



# Tunisia: Recent Developments and Policy Issues

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## Summary

On January 14, 2011, Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine ben Ali fled the country after several weeks of increasingly violent protests. The protests initially seemed to stem from discontent related to high unemployment, but eventually spiraled into an unprecedented national challenge to Ben Ali's authoritarian regime. As of January 15, the speaker of parliament, Fouad Mebazaa, has assumed the role of interim president, in line with constitutional prerogatives. On January 17, a "unity" cabinet was formed, which includes three leaders of officially sanctioned opposition parties. Ruling party figures have nonetheless retained control of key posts, while members of banned Islamist and leftist political movements have not been invited to participate. Tunisian authorities have promised political reforms and elections within 60 days. However, the impact of recent developments is difficult to predict. Violence between protesters, security forces, and unidentified gunmen persisted in urban centers as of January 17. The political shifts of recent weeks have been accompanied by speculation over the views and roles of Tunisia's security forces, portions of which orchestrated the crackdown on demonstrations while others appear to have influenced Ben Ali's decision to resign.

Prior to the December-January protests, Tunisia had been seen as a stable, autocratic government since its independence from France in 1956. Ben Ali, who was in power for 23 years, was elected for a fifth term in October 2009 in an election widely seen as flawed and boycotted by leading opposition parties. His Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) party exerted strong control over parliament, state and local governments, and most political activity. The government cultivated strong ties with France and the European Union, its largest trading partner. Tunisia is a non-oil-exporting, middle-income country with a growing economy but high unemployment.

The unexpected and rapid upheaval in Tunisia raises a wide range of questions for the future of the country and the region, pertaining to the struggle between entrenched forces loyal to the former regime and an unorganized popular movement without a clear leader; the potential shape of the new political order; the potential future role of Islamist and/or radical movements in the government and society; the role of the military as a political power-broker; and the difficult diplomatic balance—for the United States and other partners—of encouraging greater democratic openness while not undermining other foreign policy priorities. Recent developments also have potential implications for Congress related to the oversight to U.S.-Tunisian bilateral relations and assistance, and to broader questions of U.S. policy toward the Middle East. Many analysts believe the events in Tunisia could affect political stability in other countries in the region with authoritarian-leaning, Western-backed regimes.

Current U.S.-Tunisian relations largely emphasize military cooperation, although Tunisia has pushed for a greater focus on trade. Congress has been supportive of security assistance programs in Tunisia, directing the State Department in FY2009 and FY2010 to allocate levels of Foreign Military Financing (FMF) that surpassed budget requests by the executive branch. According to private sector analysis, the United States is Tunisia's primary supplier of military equipment. U.S. officials, who grew increasingly critical of the government in the days prior to Ben Ali's departure, have since called for free and fair elections.

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## Recent Developments: Exit of President Ben Ali

Tunisia has undergone major political upheaval in recent weeks. It was previously considered a stable, albeit highly authoritarian, country that cultivated close ties with Western powers, particularly France and the European Union. On January 14, President Zine el-Abidine ben Ali fled the country after several weeks of increasingly violent protests.<sup>1</sup> The protests initially seemed to stem from discontent related to high unemployment, but quickly spiraled into an unprecedented popular challenge to Ben Ali's authoritarian regime. These events have sparked international concern over stability in a region associated with secure, autocratic regimes, and some analysts have speculated that anti-government movements in neighboring countries, such as Egypt and Algeria, could be strengthened by Tunisia's example.

Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi, who has been in office since 1999, initially assumed power in Ben Ali's absence, but on January 15, Ghannouchi turned over the role of acting president to the speaker of parliament, Fouad Mebazaa, in line with constitutional prerogatives.<sup>2</sup> On January 17, Ghannouchi announced the formation of a "unity" cabinet, which included members of civil society as well as three leaders of officially sanctioned opposition parties. These were Ahmed Najib el Chebbi of the Progressive Democratic Party, the largest of the legal opposition parties, who was named minister for regional development; Ahmed Brahim of the Ettajdid Movement, a leftist party, who was appointed minister for higher education and scientific research; and Mustafa Ben Jaafar, leader of the Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties party (and a medical doctor), who was named health minister. Key positions, such as prime minister and the ministers of defense, interior, and foreign affairs, were retained by ruling party figures, and the internal stability of the government appeared to be threatened by discontent among some opposition supporters who accused their leaders of being overly conciliatory to elements of the former regime. Members of banned political parties were not invited to participate in the government. The two most significant are the Islamist movement Ennahda, led by Rashid Ghannouchi (no relation to the prime minister), and the leftist Congress for the Republic (CPR) party, led by Moncef Marzouki. Both leaders, who have been living in exile, have announced plans to return to Tunisia.

Authorities have promised political reforms, including freedom of expression, the release of political prisoners, investigations into corruption under the former regime, and the lifting of restrictions on the Tunisian League for Human Rights. They have also pledged elections within 60 days. However, it is difficult to predict whether these promises will be upheld, and whether the coming weeks will see an end to the uprising or further chaos. Looting, shootings, and violent confrontations between protesters, security forces, and gunmen in civilian clothes persisted in Tunis and other urban centers as of January 18. The protesters appear to lack a central leader and are not necessarily aligned with an identifiable political or ideological movement.

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Ali went to Saudi Arabia. France, which had been seen as a strong backer of the former president, signaled he was not welcome there, according to news reports. See Catherine Bremer, "Analysis-French Race to Adapt to New Maghreb Mood," Reuters, January 17, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Article 57 of Tunisia's constitution, adopted in 1959, states that "should the office of President of the Republic become vacant because of death, resignation, or absolute disability," the President of the Chamber of Deputies "shall immediately be vested with the functions of interim president of the republic for a period ranging from 45 to 60 days." The Article further stipulates that elections should be held during that time period to elect a new president for a five-year term, and that the interim president may not stand as a candidate.

Ben Ali's unexpected departure has led analysts to examine the role and cohesion of Tunisia's security forces, amid recent indications of internal divisions. Some analysts have speculated that the military—historically seen as relatively apolitical—may have played a key role in bringing an end to Ben Ali's presidency; such speculation has centered, in particular, around General Rachid Ammar, the military chief of staff, who is reported to have refused orders to open fire on demonstrators.<sup>3</sup> On January 16, the government announced arrest warrants for the former head of presidential security, Ali Seriati, and several of his “accomplices,” for allegedly plotting against the state.<sup>4</sup> International media reports have referenced continuing violence by “militias” seen as allied to the former president, whose relationship to formal security structures remains unclear.<sup>5</sup>

As previously noted, the ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally party (RCD) has retained control of the ministries of defense and the interior, indicating continuity for the senior military and police hierarchy. Still, security forces have displayed potentially divergent motivations in recent days, countering ongoing civilian protests aimed at dislodging the RCD from the unity government, while combating organized violence by unidentified but reportedly highly armed elements in downtown Tunis who may be linked to the former regime.

## **December-January Protests**

The anti-government protests began in late December 2010. Unrest was first reported on December 24 in the interior region of Sidi Bouzid, where thousands of demonstrators rioted and attacked a government building after a 26-year-old university graduate set himself on fire to protest police interference and a lack of economic opportunities for young people. The protests quickly spread to the nearby cities of Kasserine and Thala, as well as other urban centers. On January 12, riots erupted in the capital, Tunis; the military deployed to the streets and a national curfew was imposed. The following day, rioters ransacked a private home belonging to one of Ben Ali's wealthy relatives in the beach community of Hammamet, underscoring the deep antipathy many Tunisians feel toward members of the ruling elite. Authorities imposed a state of emergency on January 14, prohibiting any gathering of over three people and authorizing the use of force against “any suspect person who does not obey orders to stop.”<sup>6</sup>

Public demonstrations had previously been very rare in Tunisia, as state repression and surveillance of dissidents had been effective at curbing the expression of anti-government views. Police have repeatedly opened fire on demonstrators and arrested protesters, journalists, opposition party members, lawyers, and rights advocates, according to news reports. Some detainees have reportedly been tortured.<sup>7</sup> According to official figures, dozens of civilians have been killed in clashes with security forces; the true toll may be higher. The government response was also initially characterized by attempts to further curtail the use of news sites and social media, which some are reportedly using to organize and publicize the protests. Since the departure of Ben Ali, the government's response has been somewhat tempered and more reconciliatory, and the focus of security forces has turned toward containing disorder while using

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<sup>3</sup> Margaret Coker, “Tunisia Names Caretaker Government, Credits Army,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 17, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick, “Military Backs New Leaders in Tunisia,” *The New York Times*, January 16, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Angelique Chrisafis, “Confusion, Fear and Horror in Tunisia as Old Regime's Militia Carries on the Fight,” *The Guardian* (UK), January 17, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Tunisia 7 Television, “Tunisian Authorities Declare State of Emergency,” via Open Source Center.

<sup>7</sup> Reuters, “Interview-UN Rights Boss Urges Tunisia to Probe Killings,” January 13, 2011.

nonlethal force to disrupt some demonstrations. On January 18, Prime Minister Ghannouchi said in a television interview that he had instructed the security forces not to open fire on demonstrators as soon as Ben Ali had left the country, and promised that “all those who initiated this massacre, this carnage, will be brought to justice.”<sup>8</sup>

Prior to his exile, Ben Ali offered a widening series of concessions on political and civil rights in an effort to stem the anti-government uprising. The president reshuffled his cabinet, replaced the governor of the Sidi Bouzid region—where the demonstrations began in December—and the interior minister, and promised 300,000 new jobs. At the same time, he initially maintained that police had used their weapons only in “legitimate defense” against attacks by demonstrators, and accused protest leaders of being foreign-influenced “extremists” and terrorists.<sup>9</sup> On January 13, Ben Ali gave an address on national television in which he pledged to step down when his term was up in 2014, to allow fresh parliamentary elections before then, and to end state censorship. However, these promises did not placate demonstrators, who continued to call for Ben Ali’s immediate resignation and the dissolving of the RCD.

## **The U.S. Response**

U.S. criticism of the government’s response to the demonstrations, although initially muted, mounted as the protests widened. On January 7, the State Department released a statement relaying concern about the demonstrations and related government Internet surveillance. The statement called on “all parties to show restraint as citizens exercise their right of public assembly” and noted that U.S. officials had “conveyed our views directly to the Tunisian government.”<sup>10</sup> In response, the Tunisian government summoned U.S. Ambassador Gordon Gray to protest the United States’ characterization of events.

On January 11, State Department spokesman Mark Toner stated that the United States was “deeply concerned by reports of the use of excessive force by the government of Tunisia,” and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in an interview with the Saudi-funded Arabic-language satellite television channel *Al Arabiya* that “we are worried, in general, about the unrest and the instability, and what seems to be the underlying concerns of the people who are protesting.”<sup>11</sup> At the same time, Clinton stressed that “we are not taking sides,” and indicated that she had not been in direct communication with senior authorities since the protests began. In a speech in Doha, Qatar, on January 13, Secretary Clinton challenged Middle Eastern leaders to address the fundamental needs of their citizens and provide channels for popular participation, or else risk facing instability and extremism. Events in Tunisia provided a vivid backdrop to her remarks.

On January 14, after Ben Ali’s departure, President Barack Obama stated, “I condemn and deplore the use of violence against citizens peacefully voicing their opinion in Tunisia, and I applaud the courage and dignity of the Tunisian people.” He also called on the Tunisian government to hold “free and fair elections in the near future that reflect the true will and

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<sup>8</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick, “Tunisia Unity Government Fractures,” January 18, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Global Insight, “Unrest in Tunisia Highlights Underlying Troubles,” January 7, 2011; Agence France Presse (AFP), “Tunisia Leader Slams ‘Terrorist Acts,’ Pledges More Jobs,” January 10, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. State Department, “Recent Protests and Website Hacks in Tunisia,” January 7, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> AFP, “US Concerned About Reports of ‘Excessive Force’ in Tunisia,” January 11, 2011; and U.S. State Department, “Secretary of State Interviewed on Al Arabiya,” January 11, 2011, via Congressional Quarterly (CQ).

aspirations of the Tunisian people.”<sup>12</sup> Secretary Clinton echoed the president’s call for free and fair elections and also called for the Tunisian government to “build a stronger foundation for Tunisia’s future with economic, social, and political reforms.” She added, “On my trip to the Middle East this week, I heard people everywhere yearning for economic opportunity, political participation and the chance to build a better future. Young people especially need to have a meaningful role in the decisions that shape their lives. Addressing these concerns will be challenging, but the United States stands ready to help.”<sup>13</sup>

## **Background: The Government Under Ben Ali**

Prior to the December-January demonstrations, Tunisia was seen as having a stable, authoritarian government that placed a higher priority on economic growth than on political liberalization. It had had only two leaders since gaining independence from France in 1956: the late Habib Bourguiba and Zine el-Abidine ben Ali, a former Minister of National Security, Minister of the Interior, and Prime Minister, who became president in 1987. Constitutional amendments approved in May 2002 lifted term limits for the presidency and raised the age allowed for a candidate to 75. Ben Ali easily won a fourth five-year term on October 24, 2004, with 94.49% of the vote and a 91% voter turnout. He won yet another term on October 25, 2009, with 89.62% of the vote and an 89.4% voter turnout. The 72-year-old Ben Ali was not eligible to run again unless the constitution were revised once more.

In the run-up to the 2009 presidential election, opposition Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) candidate Ahmed Najib el Chebbi decided not to compete in order not to give the authorities what he termed “fake legitimacy.” The Constitutional Council rejected the candidacy of Secretary General of the Democratic Forum of Labor and Liberties (FDTL) Mustafa Ben Jaafar because he allegedly had not been selected at least two years before the date of submission of his candidacy as required by a 2008 law. Ben Jaafar threw his support to Renewal Movement (Ettajid/formerly communist) leader Ahmed Brahim, who had criticized the government for harassing and imposing restrictions on his campaign. Brahim won 1.56% of the vote. Mohammed Bouchiha of the Party of Popular Unity (PUP) won 5% of the vote and Ahmed Inoubili of the Democratic Unionist Union (UDU) 3.8%; both represent “official” opposition parties.

The electoral system grants 75% of the seats in parliament to the party that wins a simple majority in the elections and 25% to all other parties based on their share of the vote. The latter are considered “official” opposition parties in that the government allows them to hold seats in parliament. Nine parties ran for seats in the Chamber of Deputies (lower house of parliament) in October 2009. The PDP boycotted the elections after the authorities rejected PDP’s election lists for 17 of the 26 constituencies. FDTL also was prevented from running. Ben Ali’s RCD won 151 out of 214 seats.<sup>14</sup> Six other parties also won seats. A referendum in 2002 created a Chamber of Advisors (upper house) of 126 members: 85 elected by municipal councils, professional associations, and trade unions, and 41 appointed by the president. Municipal elections were held in May 2010. The PDP boycotted, while the ruling party won nearly 90% of the municipal seats.

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<sup>12</sup> The White House, “Statement by the President on Events in Tunisia,” January 14, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> U.S. State Department, “Recent Events in Tunisia,” January 14, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> The RCD is the current incarnation of the Neo-Destour Party, which was formed in 1934 and led the movement for independence.

After the 2009 elections, then-U.S. State Department spokesman Ian Kelly said, “We were concerned about the recent elections. The government of Tunisia did not allow international election monitoring. We are not aware that permission was granted to any credible independent observers. We will continue to press for political reform.”<sup>15</sup> Tunisian authorities rejected the criticism, claiming that observers from 23 countries had vouched for the integrity and transparency of the election.<sup>16</sup> After the 2004 election, the U.S. State Department had stated, “The ruling party’s domination of state institutions and political activity precluded credible and competitive electoral challenges from unsanctioned actors.”<sup>17</sup> The same conclusion could be applied to the 2009 elections.

The powerful president appoints the prime minister, the cabinet, and 24 regional governors. Parliament does not originate legislation and passes government bills with minor or no changes. There is no vice president, and Ben Ali did not publicly cultivate a designated successor.

## **Suppression of Islamist Politics**

The government under Ben Ali routinely emphasized the threat of Islamist extremism (see “Terrorism,” below) in order to justify its authoritarian rule. The government harshly suppressed Ennahda (Renaissance), an Islamist political party which authorities considered to be a violent, domestic terrorist group, after unearthing an alleged conspiracy in 1991. Ennahda denied the accusation, but, in 1992 Tunisian military courts convicted 265 Ennahda members on charges of plotting a coup. In November 2008, authorities released all 21 remaining imprisoned Ennahda members. However, a former leader of the group, Mohammed Sadiq Chourou, was rearrested three weeks later after demanding that the movement be rehabilitated and allowed to resume its political activities; he was sentenced to one year in jail, which was later extended by one year.

Some analysts consider Ennahda’s exiled leader, Rashid Ghannouchi, to be a moderate seeking to accommodate Islam with democracy.<sup>18</sup> In June 2010, another exiled Ennahda figure, Dr. Abdelmajid Najjar, was permitted to return to Tunisia, where he called for the return of other exiled Islamist leaders and “political reconciliation.”<sup>19</sup> In December, however, two Ennahda members were sentenced to jail for allegedly “reviving a banned organization.”<sup>20</sup> Following Ben Ali’s exile, Ghannouchi announced he was planning to return to Tunisia from exile in London, and that Ennahda would consider participating in the government if invited. Ghannouchi reportedly added that he would not run for president.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> U.S. State Department Daily News Briefing, October 26, 2009; via CQ.

<sup>16</sup> “Tunisia Denies U.S. Critics on Election Transparency,” Xinhua News Agency, October 28, 2009.

<sup>17</sup> U.S. State Department, “Tunisia,” *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 2004*, released February 28, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Azzam S. Tamimi, *Rachid Ghannouchi: A Democrat within Islamism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

<sup>19</sup> Quds Press, “Tunisian Opposition Leader on His Return, Need for Reconciliation with Islamists,” June 15, 2010, via BBC Monitoring.

<sup>20</sup> Al Jazeera TV, “Islamists Jailed in Tunisia for ‘Attempt to Revive’ Ennahda Movement,” December 6, 2010, via BBC Monitoring.

<sup>21</sup> Mohammed Al Shafey, “Exiled Tunisian Islamist Leader Vows to Return,” *Asharq Alawsat*, January 17, 2011.

## Human Rights

The Ben Ali government effectively used the fear of an Islamist threat and the example of Islamist-fueled civil conflict in neighboring Algeria to systematically suppress human rights and fail to carry out political reforms. Ben Ali maintained that he was ushering in democratic reforms in a “measured way” so that religious extremists could not exploit freedoms.<sup>22</sup> Still, most observers saw no evidence of even a gradual reform program.

As the U.S. State Department’s annual *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* demonstrate, Tunisian security forces have been accused of a wide range of abuses, including extrajudicial arrests, denial of due process, torture, and other mistreatment of detainees. The Ben Ali government routinely infringed on citizens’ privacy rights and imposed severe restrictions on freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and association. It was intolerant of public criticism and used intimidation, criminal investigations, the court system, arbitrary arrests, residential restrictions, and travel controls to discourage human rights and opposition activists.<sup>23</sup> In a 2010 report, Amnesty International accused Tunisian authorities of “subverting” human rights organizations and other dissenting groups “by infiltrating them and provoking turmoil.”<sup>24</sup>

The government also tried to squelch criticism of its human rights practices made outside of the country. In 2010, the parliament passed legislation making it a crime to “establish, directly or indirectly, contact with officials of a foreign state, institution or foreign organization with the aim of inciting them to harm Tunisia’s vital interests and its economic security.”<sup>25</sup> The U.S.-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) reported in 2008 that Tunisian “authorities aggressively counter criticism at international forums by recruiting ‘spoilers,’” and described how one such group tried to dominate discussion at a Johns Hopkins University event featuring Tunisian journalist and human rights activist Sihem Bensedrine, who had been jailed and physically abused in Tunisia.<sup>26</sup> The same tactic was deployed at a May 2009 National Democratic Institute event with opposition figure Ahmed Najib el Chebbi.<sup>27</sup> In April 2010, Human Rights Watch researchers were prevented from holding a press conference in Tunis to discuss a recent report documenting repressive measures that Tunisian authorities impose on former political prisoners.<sup>28</sup> CPJ also described the government’s use of charges unrelated to journalism against journalists as a way to protect itself from international scrutiny.

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) listed President Ben Ali among the world’s worst press freedom “predators”<sup>29</sup>; the organization’s website is blocked in Tunisia. International human rights organizations have noted that Tunisia’s Internet policies are among the world’s most repressive: all Internet cafes are state-controlled; authorities aggressively filter Internet websites and reportedly conduct surveillance at Internet cafes; President Ben Ali’s family and friends control

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<sup>22</sup> “Tunisian President Says He Wants to Share Experience in Handling Islamic Extremism with Bush,” Associated Press, February 13, 2004.

<sup>23</sup> U.S. State Department, “Tunisia,” *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 2009*, released March 11, 2010.

<sup>24</sup> Amnesty International, “Tunisia Urged to End Subversion of Groups Critical of the Authorities,” July 12, 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Tunisia: A Move against Human Rights Defenders,” June 17, 2010.

<sup>26</sup> Committee to Protect Journalists, *Special Report on Tunisia*, September 23, 2008.

<sup>27</sup> A CRS analyst was present at this discussion.

<sup>28</sup> Sarah Leah Whitson, “A Tighter Tunisia,” *The Los Angeles Times*, April 19, 2010; see Human Rights Watch, *Repression of Former Political Prisoners in Tunisia: “A Larger Prison,”* March 24, 2010.

<sup>29</sup> RSF, “Predators,” updated May 3, 2010, at [<http://en.rsf.org/predators,21.html>].

local Internet service providers (though the current status of this censorship regime is in flux); and independent bloggers have been jailed. In August 2009, RSF reported that the National Union of Tunisian Journalists (SNJT), which had tried to be independent and autonomous, had been taken over by members or supporters of the ruling RCD party at an extraordinary congress held two months before national elections.

In November 2005, Tunisia hosted the U.N. World Summit on the Information Society in an effort to burnish its image, but its conduct had the opposite effect. Before the summit, local authorities closed the Association of Judges, which had called for a more independent judiciary, and prevented conferences of journalists and the League of Human Rights. They also beat a French correspondent who had reported on clashes between police and supporters of Tunisian hunger strikers. During the conclave, the European Union complained after plainclothes policemen physically prevented international non-governmental organizations from meeting and then stopped the German ambassador from meeting with their representatives. The Swiss government protested after its delegation head's speech that referred to these events was censored. After the summit, Tunis banned the International Federation of Journalists' website.

On a positive note in human rights practices, Tunisia has long been in the forefront of Arab countries guaranteeing women socio-economic rights and affording them educational and career opportunities. It is the only Arab Muslim country that bans polygamy. Women serve in the military and in many professions and constitute more than 50% of university students; the first woman governor was appointed in May 2004. In 2006, the government banned the headscarf from public places, claiming that it was protecting women's rights and preventing religious extremism. Critics charged that it was violating individual rights.

## **Terrorism**

Tunisian authorities have emphasized terrorism as a potential domestic threat, while Tunisian nationals have been implicated in terrorism abroad. In 2002, the U.S. State Department placed the Tunisian Combatant Group (TCG) on a list of specially designated global terrorists and froze its assets.<sup>30</sup> TCG sought to establish an Islamic state in Tunisia and was considered to be a radical offshoot of Ennahda. The TCG was suspected of plotting, but not carrying out, attacks on U.S., Algerian, and Tunisian embassies in Rome in December 2001.

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), previously known as the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), actively recruits Tunisians and reportedly had ties with the TCG.<sup>31</sup> In January 2007, in somewhat mysterious circumstances, Tunisian security forces claimed to have engaged in gun battles with terrorists linked to the GSPC who had infiltrated from Algeria and possessed homemade explosives, satellite maps of foreign embassies, and documents identifying foreign envoys. Eastern Algeria is an AQIM/GSPC stronghold. Some 30 Tunisians were subsequently convicted of plotting to target U.S. and British interests in Tunisia. AQIM later

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<sup>30</sup> U.S. State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism, 2006*, released April 30, 2007.

<sup>31</sup> Craig S. Smith, "Tunisia is Feared as New Islamist Base..." *International Herald Tribune*, February 20, 2007. Note, GSPC renamed itself Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in January 2007. For further background on AQIM, see CRS Report R41070, *Al Qaeda and Affiliates: Historical Perspective, Global Presence, and Implications for U.S. Policy*, coordinated by John Rollins.

claimed responsibility for kidnapping two Austrian tourists in Tunisia in February 2008. Algerian and Tunisian authorities have arrested Tunisians along their border, going in both directions.

Tunisian expatriates suspected of ties to Al Qaeda have been arrested in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Western Europe, and the United States. Some are detained at the U.S. Naval Base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and their possible return to Tunisia has proven to be somewhat controversial.<sup>32</sup> On April 24, 2009, General David Petraeus, then-Commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), told a House Appropriations Committee subcommittee that the perpetrators of suicide bombings in Iraq that month may have been part of a network based in Tunisia.<sup>33</sup>

Al Qaeda deputy leader Ayman al Zawahiri appeared to acknowledge an Al Qaeda presence in Tunisia in a taped message broadcast in October 2002, when he seemed to claim responsibility for the bombing of a synagogue on the Tunisian island of Djerba, noted for its Jewish minority, in April 2002. In all, 14 German tourists, five Tunisians, and two French citizens were killed in the attack.<sup>34</sup> France, Spain, Italy, and Germany arrested expatriate Tunisians for alleged involvement in the attack. In January 2009, French authorities put two alleged culprits on trial.

In December 2003, the Tunisian parliament passed a sweeping anti-terrorism law. The U.S. State Department called it “a comprehensive law to ‘support the international effort to combat terrorism and money laundering.’”<sup>35</sup> Since passage of the law, as many as 2,000 Tunisians have been detained, charged, and/or convicted on terrorism-related charges.<sup>36</sup> Critics claim that the law “makes the exercise of fundamental freedoms ... an expression of terrorism.”<sup>37</sup> Rights advocates have also accused anti-terror trials of relying on excessive pretrial detention, denial of due process, and weak evidence. In June 2008, an Amnesty International report, *In the Name of Security: Routine Abuses in Tunisia*, detailed concerns “regarding serious human rights violations being committed in connection with the government’s security and counterterrorism policies.”

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<sup>32</sup> An editorial in the *Orange Country Register* on November 16, 2008 stated, “In 2006, the U.S. sent two prisoners (from Guantanamo) to Tunisia with the explicit understanding that they would not be tortured or mistreated. The Tunisian government broke its promise and inflicted cruel treatment and kangaroo-court trials.” In May 2009, the United States asked Italy to receive two Tunisian detainees who objected to their return to Tunisia for fear that they would be subjected to torture. On May 26, 2009, the Tunisian Minister of Justice said that his government was prepared to receive another 10 Guantanamo detainees. “Tunisia asks US to Hand Over two Guantanamo Detainees,” Al-Jazeera TV, May 29, 2009.

<sup>33</sup> House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies Holds Hearing on the US Central Command, April 24, 2009, via CQ.

<sup>34</sup> “Al-Qaeda Deputy Leader Signals Involvement in Attacks,” *Financial Times*, October 10, 2002.

<sup>35</sup> U.S. State Department, *Patterns of Global Terrorism, 2003*, released April 29, 2004.

<sup>36</sup> U.S. State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism, 2009*, released August 5, 2010.

<sup>37</sup> Jeremy Landor, “Washington’s Partner,” *Middle East International*, March 5, 2004, pp. 23-24

## Economy

During the presidency of Ben Ali, many analysts contended that there is an implicit social contract between the government and its citizens, which promoted economic stability and middle-class standards of living at the expense of political freedom. Until the December-January protests, this strategy appeared to have worked. Tunisia has almost completed a transition from a socialist to a market economy. It is considered a middle-income country, and one of the best-performing non-oil exporting Arab countries. Widespread home and car ownership support that characterization. Ben Ali's 2004 election manifesto called for diversification, that is, ending reliance on textiles (which have been a primary engine of economic growth), due to increased competition from China; modernization by providing investment incentives to foreign businesses and passing legal reforms; liberalization with an anticipated free-trade zone with the EU; and privatization. The textile sector has since shifted to higher quality goods. The tourism sector also has been emphasized; it is a major employer and earns some 11% of the country's hard currency receipts.<sup>38</sup> Tunisia has also attempted to attract foreign investment in its nascent oil and gas sector. Unemployment remains a major problem, however; the official rate is high and the unofficial rate is believed to be even higher.

### Basic Facts

**Population:** 10.6 million (2010 est.)

**Gross Domestic Product Growth Rate:** 3% (2009 est.)

**GDP Per Capita** (purchasing power parity): \$9,100 (2009 est.)

**Unemployment rate:** 13.3% (2009 est.)

**Key Exports:** clothing, semi-finished goods and textiles, agricultural products

**Key Imports:** textiles, machinery and equipment, hydrocarbons

**Major Trading Partners:** France, Italy, Germany, Libya, China, Spain

**Source:** CIA, *The World Factbook*, January 3, 2011.

In 2008, social unrest broke in the impoverished mining region of Gafsa, where unemployment is particularly high. The government sent in the army to aid the police, who were unable to contain the demonstrations. Some 38 people were imprisoned in connection with the protests on charges of forming a criminal group with the aim of destroying public and private property, armed rebellion, and assault on officials during the exercise of their duties. They were paroled in November 2009. Released trade unionist Adnan Hadji stated that demands for improving deplorable conditions in the mines had been made in a legal way and that the demands were about real things, such as pollution, unemployment, disease, and maldistribution of wealth.<sup>39</sup>

The European recession in 2009 affected the Tunisian economy, producing a decrease in exports, a contraction in the industrial sector, and a lower expansion in services. Tunisia's economy nevertheless fared relatively well given the severity of the global economic crisis, and the country did not experience a recession. The government responded to the economic setbacks with fiscal stimulus emphasizing development projects, the creation of more state jobs, and increases in state payrolls.<sup>40</sup> In September 2010, the IMF projected that economic growth would reach 3.8% in 2010, after having slowed to 3% in 2009; the Fund predicted that Tunisia's growth could continue

<sup>38</sup> U.S. State Department, "Background Note: Tunisia," October 13, 2010.

<sup>39</sup> "Tunisia Releases Mining Area Detainees on Parole," Al-Jazeera, November 5, 2009. According to human rights advocates, Tunisian authorities continued to monitor and repress activists in Gafsa throughout 2010.

<sup>40</sup> "Tunisia Continues Fiscal Stimulus in 2010 Budget," *TransArabia*, November 14, 2009.

to increase gradually, “provided that policies and reforms planned by the authorities aimed at enhancing Tunisia’s competitiveness, developing new markets, and supporting new sources of growth in sectors with high added value bear fruit.”<sup>41</sup>

## Relations with the United States

The United States and Tunisia have enjoyed continuous relations since 1797, prior to French colonization. Tunisia was the site of major battles during World War II, and was liberated by Allied forces in 1943 as part of the Allied campaign known as Operation Torch. A U.S. cemetery and memorial near the ancient city of Carthage holds nearly 3,000 U.S. military dead. During the Cold War, Tunisia pursued a strongly pro-Western foreign policy despite a brief experiment with leftist economic policies. The United States considered Tunisia under Ben Ali to be an ally, a moderate Arab, Muslim state, and a partner in international counterterrorism efforts. However, Tunisia did not support the 1991 Gulf War or the 2003 war against Iraq and, when the 2003 war in Iraq began, Ben Ali expressed regret and fear that the conflict might destabilize the Middle East.<sup>42</sup> Tunisian officials’ criticism was not voiced directly at the United States and was circumspect, and their stance did not harm bilateral relations. U.S.-Tunisian relations today largely emphasize cooperation in counterterrorism, although Tunisia would like greater focus on increasing trade (see below).

Despite generally positive bilateral ties, U.S. officials have recently expressed concern over Tunisia’s record on political rights and freedom of expression. In a January 2010 speech on global Internet freedom, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton singled out Tunisia as one of five countries contributing to a “spike in threats to the free flow of information.”<sup>43</sup> In July, the State Department expressed “deep” concern over “the decline in political freedoms, notably severe restrictions on freedom of expression in Tunisia,” particularly with regard to the sentencing of an independent journalist, Fahem Boukadous, to four years in prison, reportedly in connection with his coverage of the Gafsa protests in 2008.<sup>44</sup> Tunisia rejected U.S. criticisms, contending that Boukadous’ arrest was unrelated to “journalistic activity.” The United States strongly criticized Tunisia’s reaction to anti-government demonstrations in January 2011 (see “Recent Developments: Exit of President Ben Ali,” above). Numerous international and regional news reports and analyses have referenced internal communications among U.S. diplomats that have been highly critical of political repression and corruption among Ben Ali’s inner circle and family. Some analysts have speculated that reports of such communications may have played a role in sparking the anti-government protests.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Joël Toujas-Bernate and Rina Bhattacharya, International Monetary Fund, “Tunisia Weathers Crisis Well, But Unemployment Persists,” September 10, 2010.

<sup>42</sup> “Ben Ali Expresses ‘Deep Regret’ at Start of War Against Iraq,” *Tunis Infotunisie*, March 20, 2003, Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) Document AFP20030320000266.

<sup>43</sup> U.S. State Department, “Secretary of State Clinton Delivers Remarks on Internet Freedom,” January 21, 2010; via CQ.

<sup>44</sup> U.S. State Department Daily Press Briefing, July 9, 2010. Boukadous was convicted of “belonging to a criminal association” and spreading materials “likely to harm public order.” For further background on Boukadous’ sentencing, see Committee to Protect Journalists, “Tunisia Must Release Ailing Journalist on Hunger Strike,” October 21, 2010.

<sup>45</sup> E.g., Christopher Alexander, “Tunisia’s Protest Wave: Where It Comes From and What It Means,” *ForeignPolicy.com*, January 3, 2011.

The U.S. State Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) has a regional office in Tunis, responsible for programming to enhance political, economic, and educational reforms in Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, and Morocco as well as Tunisia, which opened in August 2004. MEPI has implemented very few bilateral programs in Tunisia. Critics suggest that the United States has sent mixed signals to Tunisia by aiding the military while not strongly supporting democratizing elements, despite expressing a desire for reform in the Middle East.

U.S.-Tunisian trade is relatively low in volume because Tunisia is a small country and conducts most of its trade with Europe. In 2009, the United States imported \$325.8 million in goods from Tunisia and exported \$502.1 million in goods to Tunisia.<sup>46</sup> Tunisia is eligible for special trade preferences, that is, duty-free entry for listed products, under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) Program. The United States and Tunisia have a trade investment framework agreement (TIFA) and a bilateral investment treaty. TIFAs can be the first step toward a free-trade agreement (FTA). The Tunisian government has expressed interest in concluding an FTA with the United States, but it has not made the reforms needed to proceed toward one.

## **U.S. Assistance**

U.S. aid to Tunisia focuses on military assistance and counterterrorism cooperation. A U.S.-Tunisian Joint Military Commission meets annually and joint exercises are held regularly. According to the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), Tunisia relies on U.S. Foreign Military Financing (FMF) assistance to “maintain its aging 80’s and early 90’s era inventory of U.S.-origin equipment, which comprises nearly 70% of Tunisia’s total inventory.”<sup>47</sup> FMF and “Section 1206” security assistance funds have also provided Tunisia with equipment for border and coastal security, which the United States views as a key area of counterterrorism prevention.<sup>48</sup> Since 2003, this equipment has included helicopters, machine guns, body armor and helmets, parachutes, and night vision devices for sniper rifles. Other equipment has been provided through the State Department’s Peacekeeping Operations (PKO) account, with plans to procure seven Scan Eagle Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) with \$4.1 million in FY2008 PKO funds forfeited by Mauritania (which had been temporarily rendered ineligible for security assistance due to a military coup).<sup>49</sup> DSCA also reports that Tunisia has been one of the top twenty recipients worldwide of International Military Education and Training (IMET) since FY1994.<sup>50</sup> According to private sector analysis, the United States is Tunisia’s primary supplier of military equipment, purchased through Foreign Military Sales (FMS) agreements.<sup>51</sup>

Tunisia is one of ten countries participating in the U.S. Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), a State Department-led regional program aimed at helping North African and Sahelian countries better control their territory and strengthen their counterterrorism

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<sup>46</sup> U.S. International Trade Commission data. While Tunisian imports of U.S. goods did not fluctuate significantly during the economic recession, U.S. imports from Tunisia nearly halved between 2008 and 2009.

<sup>47</sup> Defense Security Cooperation Agency, “Tunisia Summary,” updated January 13, 2011.

<sup>48</sup> P.L. 109-163, the National Defense Authorization Act, FY2006, Section 1206 authorizes the Secretary of Defense to train and equip foreign military and foreign maritime security forces. For more information, see CRS Report RS22855, *Security Assistance Reform: “Section 1206” Background and Issues for Congress*, by Nina M. Serafino.

<sup>49</sup> This assistance is described as supporting the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Forecast International, *International Military Markets—Middle East & Africa*, “Tunisia: Section 3—Market Overview,” May 2009.

capabilities. The Defense Department allocated over \$13 million between FY2007 and FY2009 on TSCTP-related military cooperation with Tunisia, including bilateral and multinational exercises, regional conferences, and Joint-Combined Exchange Training programs, which are conducted by U.S. special operations forces.<sup>52</sup> This is in addition to nearly \$19 million in Section 1206 funds allocated in FY2008 and FY2009, which have supported the provision of equipment (as discussed above) and training related to counterterrorism. Tunisia also cooperates in NATO's Operation Active Endeavor, which provides counterterrorism surveillance in the Mediterranean; participates in NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue; and allows NATO ships to make port calls at Tunis.

**Table I. U.S. Aid to Tunisia**

\$ Thousands

	FY2008 Actual	FY2009 Actual	FY2010 Estimate	FY2011 Request
FMF	\$8,300	\$12,000	\$15,000	\$4,9,000
ESF	\$1,200	\$800	\$2,000	0
IMET	\$1,700	\$1,700	\$1,950	\$2,300
INCLE	\$198	0	0	0
NADR	\$100	\$425	\$200	0
1206	\$10,000	\$8,800	0	unavailable

**Notes:** FMF: Foreign Military Financing; ESF: Economic Support Funds, IMET: International Military Education and Training funds, INCLE: International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement Funds, NADR: Non-proliferation, Anti-Terrorism, Demining, and Related Programs funds.

**Source:** State Department Congressional Budget Justifications, FY2010-FY2011.

Congress has been supportive of U.S. military assistance in Tunisia in recent years. In an explanatory statement accompanying P.L. 111-8, the Omnibus Appropriations Act, 2009, signed into law on March 11, 2009, appropriators allocated \$12 million for FMF assistance for Tunisia, far more than the State Department's budget request for \$2.62 million. At the same time, appropriators wrote in a joint explanatory statement that "restrictions on political freedom, the use of torture, imprisonment of dissidents, and persecution of journalists and human rights defenders are of concern and progress on these issues is necessary for the partnership between the United States and Tunisia to further strengthen."<sup>53</sup> Similarly, in the conference report accompanying P.L. 111-117, the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2010, signed into law on December 16, 2009, appropriators directed the State Department to allocate \$18 million in FMF for Tunisia, \$3 million above the requested amount. The conference report also allocated \$2 million in Economic Support Fund (ESF)—the amount requested—for "programs and activities in southern Tunisia and to promote respect for human rights, as proposed by the Senate."<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Funding figures provided to CRS by the State Department.

<sup>53</sup> *Congressional Record*, February 23, 2009, p. H2417.

<sup>54</sup> *Congressional Record*, December 8, 2009, p. H14350.

## Other Foreign Policy Issues

Tunisia sympathizes with the Palestinians; it hosted the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) headquarters in exile from 1982-1993 and still hosts some PLO offices today. Tunisia had an interests office in Israel until the outbreak of the second Palestinian *intifadah*, or uprising against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, in 2000. Israelis of Tunisian descent are allowed to travel to Tunisia on Israeli passports, and the Israeli and Tunisian foreign ministers sometimes meet. In September 2005, President Ben Ali sent a personal letter to then Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, praising his “courageous” withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. The then Israeli Foreign Minister, who was born in Tunisia, and Communications Minister attended the World Summit on the Information Society in Tunisia in 2005. (Prime Minister Sharon was invited along with leaders of all U.N. member states; his invitation provoked demonstrations in Tunisia.)

Tunisia and the EU have cemented a close relationship by means of an Association Agreement, aid, and loans. More than 60% of Tunisia’s trade is conducted with Europe.<sup>55</sup> The Association Agreement, which was signed in 1995 and went into effect on January 1, 2008, eliminates customs tariffs and other trade barriers on manufactured goods, and provides for the establishment of an EU-Tunisia free trade area in goods, but not in agriculture or services. Negotiations on the provision of “advanced status” for Tunisia vis-à-vis the EU, which would provide even greater trade benefits, are ongoing.<sup>56</sup> Tunisia receives aid from the EU’s Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (MEDA) program and soft loans from the European Investment Bank, the financing arm of the EU. The Europeans hope that their aid will help Tunisia to progress economically, and thereby eliminate some causes of illegal immigration and Islamic fundamentalism. The EU and Tunisia have discussed additional cooperation to control illegal immigration and manage legal immigration flows, a subject that probably is of greater interest to Europe than to Tunisia. At the same time, EU leaders have expressed concerns over Tunisia’s record on human rights and political freedom. In January 2011, amid the anti-government protests, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, stated that although the EU seeks to strengthen bilateral ties, this process “obviously requires increased commitments on all issues, in particular in the area of human rights and fundamental freedoms.”<sup>57</sup>

Tunis is the headquarters location of the African Development Bank (AfDB), which receives significant financial support from the United States.<sup>58</sup>

## Outlook

The unexpected and rapid turn of events in Tunisia raises a wide range of questions for the future of the country and the region. Recent events also raise potential issues for Congress pertaining to the oversight of U.S.-Tunisian bilateral relations and assistance, and to broader U.S. policy priorities in the Middle East. Questions include:

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<sup>55</sup> World Trade Organization, *Tunisia Profile*, October 2010.

<sup>56</sup> See European Commission, EuropeAid Development and Cooperation, *Tunisia*, at [[http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/where/neighbourhood/country-cooperation/tunisia/tunisia\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/where/neighbourhood/country-cooperation/tunisia/tunisia_en.htm)].

<sup>57</sup> AFP, “EU Calls for Release of Tunisian Protesters,” January 10, 2011.

<sup>58</sup> See CRS Report RS22690, *The African Development Bank Group*, by Martin A. Weiss, for further background.

- What actions or developments may bring an end to the continued violence in Tunisia? Will popular demands for an end to RCD participation in the government lead to ongoing demonstrations and confrontations with security forces? What is the role of the military in steering political developments?
- What will the future Tunisian government and political order look like? What will be the nature and role of previously banned groups, such as Islamist and leftist political parties? Will there be a free and independent press and civil society in Tunisia?
- Which individuals and groups currently enjoy significant public credibility in Tunisia, and what are their expected courses of action? Has Tunisians' experience of secular authoritarianism made the public more likely to place their trust in extremist groups?
- What is the likely impact of the unrest on foreign investment and economic growth in Tunisia and the region?
- Will the recent events in Tunisia spark similar uprisings in neighboring states? Will they provoke a preemptive crackdown by other governments? What are the potential medium- to long-term effects of such a crackdown?
- What has been the impact to-date of U.S. public statements and actions related to Tunisia, and what are the prospects for future U.S. influence on the evolution of events? How, if at all, should the U.S. government reshape its assistance programs for Tunisia in response to recent and continuing events? What position should the United States take vis-à-vis popular anti-government demonstrations in the region? What course of U.S. action will be most likely to fulfill foreign policy and national security goals?

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## **Acknowledgments**

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