



Tunisia: Current Issues

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Summary

Tunisia has a stable, highly authoritarian government led by President Zine ben Ali, who was elected to a fourth term on October 24, 2004 and will run for a fifth term in October 2009. Ben Ali's Constitutional Democratic Rally party controls parliament, state and local governments, and most political activity. There are significant limitations on human rights but marked advancements for women and girls. Tunisia has experienced occasional attacks by Islamist terrorists, and Tunisian expatriates have been arrested in Europe and North America on terrorism-related charges. Tunisia is a non-oil-exporting, middle-class country with a diverse, growing economy, and high unemployment. U.S.-Tunisian relations today largely emphasize cooperation in terrorism, although Tunisia would like greater focus on trade.

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Government

Tunisia has a stable, highly authoritarian government that places a higher priority on economic growth than on political liberalization. It has 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 has been president since 1987. Constitutional amendments approved in May 2002 lifted term limits for the presidency and raised the age allowed for a candidate to 75. The 68-year-old Ben Ali easily won a fourth five-year term with 94.49% of the vote and a 91% voter turnout on October 24, 2004. He will run for a fifth term in October 2009. Three small “official” opposition parties also fielded candidates in 2004; other opposition parties endorsed Ben Ali. (“Official” opposition parties are those which the government allows to hold seats in parliament.) The powerful president appoints the prime minister, the cabinet, and 24 regional governors. There is no vice president or designated successor to Ben Ali. Mohammed Ghannouchi has been prime minister since 1999.

RCD controls the Chamber of Deputies or lower house of parliament with 152 out of 189 seats.¹ Five weak, official opposition parties share the remaining, reserved 37 seats. Two others are not represented in parliament. One of these, the Democratic Progressive Party (PDP), withdrew its candidates from the parliamentary elections, charging official “harassment,” including the rejection of candidate lists and the banning of its election manifesto, which criticized the regime and the President. There are 43 women in parliament mainly due to Ben Ali’s decision to reserve 25% of the slots on the RCD parliamentary list for women. 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. Parliament does not originate legislation and passes government bills with minor or no changes.

Commenting on the 2004 election, the U.S. State Department noted, “The ruling party’s domination of state institutions and political activity precluded credible and competitive electoral challenges from unsanctioned actors.” Some analysts believe that the 2009 election may result in the same conclusion.

Terrorism

The Tunisian government is focused on the possibility of an Islamist threat at home, while Tunisians have been implicated in terrorism abroad. The government harshly suppressed An Nahdah (Renaissance), which it considered to be a violent, domestic Islamist terrorist group, after unearthing an alleged conspiracy in 1991. An Nahdah denied the accusation, but, in 1992, Tunisian military courts convicted 265 An Nahdah members on charges of plotting a coup. Some analysts consider Rashid Ghannouchi, An Nahdah’s leader in exile, to be a moderate seeking to accommodate Islam with democracy.² In November 2008, authorities released all 21 remaining imprisoned An Nahdah members. However, a former leader of the group, Mohammed Sadiq Chourou, was rearrested three weeks later after demanding that the movement be rehabilitated

¹ The RCD is the current incarnation of the Neo-Destour Party, which was formed in 1934 and led the movement for independence.

² Azzam S. Tamimi, *Rachid Ghannouchi: A Democrat within Islamism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

and allowed to resume its political activities; he was sentenced to one year in jail, which was later extended by one year.

In 2002, the U.S. State Department labeled the Tunisian Combatant Group (TCG), a group of concern and froze its assets.³ It was a terrorist group that sought to establish an Islamic state in Tunisia, and was considered to be a radical offshoot of An Nahdah. The TCG was suspected of plotting, but not carrying out, attacks on U.S., Algerian, and Tunisian embassies in Rome in December 2001. The Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), now known as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), actively recruits Tunisians and reportedly had ties with the TCG.⁴ In January 2007, in somewhat mysterious circumstances, Tunisian security forces claimed to have engaged in gun battles with terrorists linked to GSPC who had infiltrated from Algeria and possessed homemade explosives, satellite maps of foreign embassies, and documents identifying foreign envoys. Some 30 Tunisians were convicted later in the year of plotting to target U.S. and British interests in Tunisia. AQIM later 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.

Tunisians have fought with Al Qaeda in Iraq. In December 2006, Turkish authorities arrested a Tunisian suspected of helping Al Qaeda insurgents infiltrate into Iraq. On April 24, 2009, General David Petraeus, Commander of the Central Command, 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.⁵

Some Tunisian terrorists have operated elsewhere abroad. In 2002, Tunisian authorities convicted 34 persons (31 in absentia) of belonging to another alleged terrorist group linked to Al Qaeda—Al Jamaa wal Sunnah (idiomatically, the Followers of Tradition)—and recruiting Europe-based expatriate Tunisians to fight in Chechnya, Bosnia, and Afghanistan.⁶ Tunisians, mainly residents of Italy, are on a U.N. Security Council Al Qaeda watch list. A Tunisian-Canadian who allegedly plotted acts against the United States was on U.S. alert lists issued in 2003 and 2004. In August 2005, Syria extradited to Tunisia 21 suspected Islamist extremists it had detained following clashes with security forces in June. In 2007, Tunisians were with the Al Qaeda-inspired, and perhaps linked, Fatah al Islam organization that fought and fell to the Lebanese army in the Nahr al Barid Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon.

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.⁷

³ U.S. State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism, 2006*, released April 30, 2007.

⁴ 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.

⁵ Mark Lander, Clinton Makes Surprise Visit to Reassure Iraqis, *Boston Globe*, April 26, 2009.

⁶ "Assets of Tunisia Group Are Frozen," *New York Times*, October 11, 2002.

⁷ 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 (continued...)

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, 21, including 14 German tourists, 5 Tunisians, and 2 French citizens, were killed in the attack.⁸ 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.’”⁹ Since passage of the law, approximately 1,000 Tunisians have been detained, charged, and/or convicted on terrorism related charges. Critics claim that the law “makes the exercise of fundamental freedoms ... an expression of terrorism.”¹⁰ 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.”

Human Rights

The Ben Ali regime uses the fear of an Islamist threat and the example of Islamist-fueled civil conflict in neighboring Algeria to justify its poor human rights record and failure to carry out political reforms. Ben Ali maintains that he is ushering in democratic reforms in a “measured way” so that religious extremists cannot take advantages of freedoms.¹¹ Yet, most observers fail to see evidence of even a gradual reform program.

Year after year, the U.S. State Department *Country Report on Human Rights Practices in Tunisia* has used almost the same language to describe and criticize unchanging human rights abuses in Tunisia. It observes significant limitations on citizens’ right to change their government and notes that local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have reported that security forces torture and physically abuse prisoners and detainees and arbitrarily arrest and detain individuals. The security forces act with impunity sanctioned by high-ranking officials. Lengthy pretrial and incommunicado detention remain serious problems. The government infringes on citizens’ privacy rights and imposes severe restrictions on freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and association. It remains intolerant of public criticism and uses intimidation, criminal investigations, the court system, arbitrary arrests, residential restrictions, and travel controls to discourage human rights and opposition activists.¹²

The Tunisian government tries to squelch criticism of its human rights practices made outside of the country. In September 2008, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) stated that Tunisian

(...continued)

TV, May 29, 2009.

⁸ “Al-Qaeda Deputy Leader Signals Involvement in Attacks,” *Financial Times*, October 10, 2002.

⁹ U.S. State Department, *Patterns of Global Terrorism, 2003*, released April 29, 2004.

¹⁰ Jeremy Landor, “Washington’s Partner,” *Middle East International*, March 5, 2004, pp. 23-24

¹¹ “Tunisian President Says He Wants to Share Experience in Handling Islamic Extremism with Bush,” Associated Press, February 13, 2004.

¹² U.S. State Department, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, Tunisia*, released February 25, 2009.

“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 has been jailed and physically abused in Tunisia.¹³ The same tactic was deployed at a May 2009 National Democratic Institute event with Ahmed Najib Chebbi, head of opposition Democratic Progressive Party (PDP).¹⁴ CPJ also describes the government’s use of charges against journalists unrelated to journalism as a way to protect itself from international scrutiny.

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) lists President Ben Ali among the world’s worst press freedom predators; its website is inaccessible in Tunisia. International human rights organizations claim that Tunisia’s internet policies are among the world’s most repressive: all internet cafes are state-controlled; authorities aggressively filter internet websites; President Ben Ali’s family and friends control local internet service providers; and independent bloggers have been jailed.

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 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.

¹³ Committee to Protect Journalists, *Special Report on Tunisia*, September 23, 2008.

¹⁴ A CRS analyst was present at this discussion.

Economy

Tunisia has almost completed a transition from a socialist to a market economy. It is considered a middle-class 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 the coming 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 20% of the country's hard currency receipts. Unemployment remains a major problem, however; the official rate is high and the unofficial rate is believed to be even higher.

Basic Facts

Population: 10.4 million (2009 est.)
Gross Domestic Product Growth Rate: 6.3% (2007 est.)
GDP per capita: \$7,900 (2008 est.)
Inflation rate: 5% (2008 est.)
Unemployment rate: 14% (2008 est.)
Exports: clothing, semi-finished goods, agricultural products
Imports: textiles, machinery and equipment, hydrocarbons
Trading Partners: France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Libya
Source: CIA, <i>The World Factbook</i> , April 30, 2009.

In 2008, there was social unrest 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 sentenced to prison in connection with the protests.

Relations with the United States

The United States and Tunisia have enjoyed continuous relations since 1797. The Bush Administration considered Tunisia to be an important ally, a moderate Arab, Muslim state, and a partner in the global war on terror. However, Tunisia did not support the 1991 Gulf War or the 2003 war against Iraq and, when the 2003 war began, Ben Ali expressed regret and fear that the conflict might destabilize the Middle East.¹⁵ 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.

¹⁵ "Ben Ali Expresses 'Deep Regret' at Start of War Against Iraq," *Tunis Infotunisie*, March 20, 2003, Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) Document AFP20030320000266.

Table I. U.S. Aid to Tunisia

	FY2008 Actual	FY2009 Estimated	FY2010 Request
FMF	\$8.3 million	\$12 million	\$15 million
ESF	\$1.2 million	\$800,000	0
IMET	\$1.7 million	\$1.7 million	\$2.3 million
INCLE	\$198,000	0	0
NADR	\$100,000	\$425,000	\$300,000
1206	\$9.8 million	\$8.8 million	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. 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. Section 1206 funding for Tunisia has supported counterterrorism programs. For more information, see CRS Report RS22855, *Section 1206 of the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2006: A Fact Sheet on Department of Defense Authority to Train and Equip Foreign Military Forces*, by Nina M. Serafino.

In an explanatory statement on H.R. 1105, the Omnibus Appropriations Act, 2009, Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee David Obey, regarding the \$12 million in FMF, said 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.”¹⁶ This language is not in P.L. 111-8, the Omnibus Appropriations Act, 2009, signed into law on March 11, 2009.

A U.S.-Tunisian Joint Military Commission meets annually and joint exercises are held regularly. Tunisia agreed to exempt U.S. military personnel from the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court. Tunisia is part of the U.S. Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), helping countries in the region better control their territory and strengthen their counterterrorism capabilities, 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.

The U.S. State Department’s Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) has a regional office, responsible for Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, and Morocco as well as Tunisia, which opened in Tunis in August 2004. MEPI has run very few bilateral programs in Tunisia. Given the Bush Administration’s emphasis on building democracy in the Middle East, critics suggested that it might have been sending mixed signals to Tunisia by aiding the military while not strongly supporting democratizing elements. During President Ben Ali’s visit to Washington in February 2004, Secretary of State Colin Powell expressed U.S. interest “in (Tunisia’s) carrying on political reforms, media openness, and other issues,” and President Bush publicly said that he would discuss with Ben Ali “the need to have a press corps that is vibrant and free, as well as an open political process.” At the time, Ben Ali claimed to share the U.S. desire for “the establishment of states on the basis of democracy...,” but preferred to emphasize the “strategic dimension” of the bilateral relationship.¹⁷ During a February 2006 visit to Tunisia, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld avoided human rights issues and praised the country as “a moderate Muslim nation that

¹⁶ *Congressional Record*, February 23, 2009, p. H2417.

¹⁷ Remarks by President Bush, President of Tunisia before Meeting, U.S. Newswire, February 18, 2004.

has been and is today providing very constructive leadership in the world.... The leadership here ... certainly in the presidency and in the other senior ministries are all people who have the courage to stand up and speak on behalf of moderation and against violence and against extremism.”¹⁸

U.S.-Tunisian trade is relatively low in volume because Tunisia is a small country and conducts most of its trade with Europe. In 2008, the United States imported \$643.4 million in goods from Tunisia and exported \$495.1 million in goods to Tunisia.¹⁹ 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.

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 first 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. In 1996, Tunisia entered into an Association Agreement with the EU to remove all tariff and other trade barriers on most goods by 2008. As part of the agreement, the EU is assisting Tunisian businesses to prepare for global competition. More than 80% of Tunisia’s trade is conducted with Europe. 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. Aspiring for closer ties, Prime Minister Ghannouchi has said that Tunisia would like to secure an intermediate status between association and membership in the EU, and to seek a “more solid, more diversified, and more fruitful partnership.”²⁰

¹⁸ Secretary Rumsfeld’s Press Availability in Tunisia, February 11, 2006.

¹⁹ U.S. International Trade Commission, <http://dataweb.usitc.gov>.

²⁰ “Tunisia Wants Special Status with European Union: Prime Minister,” *Agence France-Presse*, April 1, 2003.

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