a better representation from the people. We were able to work with the youth to try to prevent some radicalization that happened in the past. We were also able to support religious tolerance and religious liberties in the country.

But I admit, Congressman, that we have done good work but we need new ideas. And I think that is where my recommendation regarding the OTI a USAID are really the tip of the spear for us in terms of foreign policy at USAID. And their, kind of, reassessment on the new challenges in Tunisia would be helpful.

This office is one of the best-known secrets in our foreign policy apparatus. Right now, it is only appropriated about \$92 million from Congress. It really needs more funds than that, because they are very spread thin. And the more we can support these good professionals, the better it is for us and our foreign policy.

Mr. STEUBE. So how are our European partners viewing the recent political developments in Tunisia?

Mr. ACEVEDO. So, right now, the European Union is extremely concerned. Trade between the EU and Tunisia—Tunisian trade to the EU accounts for about 80 to 85 percent of their trade. So the EU is their biggest market, No. 1.

No. 2, the Europeans are worried not only from an economic standpoint but obviously from the migration standpoint. We have

seen a lot of, kind of, waves of migrants hitting the seas and trying to head north.

But there is also a NATO component here, right? And, ultimately if China and Russia set up a foothold in Tunisia, that could be destabilizing for our NATO partners in the region as well.

Mr. STEUBE. And what are the practical implications of the President disbanding the Parliament?

Mr. ACEVEDO. Congressman, this really comes down to legitimacy. You know, he formed a new government just days ago. Many of the ministers that swore an oath, they swore an oath to a Constitution that he suspended. So one begins to question any decisions that these ministers make, is it legitimate or not?

The MCC compact, for example, needs to be ratified by the Tunisian Parliament. Obviously, that cannot happen if the Parliament is disbanded.

So I think, for us, we have to look at the legitimacy as one of the biggest impacts. Typically, when the Prime Minister forms the government, there is a little bit of a vote, so to speak, in the Parliament, and that is part of their Constitution. Obviously, that did not happen, because everything has been suspended.

So all of these issues are extremely troubling, and hopefully we can nudge a little bit so that the right decisions are made and that the President shows an inclusive process on how to get out of this current crisis.

Mr. STEUBE. My time has expired. Thank you for your time today.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Steube.

We will now go to Ms. Manning.

You are recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. MANNING. Thank you, Chairman Deutch, for organizing this very important hearing on the deeply concerning situation in Tunisia.

And thank you to all our witnesses for joining us today.

Mr. Acevedo, you have done a great job of laying out your recommendations that the U.S. use a carrot-and-stick approach to influence the future behavior of Tunisia.

Can you talk to us about where has this sort of approach worked successfully? And what kinds of incentives do you think would most likely encourage the President to change the way he is behaving?

Mr. ACEVEDO. Thank you, Congresswoman, for that question.

So I will be honest; sometimes the carrot-and-stick approach works, and sometimes it doesn't, right? But I think, ultimately it is always good to give it the good old college try.

And, for us being able to articulate, kind of, what our role needs to be in this process I think is helpful. Pressuring President Saied on the economic side, I think, is something that—we hold a lot of leverage. Part of the current crisis in Tunisia and a lot of the unrest that is happening in the country is because of the high unemployment and their economy is struggling.

Through a lot of our efforts and our programs that we have in the country, whether it is the IMF program that needs to be redone, some of the economic reforms that need to happen, as well as one of—something that doesn't get much attention is, Congress

in 2013 passed legislation and appropriated for something called the Tunisian American Enterprise Fund. And this is an entity that has been pretty successful in Tunisia to help small and medium-size businesses. And, right now, it is sort of the largest supporter of small and medium-size businesses in the country.

So I think our leverage on the economic side is vital, and also on the security side. You know, we have a lot of leverage there, as well, through many of the DOD and State Department programs.

Ms. MANNING. Thank you.

Ms. Arieff, since 2011, the United States has steered, as we just were talking about, significant financial assistance to Tunisia to help promote stability and improve prosperity. Can you tell us which USAID efforts have been the most effective?

Ms. ARIEFF. Thank you, Congresswoman.

As you note, there have been significant U.S. foreign assistance resources directed toward Tunisia in the last decade, including by bipartisan support in Congress for these provisions in annual—or in aid appropriations measures that have provided in just the past few years, for example, \$85 million annually in foreign military financing; \$85 million annually in Economic Support Fund and development assistance, again, annually; as well as around \$13 million to \$15 million annually in additional internal security assistance for Tunisia's police and security apparatus.

That economic assistance, as Mr. Acevedo has outlined, has supported a range of initiatives, including economic aid, entrepreneurship support, policy reforms, as well as democracy and governance.

Ms. MANNING. And is there—

Ms. ARIEFF. I think the—sorry. I was going to say, the success is obviously mixed.

Ms. MANNING. That is what I was hoping for. Is there some investment that has worked that we want to continue or double down on?

Ms. ARIEFF. It is a judgment call, in many cases, but I would say that there is some evidence of effectiveness for some programs, including both on the economic and security side.

Ms. MANNING. OK. Thank you.

Dr. Guellali, do you see any reason for hope with the appointment of the first female Prime Minister, or was this solely aimed at placating critics? And can you also talk about the status of women's rights in Tunisia?

Dr. GUELLALI. Thank you very much, Ms. Manning.

When it comes to the new government, on paper, I think that this government has a great potential. It is, as you know, led by a woman, Mrs. Najla Bouden, and is composed of 26 highly qualified ministers, including 9 women.

Unfortunately, the new Prime Minister does not have a lot of powers, unlike its predecessors, who used to have even more powers than the President. The reason is that, in Decree 117 that the President enacted on the 22d of September, this decree declared that the President exercises all the executive powers and he is assisted by government.

So the President may, for example, unilaterally dismiss any minister. He is the only one responsible for designating State policies and has the power to create or dissolve institutions. And, in this

framework, the head of government, under this system, has only a secondary role and would be dependent on the President's will and whims.

And so, in this situation, while it is really great that Tunisia has a new government—I believe that this was one of the demands and expectations from the various observers and analysts, including from Tunisian people. But, at the same time, it remains to be seen whether they will have all the powers that they need in order to enact those reforms leading to a new system of governance, which is one of the promises from President Saied.

Ms. MANNING. Thank you.

My time has expired. I yield back.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you very much, Representative Manning.

Representative Perry, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. PERRY. OK. I thank the chairman and the ranking member for the opportunity. I thank the witnesses.

My first question is going to Ms. Arieff, so if you want to unmute now. First, thanks for providing your input, your CRS background, prior to the hearing.

Given that the United States has provided hundreds of million of dollars over the years for the purpose of augmenting Tunisia's counterterrorism capabilities, their total investment in that goal is of reasonable, if not paramount, importance to the United States of America.

Now, in 2016, news outlets, including The Jerusalem Post, reported that the Mossad had eliminated a Hamas operative, Mohamed Zouari, working with Tunisia within Tunisia.

My objective here is not to figure out or to talk about or discuss who did what when, but, rather, pose the question to determine the motivation of the government in Tunis to prevent or otherwise marginalize the influence of Hamas, specifically and especially within its borders.

When he won the 2019 Tunisian election, President Saied draped himself in a Palestinian flag, and he has frequently expressed anti-Semitic sentiment, particularly as he has tried to shield himself from his own shortcomings and those of his own domestic policies.

Now, to quote him, and I quote: "We know very well who the people are who are controlling the country today. It is the Jews who are doing the stealing, and we need to put an end to it," unquote.

Now, for years, the United States and Tunisia have maintained a robust counterterrorism relationship, and, in fact, Tunisia is the largest beneficiary of State's Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership.

However, in speaking specifically about Hamas, I would like to ask you if it is your assessment that the United States can trust—can trust—the Tunisian President and his government enough to prevent Hamas from growing in influence within Tunisia, or is the 2016 instance an aberration, so to speak?

Ms. ARIEFF. Thank you, Congressman.

I am afraid I don't have much insight into the incident that you mentioned beyond what was reported in the press. But I would note that 2016 was before President Saied was inaugurated, so it was under the previous government.

The only other thing I would add is that U.S. counterterrorism assistance for Tunisia is primarily focused on countering U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations that are active in Tunisia and Libya as well as parts of Algeria, so local Islamic State affiliates, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and its various offshoots.

And what we have seen in the last 5 years is an improvement in Tunisia's internal security coordination and a decrease in the pace and scale of terrorist attacks within Tunisia.

Mr. PERRY. And do you think—so you can't really speak to—I mean, let me phrase it another way.

Based on at least the last part of what you just said, you think that, with President Saied, that that is continuing at the current pace that it was prior to his ascension to the Presidency?

Ms. ARIEFF. I think that is a good question for the executive branch in some ways, whether military and counterterrorism cooperation have continued apace or whether there are new challenges under President Saied.

But what I can observe publicly, in terms of public statements from USAFRICOM and others, is a fair amount of satisfaction with ongoing military cooperation.

Mr. PERRY. And, listen, I appreciate it, and I know that this is a hard question to answer. It is like asking "how long is a string" or something like that.

But just based on what happened in Afghanistan and the information coming out that, for many, many years, we knew where al-Qaeda was headquartered in Quetta and things like that, after seeing trillions of dollars, tax dollars, go into a place like that, I think it is just important that we have to ask these questions.

So I appreciate your answer, but I just have to keep asking this stuff.

Dr. Abouaoun, in late 2017, a pro-Hamas leader in Tunisia's Islamist Ennahda Party met with the United States Institute of Peace. And when the Investigative Project on Terrorism organization asked about why a Federal-funded U.S. institution would willingly meet with individuals who embrace such a toxic concept as terrorism—which calls for the destruction of Israel, by the way, and expressing overwhelming anti-American sentiment—USIP responded by saying that it is important to, and I quote, "engage and maintain relationships with a variety of actors, such as political parties, government officials, religious officials, and civil society groups, to ensure inclusivity," unquote.

So I guess my overarching question is, does the USIP feel that by engaging in these meetings that they give individuals or organizations that espouse openly terrorism a platform that they should not otherwise have?

And then, as a follow-on question, what other terrorist organizations or individuals has the USIP met with?

Dr. ABOUAOUN. Thank you very much. I raised my hand before because I wanted to comment on the previous question regarding—

Mr. PERRY. Feel free.

Mr. DEUTCH. Dr. Abouaoun, if you could—we are past 5 minutes. So you can go ahead and answer, and if you could just be respectful of our time, I appreciate it.



Mr. PERRY. Thanks for your indulgence, Mr. Chairman.

Dr. ABOUAOUN. Right. Thank you.

So, very briefly, I can say with confidence that there is a steady and consistent will within all branches of the Tunisian Government to prevent the—to continue engaging in reform efforts. So this has not changed. And I don't think it's the President alone who can change this. There are different dynamics when it comes to this kind of activity.

Back to your second question, I stick with the answer provided by USIP. Because of the nature of our work, we have to engage with different actors. The purpose of our engagement with these actors is not to promote a political position. There is a very specific purpose that has to do with our work on the ground, where if you want to be a facilitator and to prevent violence on the ground, there are a specific set of actors we have to work with.

Whether you like them or not is another story. Whether you endorse their political positions is another story. But I can assure you that, in all cases, we make sure that we won't give agency to actors who act against what the interests of the United States.

Thank you.

Mr. PERRY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield.

Mr. DEUTCH. All right. Thank you, Representative Perry.

Representative Malinowski, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Thank you so much, Chairman Deutch.

Let me start by defending USIP more explicitly than USIP just did.

The individual and the political party that USIP met with, Ennahda, not only does not support terrorism, it is one of the strongest opponents of terrorism and extremism in the Tunisian political sphere. Mr. Ghannouchi has met with senior U.S. Government officials from multiple administrations and has been seen by Republican and Democratic administrations as a very positive force in that country.

So let me just categorically reject what Mr. Perry suggested. There is nothing inappropriate about that meeting. We should all be meeting with—in Tunisia's democratically elected political parties.

Look, I have been a very strong supporter of U.S. assistance to Tunisia. I think we should have done a lot more over the last 10 years. I traveled there multiple times when I was in the State Department.

And let's face it: The reason why we have tried to pay attention to Tunisia—and, in part, it has been an important partner in counterterrorism, but largely it is because this small country has played an outsized role in the drama that has engulfed the Middle East since the Arab Spring. It is the only survivor of the Arab Spring—or it was until the recent coup against democracy. So it is important in the larger debate in the region between democracy and authoritarianism.

And my first question goes to whether Tunisia has been important in that context not just to us but to others who may be on the other side of that struggle between democracy and authoritarianism. And I am thinking particularly about some of the Gulf countries that supported the coup in Egypt as well, that sup-

ported the anti-democratic Haftar movement in Libya, that see a Muslim Brotherhood conspiracy everywhere, that citizens in the Arab world push for more open and democratic systems of government and that are threatened by the rise of democracy.

And I wonder, perhaps, Ms. Arieff, if you can adjust that question. There was a lot of rhetorical support for the coup in Tunisia from a lot of voices in the UAE and Saudi Arabia in particular. I wonder if you can comment on whether there is any evidence that that support has gone beyond just rhetoric.

Ms. ARIEFF. Thank you, Congressman.

It is true that some of the strongest rhetorical support that we have seen from government officials for President Saied's actions has come from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and UAE, and to a slightly lesser extent, Algeria.

So that rhetorical support does suggest an interest in what is happening in Tunisia and perhaps a different view of President Saied's actions than what has been expressed by the Biden administration and many Members of Congress.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. And why are they so interested in this? What is their motivation?

Ms. ARIEFF. You know, a range of motivations, no doubt, but I think, clearly, there is less concern for an erosion of formal democratic norms or checks and balances internally. There is an interest in stability and perhaps a perception that President Saied is well-placed to deliver that.

I would say, you referred to resources. One thing that we might look to in the coming weeks and months—we have touched on Tunisia's economic and fiscal challenges—is whether we will see new pledges of direct financial support for Tunisia through bilateral assistance, for example, or grants or loans coming from some of these countries. And that would give, perhaps, a stronger indication of the level of stakes that these countries perceive in the outcome.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. OK.

And then let me ask maybe you, Ms. Guellali: What should the United States do? What is to be done, is the ultimate question here.

I mean, there is, I think, a broad consensus within the Biden administration that this was a coup. They may not use that language. I think there is a debate about the best way for the United States to use its leverage with respect to military aid, security assistance, assistance to the police and the military especially.

The President's actions were popular, at least initially, in Tunisia, and that is a factor also weighing on the administration.

What is your advice? What is the bottom line in terms of the primary leverage that the United States has to effect a return to parliamentary democracy?

Dr. GUELLALI. Thank you very much, Congressman Malinowski.

I would say that I can advise on what not to do rather than what to do, basically. Because that is really a very difficult question to answer in terms of policy.

But I believe that one thing that the U.S. should not do is cutting military and security aid to Tunisia to pressure the return to the democratic process. And I believe that this would be a mis-

guided decision, as it will have really very bad repercussions on the security of the country and might lead also to the deterioration of the security environment not only in Tunisia but also in the entire region.

It will be also inconsistent with U.S. policy in Tunisia for the past years. I believe I mentioned during the testimony that security forces have committed numerous and grave human rights violations during the transition. And, most recently, under the Mashishi government, they arrested thousands of people and mistreated allegedly hundreds of them. So cutting military aid or conditioning it right now to the return to the democratic process while the U.S. remained silent in the face of such human rights violations in the past would be really inconsistent, I believe.

I think the U.S. should maybe use its leverage on Tunisia's security and armed forces to impose respectful human rights on all levels, including during the policing of demonstrations and fostering accountability.

I think also that what is really needed right now in Tunisia is to impose checks and balances on the actions of the President, especially that, so far, he has shielded himself from any kind of challenges to his decisions. And that is something that could be done through the pushing of a reform agenda but also working with civil society in Tunisia.

I think amplifying the voices of civil society is really important, because it is difficult, I believe, in this environment, where the President enjoys such a broad popularity, for the U.S. to cut ties with Tunisia, because it will be considered really as cutting ties also with the Tunisian people. And I think this is not the right moment to do that.

Mr. ACEVEDO. Congressman, can I add something real quick?

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Well, my time is up, so it is up to the chairman.

Mr. DEUTCH. Yes. Thanks, Mr. Malinowski.

Mr. Acevedo, I am confident that you will have an opportunity to respond to that, but we are well past time, so I am going to keep this moving, as your old boss would have done in this same situation.

Thank you very much, Mr. Malinowski.

And, Mr. Mast, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. MAST. Yes, Mr. Deutch, I will let Mr. Acevedo respond right now. That is fine.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you.

Mr. ACEVEDO. Thank you, Mr. Mast. As a native Floridian, I appreciate that.

Just two real quick things.

One, to the Congressman: I think if the administration can send unequivocal messages that we would like the Parliament to be reinstated, it would be a very important message. I think that, while it is true, obviously, that the Tunisian Parliament is not popular, it doesn't mean you can just suspend it just because they are not popular. And I think sending that message, I think, is important.

Second, I would say, we should be doubling down on our civil society programs. I think all of our democracy networks, whether it

is at USAID or DRL, could be out there and allocating additional resources to help civil society right now during their time of need.

Mr. MAST. I think your response to the previous question, it actually plays right into one of the things that I wanted to speak about.

And let's be clear about Tunisia: It was the start, it was the starting point for the Arab Spring, really. I mean, just symbolically, very important.

But there was a great Bloomberg article that I read a few weeks back on this, and I went back and looked up the quote for it, because I think it does sum up the administration's response to this very well. And I am going to quote this article.

It says: "Yet all the Biden administration managed was a neutral-sounding message from Secretary of State Antony Blinken—'encourag[ing]' Saied 'to adhere to the principles of democracy'—and a still weak, if slightly better message from National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, who 'called on' Saied to form a new government and 'ensur[e] The timely return of the elected parliament.' In the coded language of diplomacy, these messages basically told Saied to go ahead and do whatever he wanted."

That was how the article summarized the response of the administration to what had gone on there.

You just called, Mr. Acevedo, for a strong response. We didn't see a strong response. That is a fact. We saw a very weak response, which is not surprising in the midst of everything that was going on with Afghanistan and the weakness that we saw being portrayed there.

But I want to ask a slightly different question, and that is in terms of something that you talked about, and that was the fighters from Tunisia in Afghanistan over the course of the time that we have been fighting in Afghanistan.

Do you have an idea, personally, of the path, whether a land path or through ports of entry from the air, on how Tunisians were getting into Afghanistan? Was it a land path going through Egypt and Jordan and Iran? Was it a path flying into Pakistan, flying into Iran, flying into other places? What was the path that fighters were making their way to Afghanistan?

Mr. ACEVEDO. Congressman, to my knowledge, I think the majority of the path was through land, but perhaps my colleague from CRS may have more information on that.

Mr. MAST. Yes, I would yield there.

Ms. ARIEFF. I would have to get back to you, sir. And it is possible that the intelligence community could provide a more definitive answer on that question.

Mr. MAST. No question about that; the intelligence community can. But certainly would look forward to you all getting back with a response, as well, on the most prominent paths for those fighters to make their way to the battlefield.

I think that is something that is important for all of us to know as we look at future relationships with any of those nations that would allow fighters to move through their territories, as well as what is going on in Tunisia and those, whether in a dissolved Parliament or the President, now dictator, and what actions they were doing to allow fighters to move throughout those timeframes.

With that, I have no further comments or questions, Mr. Chairman, and I yield my time back.

Mr. DEUTCH. All right. Thank you, Representative Mast.

Representative Keating, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It has been a few years since I have been in Tunisia. I was there after one of the suicide bombings that occurred. In our discussions with officials then, the primary concern they had was the economy, unemployment, particularly unemployment among young people.

I had, subsequently, civilian conversations with Tunisians. And it wasn't as much that they were radicalized to these groups; they were given economic promises and promises to take care of their family that were really the precursor. They might have become radicalized later. But that explained, I think, a lot of the large increase pro rata of Tunisians engaging and being recruited here.

Now, with President Saied, he is telling the world right now that he is not going to be affected by any external pressures, that he is going to make sovereign decisions, and external economic aid or assistance really won't be determinative. However, this is, I think, the best textbook example of how we can engage with the European Union, something I have talked about repeatedly.

So what I would like for comments from the panel would be this: I think—I can't see another situation that cries out more for this—the EU is the leading trading partner with Tunisia. And if the U.S. and the EU together can calibrate more closely and hopefully even formalize the kind of assistance they have in an effort, I think that is our best case of trying to affect the process of backsliding that we are seeing occur now.

So I would like to ask the panel, in the remaining time, to really comment on how our effectiveness can be multiplied by working more closely with the European Union in this respect; and on the President's comment, President Saied's comment, about not being affected by external forces or influence.

Any member of the panel that wants to jump in.

Dr. ABOUAOUN. Thank you very much.

So I think that what you said, Congressman, is in line with what I suggest in my presentation, but any pressure or engagement with the President has to be multilateral. I think the effectiveness will be much higher in this case.

But beyond the channel, beyond the form of the engagement, I think that a lot of money has been spent on economic—supporting Tunisia economically and financially, but the area that has been somehow overshadowed and ignored is social mobility. Take what Tunisians are looking like, especially young Tunisians,, is prospects for social mobility—upwards social mobility, obviously.

And one of the reasons why the President is so popular is that he embodies this. He is an example of someone who climbed the ladder, the social ladder, from university professor to President, without the support of the party leader and without, really, the financing—

Mr. KEATING. In the 1 minute that is left—I apologize—

Dr. ABOUAOUN. Well, I would emphasize multilateralism and social mobility.

Mr. KEATING [continuing]. Want to comment on this?

Well, thank you very much.

I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Keating.

Representative Burchett, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. BURCHETT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Can you all hear me?

Mr. DEUTCH. Yes, we can.

Mr. BURCHETT. All right. Great.

Since the European Union is Tunisia's top donor and since China and the Gulf States are looking to get more involved in the country, would scaling back our foreign aid even be effective in pushing President Saied back to more democratic norms?

Anybody can answer that.

Mr. ACEVEDO. Congressman, I think it is a little too early to tell, to be honest with you. But I think if we have these serious conversations with President Saied and potentially floating out there the conditioning of some of our foreign assistance, I think it is better for us to find out today where this relationship is going with the President as opposed to waiting 6 months or a year from now.

Mr. BURCHETT. OK. We are on the same—did anybody else want to try that?

No? OK.

What is you all's take on the new government that President Saied recently approved?

Anybody?

Mr. ACEVEDO. I can jump in real quick, Congressman.

You know, I think the new government under this apparatus, where the President is still ruling by decree and holds all the power, doesn't really have the effect we would like. So, while some may potentially spin this as a positive step forward, which it is, giving credibility to a government and ministers who are not abiding by the Constitution doesn't carry as much weight as it should.

Mr. BURCHETT. OK.

Anybody else want to take a shot at that?

You all aren't talkative.

Ms. ARIEFF. I can add one point.

Others have illustrated the constraints, the institutional constraints, that are now placed on this new Cabinet, in contrast to the latitude that a head of government and Cabinet enjoyed under the Constitution. In addition, the decree that President Saied issued on September 22 defining those constraints States that the Cabinet is responsible for implementing the President's general policy.

We still don't know, based on public statements, what the President's general policy is in many domains. So, as others have noted, it is very hard to predict at this point where things are going.

Mr. BURCHETT. All right.

President Saied apparently is very popular in Tunisia. I understand he might even be making the ranks of our own chairman, Ted Deutch, in his home district, but maybe not as much. I am not sure.

How does this affect you all's—our strategy, I guess, to coax and/or push him back on the democratic track?

Mr. ACEVEDO. Congressman, this is probably one of the most toughest questions, is the one you are asking, right? Because I

think—I would assume that President Saied will say, “Hey, I am doing what the people want me to do. Look at my popularity numbers.” And I think, for us if you are going to be a democracy and a place where rule of law is respected, where the branches of government are respected, then you have to abide by those Constitutions.

You know, the irony of this all is that, in 2014, as a former constitutional lawyer, he helped create this Constitution. And, now, here he is suspending it. And, so far, we have not seen a path on how he is going to get out of this.

So I think we can help him get out of this mess. I think we definitely want Saied to succeed. It is in our national security and foreign policy interest. But, ultimately, just because some decisions may be popular or unpopular, it doesn’t mean you can just sidestep the Constitution, in my opinion, Congressman.

Mr. BURCHETT. All right.

Anyone else?

If not, I will yield back the remainder of time.

But I would tell you, Eddy, that “W” up in your left-hand corner looks sort of like a “WWE” from the World Wrestling Enterprise. I know Congressman Deutch, being a semi-professional wrestler himself, would have pointed that out to you if I hadn’t already, so——

Mr. ACEVEDO. Well, usually, Congressman, in Florida, we like to come off the top rope. So it is quite fitting.

Mr. BURCHETT. I am a bionic-elbow man myself, but——

Mr. DEUTCH. The gentleman has yielded the balance of his time. You are welcome in south Florida anytime, Mr. Burchett. And I am going to jump in before this hearing goes off the rails, some might say.

Mr. Sherman, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. SHERMAN. Thank you.

We were all inspired by Tunisia in 2011, where a simple merchant, vegetable seller, started an Arab Spring. We all want to see all of the elements of democracy adhered to. But we are also cautioned by the success, on occasion, of the Muslim Brotherhood, which believes in one person—actually, they probably just believe in one man—one vote, one time.

And it is important that, as we coax Tunisia toward the full rule of law and constitutional principles, that we remember that the Muslim Brotherhood does indeed lurk, and, while they are willing to use democratic methods to take power, they are not willing to cede power.

I was unable, for technical reasons, to hear one of our witnesses, Dr. Elie—well—A., so I read his testimony. And he said, in part—and those of you with the same technical issues may not have heard this—“Some have advocated for the removal of President Saied, but that would only embolden the Ennahda Party and the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as remnant forces of the old regime, which has its own dangers and implications.”

That may explain why the Biden administration has not labeled this as a coup, has not cut our relationship with Tunisia. It is easy to say that if there is any departure from exactly the way we would like to run things that we slam the table and we show how strong

we are. But I think our witness from the Institute of Peace shows that strength without wisdom, while occasionally describing American policy, is not the policy that the Biden administration has pursued or should pursue.

Mr. Acevedo reminds us that Tunisia has been a source of Islamic terrorists. We have talked about even how they get to Afghanistan. The U.N. said 5,800 were there just half a decade ago. And they were fighting for the Islamic State, rather, not necessarily in Afghanistan, more in Syria and Iraq. And, of course, these people have mostly gone back. So, as we work for all of the democracy that we would like to see, we certainly don't want to see those forces.

It is interesting that President Saied is a constitutional lawyer. He has invoked Article 80—I don't know if he wrote it—which allows the President to take pretty much the measures he has taken if there is an imminent threat against the country's security and independence.

Of course, that envisions a constitutional court that would oversee that process. Of course, for 7 years prior to Saied and under his opponents, they failed to form the constitutional court.

The article also requires that the President guarantee as soon as possible a return to normal functioning of State institutions.

So, Mr. Acevedo, some of the Tunisian Americans in my district have talked to me, and they envision that they would be a plebiscite for a new Constitution. This would, in a way, be a plebiscite on President Saied. But they would envision a Constitution more modeled after that of the United States than of France, with a strong President rather than a Prime Minister/Parliament system.

It is hard to say that any system of government is undemocratic if it is modeled after ours. Had I been at the Constitutional Convention, I would have proposed a parliamentary system. But, then again, I would have been wearing a wig, and that would have been a benefit as well.

So, Mr. Acevedo, what do you know about the possibility of a plebiscite on a Constitution that reflects President Saied's desire for more of a Presidential system?

Mr. ACEVEDO. Thank you, Congressman.

I think you hit a really good point, which is the question that I would ask, which is, what is it that President Saied—and where does he want to go from here? And that is what we are missing in this equation.

I think, from my standpoint we need the President to articulate a plan that is inclusive, a plan that does not exclude the political parties. And we need to ensure that during the reconciliation process he is talking to those who may support him and those who may oppose him, right? That is part of the democratic process.

And I think it is also important to note that the message that we should be sending from the U.S.—obviously, President Saied is an important factor, but there is a whole political class in Tunisia that goes far beyond just one individual.

And I just have to reiterate how important this hearing is, because I think the more we shine a spotlight on what is going on in Tunisia and especially the parliamentary issue—of course, the U.S. Congress speaking about a parliamentary issue in another



country really sends a very strong message. So even after this hearing, I look forward to working with all of you to continue that pressure, because I think it is very much needed to help the Tunisian people.

Mr. SHERMAN. Democracy, yes; Brotherhood, no.

I yield back.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you very much, Mr. Sherman.

And I now yield myself a time for questioning.

I think I want to start with, Dr. Abouaoun, what would the Constitution and the government look like if President Saied implemented his longstanding beliefs?

Dr. ABOUAOUN. Thank you.

I guess the vision of unimpeded, I mean he did not flesh out very clearly. But, in general, what is known about the President is that he prefers a more popular direct democracy where there is a very strong emphasis on how much local structures (ph) have power versus how much central structures have power.

And, obviously, he is using the dysfunction of the last ten years and the grievances of the people resulting from these dysfunctions to push for a Presidential regime, combined with this direct popular democracy.

Thank you.

Mr. DEUTCH. Ms. Arieff, do you have anything to add to that?

Ms. ARIEFF. I agree that he has said different things at different times. I would note that he was not necessarily a direct actor in the drafting of the 2014 Constitution; he was a big critic, even at that time, of the direction that things took.

He has, over the many years that he has been a professor and then public persona and then Presidential candidate, he has talked about a vision of local councils which would, in turn, select parliamentarians, so not through direct election of the legislature. And so he describes this as kind of power flowing upward from the ground instead of downward from a unified executive.

At the same time, earlier this year, prior to his actions on July 25, he expressed support for returning to something like the 1959 Constitution, which is Tunisia's Constitution after independence, which was a strongly Presidentialist system with few checks and balances, so a very different political vision.

I am curious if Amna has additional insight, but it is difficult to say.

Mr. DEUTCH. Well—

Dr. GUELLALI. I think—

Mr. DEUTCH. Let me actually—I am going to turn to you, Dr. Guellali, but I want to put something else on the table first.

Tunisian General Labor Union, UGTT, which is the main trade union federation, reportedly the country's largest independent organization, has been an influential organization in Tunisian society. It won a Nobel Peace Prize alongside other Tunisian civil society groups. It served as a channel for ordinary Tunisians' economic grievances and mediator of political disputes.

And so UGTT President Tabboubi expressed qualified support for President Saied's actions after July 25, but the organization came out in opposition to his increased consolidation of power in September and referred to his actions as a "danger to democracy." Nev-

ertheless, President Saied says he is acting out of the will of the Tunisian people.

So, Dr. Guellali, let me go to you now. How has civil society, more broadly, felt about President Saied's actions? And to what extent do you feel civil society is empowered to speak out and continue to play a role in what may come next?

Dr. GUELLALI. Thank you very much, Chairman Deutch, for this question.

I think civil society had a very diverging and varied reaction to the President's move on the 25th of July. Some, such as the powerful UGTT, the workers' union you were mentioning, considered that the move was necessary to put an end to the political paralysis, but they called on the President to initiate a negotiated and quick return to the democratic process. Other civil society groups condemned the decision to suspend the Parliament and considered that the President has acted outside of his constitutional powers.

However, all civic forces in Tunisia today have expressed their desire to participate in the elaboration of the roadmap for the country. They have urged the President to create an open, inclusive, and consultative dialog with all stakeholders and with a timeframe for the next steps and the next stages for this situation.

And, so far, the President has not responded to these demands and has even mocked calls for a roadmap. He has recently voted to have a dialog with the youth, especially in the forlorn regions of Tunisia, but has not so far unveiled a timeline or the forms of this dialog.

So this is really—for civil society groups, it is really very important that they can participate in this dialog and can be part of forging the new system of governance. I believe that none of the civic groups in Tunisia has called for the reinstatement of the Parliament as it was, but they are calling for a new democratic—new parliamentary democracy, basically.

Mr. DEUTCH. That is very helpful. Thank you very much.

And one last question.

Mr. Acevedo, Tunisia was a top local source of IS foreign fighters from 2014–2015, at the height of the group's territorial influence in Iraq and Syria. U.N. estimates that, in 2015, over 5,800 Tunisians were fighting for ISIS across the Middle East and North Africa. Many of these actors are now returning to Tunisia with no intention of giving up the fight.

How could current political instability in Tunisia impact counterterrorism operations in the country? And if you would care to comment on how that might impact the rest of the region, especially Libya.

Mr. ACEVEDO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It really comes down to recruitment. On the security side, my concern with Tunisia is, we have different elements in this pot that are exactly what we have seen before: a struggling economy; we have a youth bulge that cannot find jobs, so they have to find where to go to feed themselves and feed their families. And if the people start losing hope, then it could become a hotbed for recruitment for terrorist activities.

Now, because of Tunisia's history and, kind of, where we were in 2013, 2015, on the recruitment side, all the elements are still there,

which is why I am concerned that either the spillover effect from Libya or any potential consequence from a potential reemergence on the Afghanistan front can once again pop up in Tunisia and further destabilize the region.

And we usually talk about the migration crisis kind of going north toward Europe, but let's not forget, we also have a security crisis on the Sahel, on the south of Tunisia, and that could be jeopardized, as well, if more recruitment is happening in that region.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you very much, Mr. Acevedo.

And I want to thank all the witnesses for an important and robust discussion today about the situation in Tunisia.

This isn't easy, obviously, but I think it is really important to recognize the United States can and, I think, really must stand firm in supporting the continued democratic transition in Tunisia, calling attention to concerning actions that President Saied has taken since July, and has demonstrated no intention of changing course of action, despite vocal concern from civil society and the international community.

It is also our responsibility to not disregard the continued legitimate grievances of the Tunisian people and to use our voice and our vote and our assistance to strengthen Tunisia's ability to respond to the economic stagnation and terrorism challenges that they face. We all want to see a stable, prosperous Tunisia. We want to see the Tunisia in which people chart their own successful future.

And, in sum, the purpose of this hearing is to talk about the importance of continuing to see Tunisia move forward in democratic fashion. Again, this is not easy, but all of our witnesses have offered really helpful and insightful analysis of what is happening now.

We are grateful to you for your participation.

I want to thank all the members for participating today.

And, with that, this subcommittee hearing is now adjourned. Thanks very much, everyone.

[Whereupon, at 2:46 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

**SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE  
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128**

**Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Global Counterterrorism**

**Ted Deutch (D-FL), Chair**

October 14, 2021

**TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS**

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, to be held virtually by the Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Global Counterterrorism via Cisco WebEx (and available by live webcast on the Committee website at <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/>):

**DATE:** Thursday, October 14, 2021

**TIME:** 1:00 p.m., EDT

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

**WITNESSES:** Elie Abouaoun, Ph.D.  
Director  
Middle East and North Africa Programs  
United States Institute of Peace

Amna Guellali, Ph.D.  
Deputy Regional Director for Middle East and North Africa  
Amnesty International

Ms. Alexis Arief  
Specialist in African Affairs  
Congressional Research Service

Mr. Eddy Acevedo  
Chief of Staff and Senior Advisor  
The Wilson Center  
*(Former National Security Advisor and Senior Deputy Assistant  
Administrator for Legislative and Public Affairs, USAID)*

\*NOTE: Witnesses may be added.

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Day Thursday Date 10/14/2021 Room Cisco Webex

Starting Time 1:06 PM Ending Time 2:46 PM

Recesses ☐ (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_ ) (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_ ) (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_ ) (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_ ) (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_ ) (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_ )

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TITLE OF HEARING:

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

SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

*See Attached*

NON-SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT: (Mark with an \* if they are not members of full committee.)

HEARING WITNESSES: Same as meeting notice attached? Yes ☒ No ☐

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# HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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