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Summary

Once considered the lone democratic success story of the 2011 “Arab Spring” uprisings, Tunisia has seen erratic and increasingly authoritarian rule under President Kais Saïed, first elected in 2019. Saïed has dismantled institutional checks and balances, while overseeing arrests of political opposition leaders and other critics. Saïed first campaigned as a populist anti-system candidate, leveraging widespread public criticism of alleged corruption and declining standards of living under a series of post-2011 governments. Some of Tunisia’s economic challenges have worsened under Saïed, who has sought to deflect blame onto his predecessors and various entrenched interests whom he is claiming to fight.

Saïed is running for a second term in elections slated for October 6, 2024. Nearly all of his would-be challengers have been jailed or barred from registering as candidates. Thousands of Tunisians reportedly turned out to protest Saïed’s rule in mid-September 2024, but prospects for wider unrest or political upheaval are uncertain.

Developments in Tunisia, a U.S.-designated Major Non-NATO Ally, pose challenges for U.S. policymakers. Officials may weigh various potentially competing goals, including support for democratic principles, concern about economic instability, strategic competition, and an interest in maintaining security cooperation to counter terrorist and maritime security threats. Other countries’ reactions to President Saïed’s actions have varied, complicating coordination.

U.S. foreign assistance for Tunisia has decreased since 2021, when President Saïed first asserted sweeping executive powers. The United States has continued some security cooperation, including military aid, exercises, and senior visits. During budget hearings in mid-2024, Biden Administration officials stated an intent to maintain support for Tunisia’s military and for the private sector and local civil society groups, while curtailing U.S. assistance overall.

Annual appropriation and defense authorization bills provide potential opportunities for Congress to shape U.S. engagement. Other related legislation introduced in the 118th Congress includes the Safeguarding Tunisian Democracy Act of 2023 (S. 2006), along with S.Res. 260 and H.Res. 613, which would recognize Tunisia's leadership in the Arab Spring and express support for upholding its democratic principles and norms. Congress held oversight hearings on Tunisia and U.S. policy in 2021 and 2023.

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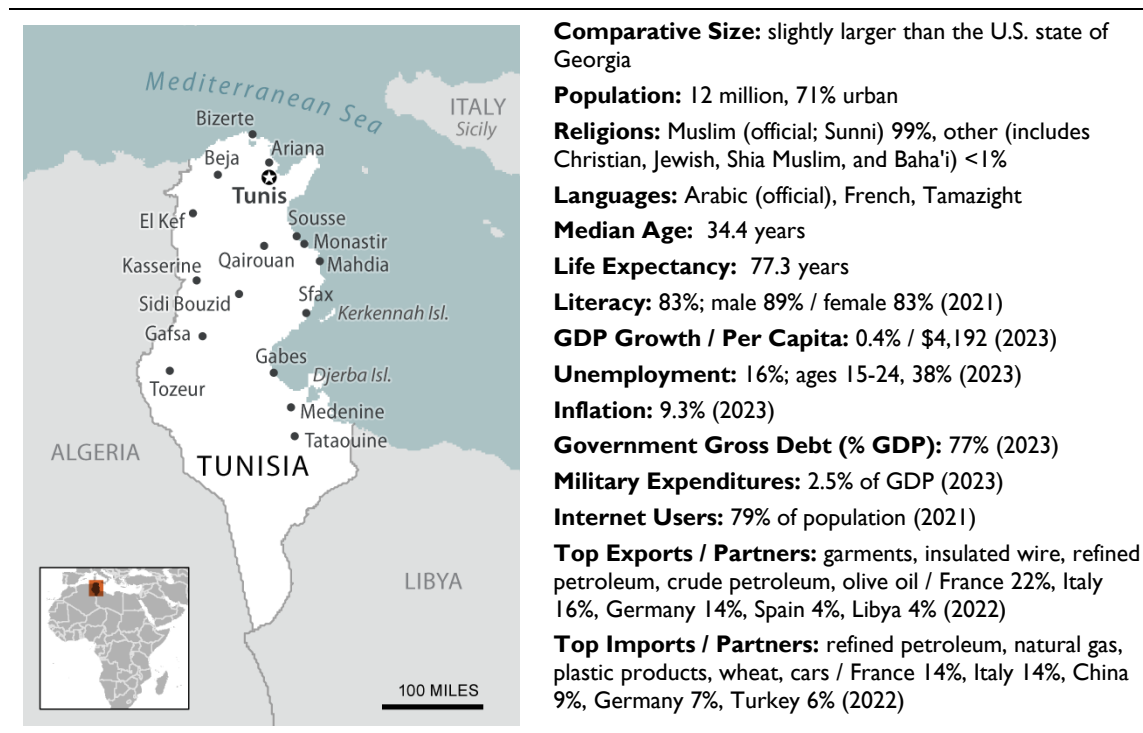
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Introduction

President Kaïs Saïed’s increasingly draconian rule has quashed Tunisia’s nascent democratic system, established after Tunisians overthrew a longstanding authoritarian regime in 2011. Elected in 2019 as a populist anti-system candidate, Saïed has dismantled institutional checks and balances and encouraged a wave of arrests targeting critics and political adversaries. Despite ongoing economic challenges, Saïed appears to face little viable opposition ahead of elections slated for October 6, 2024. Nearly all would-be challengers are in jail, in exile, or barred from running, while polls suggest a “growing disaffection with politics” among the public.¹

Figure I. Tunisia at a Glance



Sources: CRS graphic. Map information from U.S. Department of State, ESRI. Figures from CIA *World Factbook* and International Monetary Fund (IMF, April 2024); 2024 estimates unless noted.

Developments in Tunisia, a onetime regional democratic leader and U.S.-designated Major Non-NATO Ally, pose challenges for U.S. policymakers. In 2023, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Barbara Leaf expressed “enormous concern about where Tunisia is headed, guided by this president.”² At the same time, the Biden Administration has asserted an ongoing need to partner with Tunisia’s “apolitical, professional” military to counter regional threats.³

¹ Human Rights Watch (HRW), “Tunisia’s Electoral Commission Paves the Way for Kais Saied’s Second Term,” September 4, 2024; Arab Barometer, “Tunisian political views: splintered and confused,” April 16, 2024.

² Reuters, “US says Tunisia president weakened checks and balances,” March 23, 2023.

³ Department of State, *FY2025 Congressional Budget Justification: Foreign Operations, Appendix 2*, March 2024.

Citing Tunisia’s troubled economy, U.S. officials have encouraged President Saïed to reach a loan agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which Saïed has resisted to date.⁴

U.S. officials may seek to balance multiple policy goals with regard to Tunisia, such as support for democratic principles, efforts to prevent a destabilizing economic crisis, partnership on regional security, and strategic competition against Russia and China in North Africa. Tunisian officials have rejected some U.S. criticism as “interference” and asserted that Tunisia’s justice system “will not yield to pressure.”⁵ Other countries’ reactions to President Saïed’s actions have varied, complicating coordination. Some European leaders have pursued cooperation with President Saïed to counter migration; the European Union, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia have offered financial assistance, albeit not at the same scale as a potential IMF loan.⁶

Annual appropriations and defense authorization bills provide potential opportunities for Congress to shape U.S. engagement with Tunisia, among other legislative and oversight options. U.S. bilateral aid for Tunisia has decreased since 2021, when President Saïed first asserted sweeping executive powers. In budget hearings in mid-2024, Assistant Secretary Leaf testified that the Administration was “rigorously reviewing U.S. efforts and programs in Tunisia to ensure they are fit to purpose for the Tunisian people,” while defending ongoing security assistance as “focused on our vital national interests.”⁷ USAID’s top Middle East official testified that the agency planned to continue “critical investments in the private sector and Tunisian civil society,” while reducing overall funding “given the government’s continued democratic backsliding.”⁸ The Department of Defense has continued to engage with Tunisia, including through military exercises, train-and-equip programs, and senior leader engagement.

President Saïed Reshapes Tunisia’s Political System

Tunisia was the only country affected by the 2011 “Arab Spring” uprisings to establish a constitutional democracy, having previously been ruled by authoritarian regimes. A new constitution, drafted and adopted by an elected assembly in 2014, established separation of powers and basic rights guarantees, and Tunisia held several competitive elections resulting in peaceful transfers of power. A series of coalition governments comprised secularist parties along with Tunisia’s main Islamist (later self-described “Muslim Democrat”) party, while media outlets and civil society groups proliferated. Elections for new municipal-level posts in 2018 marked a step toward long-sought political decentralization.

President Saïed has reshaped the political system, asserting presidential control over the state security apparatus, judiciary, local-level government, and election management. Between July

⁴ Secretary of State Antony Blinken, testimony before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee, “Review of the Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Request for the U.S. Department of State,” hearing, March 22, 2023; Reuters, “Tunisia president sacks the economy minister over statement about IMF,” October 17, 2023.

⁵ AfricaNews, “Tunisie: Ghannouchi maintenu en détention, Saïed se justifie,” April 21, 2023; TAP, “Tunisian Justice will not yield to pressure (Foreign Ministry),” April 19, 2023.

⁶ Associated Press (AP), “Italy’s leader keeps the focus on migration on her fourth visit to Tunisia in a year,” April 17, 2024; European Commission, “The European Union continues to implement the Memorandum of Understanding with Tunisia with the disbursement of EUR 150 million in financial support,” March 4, 2024; Reuters, “Saudi Arabia to give Tunisia \$500 million as soft loan and grant,” July 20, 2023 and “Algeria provides \$300 mln loan to Tunisia,” December 14, 2021.

⁷ Written testimony to the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia, “Fiscal Year 2025 Budget Request for Near Eastern Affairs,” hearing, May 23, 2024.

⁸ Written testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism, “FY 2025 Budget Request for the Middle East and North Africa,” hearing, June 18, 2024.

and September 2021, Saïed “suspended” parliament (which he later fully dissolved), unilaterally dismissed the cabinet, and suspended much of the constitution by decree.⁹ These developments led the democracy promotion organization Freedom House to downgrade Tunisia’s ranking from “Free” to “Partly Free” in 2022.¹⁰ Critics, including opposition politicians, denounced Saïed’s actions as a “coup.”¹¹ Many Tunisians expressed support for Saïed’s actions, however, as many criticized the dissolved cabinet and parliament for alleged corruption, political dysfunction, and mishandling of the response to COVID-19 (see “Prelude to a Power-Grab,” below).

In July 2022, President Saïed convened a referendum on a new constitution drafted by a handpicked committee, which passed amid an opposition boycott. The new constitution centralizes presidential control over policymaking and the judiciary, weakening the legislature and the courts’ authority to challenge presidential powers.¹² A 2022 electoral law, issued by decree, weakened the role of political parties in the political system, while another decree granted Saïed greater control over the national electoral commission.¹³ Voter turnout in the 2022 referendum was estimated at 31%, and turnout in subsequent legislative elections fell to 11%.¹⁴

Elected members of the new National Assembly were sworn in in March 2023, as President Saïed announced he would dissolve Tunisia’s municipal councils. Elections for new local councils—with “considerably less financial and administrative autonomy”—were held between late 2023 and early 2024.¹⁵ Selected members of the local councils then constituted new regional and district councils, which in turn selected members of a National Council of Regions and Districts, a second legislative chamber established under the 2022 constitution.¹⁶ Members of the chamber, akin to a Senate, were sworn in in April 2024, completing the process of standing up elected government institutions under the new constitution. Due to constitutional and legal ambiguities, questions remain about the precise prerogatives of these new institutions.¹⁷

Closing Political Space

Authorities have increasingly suppressed open political competition and civil liberties—among the most concrete dividends of Tunisia’s decade of democratic governance. Starting in 2021, human rights groups described a pattern of prosecutions, “secret detentions,” and harassment targeting critics of the president.¹⁸ Repression accelerated in February 2023, with a wave of arrests targeting opposition politicians, lawyers, media figures, business owners, and other perceived critics of the government—including some 18 opposition figures accused of

⁹ Associated Press (AP), “Tunisia on edge as president suspends parliament, fires PM,” July 26, 2021; Presidential Decree No. 2021-117, September 22, 2021.

¹⁰ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2022*, February 2022.

¹¹ Rached Ghannouchi, “My Country Has Been a Dictatorship Before. We Can’t Go Back.” *New York Times* op-ed, July 30, 2021; Anadolu Agency, “Thousands protest in Tunisia to call for ending ‘coup,’” October 15, 2022.

¹² Library of Congress *Global Legal Monitor*, “Tunisia: New Constitution Consolidates Powers in the Hands of the President,” August 23, 2022. This followed a decree granting the president more influence over judicial appointments.

¹³ Sarah Yerkes and Mohammad al-Mailam, “Tunisia’s New Electoral Law Is Another Blow to Its Democratic Progress,” October 2022; Al Jazeera, “Tunisian President Saïed seizes control of electoral commission,” April 22, 2022.

¹⁴ The Carter Center, “Low Turnout in Tunisia Election Reaffirms Need for Broad-Based Consensus,” February 1, 2023.

¹⁵ Freedom House, “Tunisia,” *Freedom in the World 2024*, February 2024.

¹⁶ International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), “Tunisia: 2023 Local Elections,” December 19, 2023.

¹⁷ Ibid; and *Jeune Afrique*, “En Tunisie, le CNRD – le nouveau Sénat voulu par Kaïs Saïed – prend ses marques,” April 24, 2024.

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch (HRW), “Tunisia: Secret Detentions Under Cover of State of Emergency,” February 9, 2022.

“conspiracy against the state.”¹⁹ Also in early 2023, President Saïed publicly assailed sub-Saharan African migrants, describing them as agents of a conspiracy to destabilize Tunisia and alter its demography.²⁰ His claims sparked ongoing violence and abuse targeting migrants and refugees (real or perceived), along with activists defending migrant rights.²¹ Human rights groups have meanwhile raised alarm about a draft bill that would restrict funding for non-governmental organizations, which Saïed has accused of serving “foreign agendas.”²²

Several of the political activists accused of conspiracy were involved in efforts to unify opposition across ideological lines, including by forging a coalition between Tunisia’s self-described “Muslim Democrat” party Ennahda (“Renaissance”) and secularist politicians and activists.²³ Other detainees have been accused of corruption, money laundering, terrorism, and/or violating a broad cybercrimes decree issued in 2022.²⁴ Arrests that appear to be politically targeted have continued in 2024, affecting politicians, party activists, journalists, lawyers, anti-racism advocates, and the former head of Tunisia’s Truth and Dignity Commission, according to news reports and human rights groups. Saïed has characterized detainees as “traitors” and “terrorists,” stating in early 2023 that “whoever dares to exonerate them is their accomplice”; such rhetoric has fueled concerns about the further erosion of judicial independence.²⁵

Prosecutions and other actions have effectively quashed Ennahda, which participated in coalition governments between 2011 and 2019. Most of the party’s leadership has been jailed since 2023. This includes party cofounder and former Speaker of Parliament Rached Ghannouchi, who has faced multiple criminal prosecutions that human rights groups describe as politically motivated.²⁶ Other senior party figures appear to be held without charge.²⁷ In 2023, authorities shuttered Ennahda’s headquarters and that of an opposition coalition cofounded by the party, and banned Ennahda from holding meetings at its offices throughout the country.

Nearly all would-be opposition candidates have been jailed or otherwise barred from running in the presidential election scheduled for October 6, 2024, including in apparent contravention of a court decision.²⁸ These include politicians representing a wide range of ideological views, such as Ennahda leaders; centrist secularist figures such as Issam Chebbi, leader of the Jomhuri (Republican) party, and Ghazi Chaouachi, former leader of the Attayar (Democratic Current) party; and Abir Moussi, an ardently anti-Islamist former official in the pre-2011 ruling party.²⁹ The electoral commission, a nominally independent body that critics accuse the president of influencing, has denied two Tunisian civil society groups accreditation to observe the election.³⁰

¹⁹ Department of State, “2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Tunisia,” April 22, 2024.

²⁰ Reuters, “Tunisian president says migration to Tunisia aimed at changing demography,” February 21, 2023.

²¹ Amnesty International (AI), “Tunisia: Repressive crackdown on civil society organizations following months of escalating violence against migrants and refugees,” May 16, 2024; U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNOHCHR), “Tunisia must immediately stop hate speech and violence against migrants from south of Sahara,” April 4, 2023.

²² France24, “Tunisian civil society fears plan to limit foreign funding,” March 4, 2024.

²³ *Le Monde*, “Chaima Issa, the first female political prisoner under Kais Saied's regime,” April 5, 2023.

²⁴ Department of State, “2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Tunisia.”

²⁵ HRW, “Tunisia: Wave of Arrests Targets Critics and Opposition Figures,” February 24, 2023.

²⁶ Department of State, “2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Tunisia.”

²⁷ HRW, “Tunisia Doubles Down on Democratic Rollback,” May 2, 2023.

²⁸ Al Jazeera, “Why is Tunisia’s Administrative Court at odds with its electoral authority?” September 5, 2024; Reuters, “Tunisian court jails four presidential candidates and bars them from elections,” August 5, 2024.

²⁹ HRW, “Tunisia: Prospective Presidential Candidates Barred,” August 20, 2024.

³⁰ AP, “Rejected poll monitors accuse Tunisia’s election authorities of bias,” September 9, 2024.

Role of State Security Forces

The Ministry of Interior—a pillar of Tunisia’s authoritarian pre-2011 regime—appears once more to be playing a central role in political repression, via the police and internal security apparatus.³¹ The military has not played as prominent a role, although troops initially deployed on President Saïed’s orders to bar entry to the National Assembly in July 2021, and military courts have prosecuted civilians on seemingly politically motivated charges.³² (Tunisian law permits military trials of civilian defendants, despite post-2011 reform efforts.) Some observers assess that President Saïed has leveraged tacit acceptance among military leaders, and some assert that he has attempted to coopt military officers via state appointments, promotions, and other benefits.³³

Background: Prelude to a Power Grab

In January 2011, Tunisians ousted authoritarian leader Zine el Abidine Ben Ali in a popular uprising that sparked a wave of unrest and political change across the Arab world. In the years that followed, civil liberties expanded dramatically in Tunisia, an elected assembly drafted and approved a new constitution, and a Truth and Dignity Commission investigated abuses under the former regime. Coalitions among secularist politicians and Ennahda led the government for a decade. While other countries affected by the 2011 uprisings faced brutal conflicts and resurgent authoritarianism, four Tunisian civil society groups shared the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize for mediating political talks that paved the way for the new constitution. Elections for new municipal-level officials in 2018 marked a step toward long-sought political decentralization.

Many Tunisians, however, characterized the promise of the 2011 uprising as unfulfilled. In one 2019 poll, 87% of respondents said their country was headed in the wrong direction.³⁴ Key institutional reforms stalled, while perceptions of corruption rose, according to surveys.³⁵ Average incomes and living standards also fell, eroding a once robust middle class. Political alliances among Islamist and secularist rivals may have quieted conflicts over identity and religion in public life, but arguably at the expense of clear policy direction or accountability to voters.³⁶

Ahead of general elections in September-October 2019, Tunisia saw a wave of protests, labor unrest, and voter backlash against politicians who had led Tunisia since the 2011 transition. President Béji Caïd Essebsi, elected in 2014, passed away in office in July 2019, leaving his secularist coalition rudderless after a series of divisive disputes over policy and party leadership. These developments fueled the rise of Kaïs Saïed as an anti-system candidate who campaigned against elite corruption.³⁷ A constitutional law professor and political independent, Saïed initially rose to public prominence as a critic of the 2014 constitution. Saïed also voiced socially conservative views, opposing proposals to make inheritance laws more gender-equal, calling for

³¹ See, e.g., Aaron Zelin, “Saïed’s Tunisia Is Politicizing Counterterrorism Again,” The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 9, 2023; and Middle East Eye, “Tunisia: Free press under attack as President Kais Saïed tightens grip,” February 26, 2023.

³² AI, “Tunisia: Alarming increase in number of civilians facing military courts,” November 10, 2021.

³³ See, e.g., Sharan Grewal, “Why Militaries Support Presidential Coups,” *Journal of Democracy*, May 7, 2024; and Pierre Boussel, “Tunisia: The Shadow of the Army,” TRENDS Research & Advisory, September 2, 2022.

³⁴ International Republican Institute, *Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Tunisia, January 25-February 11, 2019*.

³⁵ 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; and Arab Barometer V, *Tunisia Country Report*, 2019.

³⁶ Sharan Grewal and Shadi Hamid, “The dark side of consensus in Tunisia: Lessons from 2015-2019,” Brookings, January 2020.

³⁷ See Zied Boussen and Malek Lakhel, “The Political Usage of Anti-Corruption in Tunisia,” EuroMeSCo, June 2023.

reinstatement of the death penalty (suspended in 1994), and referring to homosexuality as a foreign plot.³⁸

After narrowly coming in first in a crowded field of candidates in the first round of voting in 2019, Saïed won a landslide run-off against a media mogul with ties to the Ben Ali regime, who spent much of the campaign in jail on financial crimes charges. The newly elected parliament was fractured, with leading parties bleeding support to smaller groups and independents. Once in office, Saïed chafed against the constitution's division of executive powers, tussling with his own prime minister over control of the interior ministry.³⁹ Parliamentary debates were bogged down by partisan paralysis, personal insults, and occasional physical violence. In 2021, protests over police brutality and a deadly surge in COVID-19 cases placed new pressures on state institutions, against a backdrop of apparent political dysfunction.⁴⁰ It was in this tense context that many Tunisians celebrated President Saïed's announcement on July 25, 2021, that he was dismissing the cabinet, suspending parliament, and lifting parliamentary immunity.⁴¹

Tunisia's 2011 "Jasmine Revolution"

Prior to 2011, Tunisia was widely viewed as maintaining a stable and authoritarian regime that prioritized economic growth while staving off political liberalization. The country had had only two leaders since independence from France in 1956: Habib Bourguiba, a secular nationalist and former independence activist, and Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, a former interior minister and prime minister who became president in 1987. Ben Ali cultivated the internal security services and his Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) party as power bases, and harshly repressed political opposition, freedom of expression, and religious activism. Apparent corruption and nepotism, along with repression, reportedly undermined the regime's popular legitimacy, despite relatively effective state services. Another factor was an enduring socioeconomic divide between the developed, tourist-friendly coast and the poorer interior. Anti-government unrest rooted in labor and economic grievances occasionally surged in dispossessed areas of the interior, as in the Gafsa region in 2008.⁴² The country's pre-2011 economic model later came under greater scrutiny; for example, the World Bank documented in 2014 that government regulations had apparently been manipulated to favor firms closely tied to the Ben Ali family.⁴³

In December 2010, protests broke out in the interior city of Sidi Bouzid after a street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire to protest police harassment and restrictions on his economic livelihood. Protests quickly spread to neighboring towns and eventually to the capital, Tunis, and wealthy coastal communities associated with the ruling elite. Police opened fire on protesters and made mass arrests; an estimated 338 people were killed.⁴⁴ State security force defections reportedly helped turn the tide against Ben Ali, who fled the country for Saudi Arabia on January 14, 2011. Tunisian courts later brought criminal charges against him in absentia. Ben Ali passed away in Saudi Arabia from natural causes on September 19, 2019.

The Economy

Tunisia has a diverse economy. Textiles, agriculture, tourism, and phosphate mining are key sectors; Tunisia also produces some oil but is a net energy importer. The country's top trade partner is the European Union. Despite a historically strong middle class and well-educated population, wealth has long been concentrated along the urban, tourist-friendly coast, in contrast to the relatively poor and underdeveloped interior. The economy has generally created low-skilled

³⁸ POMED, *A Guide to Tunisia's 2019 Presidential Election*, September 2019. See also Mohamed-Dhia Hammami, "Past as Prologue: Kaïs Saïed's Prior Statements Point to Upcoming Political Moves," POMED, August 10, 2021.

³⁹ Reuters, "Tunisian president draws security powers into dispute with PM," April 18, 2021.

⁴⁰ Reuters, "Anger over Tunisia's pandemic failures fuels political crisis," August 1, 2021.

⁴¹ See, e.g., *Financial Times*, "Weary Tunisians welcome president's power grab," August 2, 2021.

⁴² AI, "Tunisia: Behind Tunisia's 'Economic Miracle': Inequality and criminalization of protest," June 17, 2009.

⁴³ World Bank, *The Unfinished Revolution*, May 2014.

⁴⁴ Associated Press, "Report Raises Number of Killed During Tunisia's Revolution to 338," May 5, 2012.

and low-paid jobs, fueling unemployment and under-employment, particularly among young college graduates. Under former leader Ben Ali, state regulations were reportedly tailored to enable corruption and cronyism.⁴⁵

Grievances related to economic inequality and elite corruption helped fuel the 2011 uprising. Economic performance slowed after the 2011 political transition, however, producing what the World Bank termed “a decade of lost growth.”⁴⁶ Successive coalition governments failed to address structural economic impediments, while instability in neighboring Libya and a downturn in the European Union further constrained the economy. Tunisia experienced a decline in per-capita GDP, falling from upper-middle-income to lower-middle-income status in 2015, where it has since remained.⁴⁷ Shocks continued to buffet Tunisia, including the COVID-19 pandemic (which led the economy to contract by 8% in 2020), the ripple effects of the Russia-Ukraine war (particularly severe for grain and fuel importers such as Tunisia), and years of drought that have devastated agriculture.⁴⁸ Public debt rose from 67% in 2019 to 79% in 2024.⁴⁹

After 2011, Tunisia’s elected policymakers responded to public pressures by increasing state employment and wages, expanding consumer and producer subsidies, and maintaining extensive regulation and protectionist measures. Together, these policies have created “profound distortions,” according to the World Bank.⁵⁰ The U.S. International Trade Administration (ITA) refers to Tunisia’s economy as “marked by heavy government control,” including “substantial price regulation and subsidies.”⁵¹ The ITA assesses that government and state-owned institutions “dominate” key sectors such as finance, energy, pharmaceuticals, and utilities.

Elected leaders have faced donor pressure to instill greater fiscal discipline and reduce protectionist measures, alongside competing pressure from voters to maintain or expand public benefits. The IMF expressed concerns during a 2016-2020 \$2.9 billion lending program that Tunisia was not making sufficient progress in reducing subsidies, public sector wages, and pensions.⁵² Some IMF-backed measures during that period—such as a currency devaluation and tax increases—sparked significant public backlash, however, including from Tunisia’s powerful trade unions.⁵³ President Saïed rejected a new IMF loan agreement floated in 2022, which would have required unpopular fiscal tightening measures.⁵⁴

President Saïed has not articulated a clear economic policy in response to ongoing challenges—which include a spike in inflation (topping 9% in 2023), occasional shortages of basic goods, a rise in food insecurity, and over 16% unemployment.⁵⁵ In polls over the past year, many Tunisians expressed a demand for the government to deliver economic improvements, raising questions about whether the public could turn against Saïed if the economy continues to founder.⁵⁶ Some

⁴⁵ World Bank, *The Unfinished Revolution*, May 2014.

⁴⁶ World Bank, “Tunisia Overview,” November 29, 2023.

⁴⁷ Tunisia’s GDP per capita stood at \$4,192 as of 2023, per the IMF. The World Bank currently defines lower-middle-income countries as those with per-capita GDP of \$1,146-\$4,515.

⁴⁸ World Bank, “Tunisia’s Economic Recovery Slows Down amid the Drought,” November 6, 2023.

⁴⁹ IMF, World Economic Outlook (WEO) database, April 2024.

⁵⁰ World Bank, “Tunisia Overview.”

⁵¹ Department of Commerce, ITA, “Tunisia Country Commercial Guide,” April 15, 2024.

⁵² IMF press release, June 12, 2019.

⁵³ *New York Times*, “Belt-Tightening Demands Put Tunisia’s Democracy at Risk,” May 3, 2018.

⁵⁴ Reuters, “Tunisia president rejects IMF ‘diktats’, casting doubt on bailout,” April 6, 2023.

⁵⁵ IMF, WEO database, April 2024; Inkifada, “Kais Saïed: A sinking economy plagued by inflation and shortages,” July 28, 2023; and Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), “Tunisia’s Hunger Games,” July 24, 2023.

⁵⁶ See, e.g., Arab Barometer, “Arab Barometer reveal findings from major Tunisia survey,” March 4, 2024.

analysts assess, however, that Saïed has effectively deflected blame for the economy onto his predecessors and various other targets whom he is claiming to fight.⁵⁷

Security Challenges

Internal security has improved since a string of large terrorist attacks in 2015-2016.⁵⁸ Progress may be attributable to the reduced footprint of transnational terrorist groups in neighboring Libya, along with improvements in Tunisian security forces' coordination and capacity. Some observers posit that President Saïed's use of internal security forces to target political opponents could divert resources from counterterrorism efforts or otherwise undermine security efforts, however.⁵⁹

No terrorist attacks were reported in 2022, for the first time since 2011.⁶⁰ In April 2023, a Tunisian National Guard soldier opened fire on a Jewish pilgrimage gathering on the island of Djerba (**Figure 1**), killing three Tunisian servicemembers and two civilians (one Tunisian-Israeli and the other French).⁶¹ Home to Africa's oldest synagogue, Djerba was previously the target of a large Al Qaeda-linked attack in 2002; the 2023 attack appeared isolated and was rapidly subdued by Tunisian security forces. The State Department has warned U.S. citizens to avoid travel to border regions and certain mountainous areas in Tunisia, citing terrorist threats.⁶² 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 in Iraq and Syria at the height of Islamic State territorial influence there (ca 2014-2015).⁶³ Youth marginalization, police brutality, and the mass release of terrorism suspects under a general amnesty in 2011 reportedly fueled domestic Islamist extremist groups and foreign fighter flows.⁶⁴

Foreign Relations

Tunisia has generally prioritized close ties with Europe—its largest trading partner and home to a sizable Tunisian diaspora—and cordial relations with its larger, energy-rich neighbors, Algeria and Libya. The United States has been Tunisia's top cumulative source of arms over the past decade, albeit surpassed in some individual years by Turkey (Türkiye) or Western European countries.⁶⁵ Economic ties with the People's Republic of China (PRC, or China) were growing

⁵⁷ See, e.g., Youssef Cherif, Columbia Global Centers-Tunis, quoted in *Christian Science Monitor*, "Why populist president retains support amid Tunisia's enduring poverty," January 24, 2024.

⁵⁸ In 2015, terrorist attacks at the Bardo Museum in Tunis and the coastal city of Sousse killed dozens of people, including foreign tourists. In early 2016, Tunisian security forces and local residents defeated a militant assault on the border town of Ben Guerdane (near Libya) that fueled fears of an Islamic State-linked insurgency. The 2015-2016 attacks were reportedly planned from Libya; a U.S. military strike on the Libyan town of Sabratha in February 2016 reportedly killed a number of Tunisian fighters.

⁵⁹ Aaron Zelin, "Saïed's Tunisia is Politicizing Counterterrorism Again," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 9, 2023.

⁶⁰ Department of State, "Country Reports on Terrorism 2022: Tunisia," November 2023.

⁶¹ BBC, "Djerba Tunisia: Worshipers killed near Africa's oldest synagogue," May 10, 2023.

⁶² State Department, "Tunisia Travel Advisory," May 14, 2024 (current).

⁶³ 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. In the mid-2000s, Tunisia had reportedly been a prominent source of foreign fighters in the Iraq-based group that evolved into the Islamic State.

⁶⁴ See Aaron Zelin, *Your Sons Are at Your Service: Tunisia's Missionaries of Jihad*, Columbia University Press: 2020.

⁶⁵ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), arms transfers database, consulted April 12, 2023. SIPRI's database collects information from public sources and may not be comprehensive.

prior to Saïed’s presidency and have continued to expand. Tunisia participates in China’s Belt and Road Initiative, and China is a top source of Tunisian imports (**Figure 1**). China’s Beidou navigation satellite system (BDS), a GPS competitor, established its first overseas “center of excellence” in Tunisia, in 2018.⁶⁶

President Saïed has emphasized domestic issues, and his public statements have more often focused on purported foreign interference in Tunisia than foreign policy per se.⁶⁷ Compared to previous Tunisian leaders, Saïed has expressed greater skepticism of Western partners and pursued deepening relations with China and Russia.⁶⁸ Saïed visited China in May 2024 and met with PRC President Xi Jinping, and the two leaders announced the establishment of a “strategic partnership.”⁶⁹ Accounts that China may seek a role in developing Tunisia’s deep-water ports have reportedly raised U.S. concerns.⁷⁰ Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited Tunisia and met with Saïed in late 2023, as part of a regional tour focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁷¹ Meanwhile, European diplomatic engagement, led by Italy’s Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, has increasingly focused on cooperation to stem irregular migration, with Europe offering development aid and budget support in apparent exchange.⁷²

President Saïed has undertaken policy shifts on Israel and the Palestinians. He described the October 7, 2023 Hamas attacks on Israel as “legitimate resistance” and has publicly rescinded Tunisia’s longstanding support for a two-state solution, instead asserting Palestinian rights to “all of the land of Palestine.”⁷³ There is some evidence that the president’s stance coincides with public opinion in Tunisia,⁷⁴ and there is historical context for Tunisian support for the Palestinian cause. Tunisia hosted the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) headquarters in exile from 1982 to 1993, which was the target of an Israeli air strike in 1985.⁷⁵ Successive Tunisian leaders nonetheless supported negotiations and a two-state solution, and Tunisia helped facilitate talks between the PLO and Israel that evolved into the Oslo peace process.⁷⁶

President Saïed has pursued closer ties with Iran, and in May 2024 became the first Tunisian head of state to visit the country since the Iranian revolution, attending the funeral of Iranian President

⁶⁶ *China Daily*, “Overseas Beidou center set up,” April 12, 2018. A rival to the U.S. government-owned Global Positioning System (GPS), BDS has both civilian and military applications.

⁶⁷ Thomas Hill and Sarah Yerkes, “Tunisian Foreign Policy Under Kais Saïed,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 11, 2023.

⁶⁸ Ghazi Ben Ahmed, “Tunisia at the Crossroads: What Role for the United States in a Multipolar World?” *Fikra Forum*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 20, 2024.

⁶⁹ PRC State Council, “China, Tunisia establish strategic partnership,” May 30, 2024.

⁷⁰ Louis Dugit-Gros and Sabina Henneberg, “China’s Presence in Tunisia: How far has it come, and where is it headed?” The Washington Institute, April 6, 2023.

⁷¹ AP, “Russia’s foreign minister tours North Africa as anger toward the West swells across the region,” December 21, 2023.

⁷² AP, “Italy’s leader keeps the focus on migration on her fourth visit to Tunisia in a year,” April 17, 2024.

⁷³ Sharan Grewal, “Tunisia abandons two-state solution; courts Iran, China, and Russia,” Brookings, June 5, 2024. In May 2024, Tunisia registered reservations regarding the Arab Summit’s use of the terms “June 4, 1967 borders,” “two-state solution,” and “East al-Quds [Jerusalem]” (TAP, “33rd Arab Summit: Tunisia expresses reservations over resolutions on Palestinian cause,” May 16, 2024). See also Isabelle Werenfels, “Of Friends and Foes: Israel and Iran in the Maghreb,” SWP Research Paper, June 2024.

⁷⁴ Arab Barometer, “How the Israel-Hamas War in Gaza Is Changing Arab Views,” December 14, 2023.

⁷⁵ *Washington Post*, “Israeli Air Raid Destroys Arafat’s Base in Tunisia,” October 2, 1985.

⁷⁶ The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, “Tunisian Foreign Minister Habib ben Yahia,” October 6, 1994. Tunisia maintained an interests office in Israel from 1996 until 2000, and has generally welcomed Israeli tourists during the annual pilgrimage to Djerba Island.

Ebrahim Raisi.⁷⁷ Tunisia has simultaneously pursued financial support from Arab Gulf states. Saudi Arabia pledged \$500 million in soft loans and grants in 2023, but has reportedly made further financial assistance contingent on Tunisia reaching a loan agreement with the IMF.⁷⁸

Within North Africa, Algeria has emerged as a vital partner, providing loans, diplomatic support, and continued security cooperation.⁷⁹ Close ties with Algeria appeared to prompt President Saïed, during a 2022 summit, to host the leader of the Polisario Front, an Algerian-supported movement that seeks independence for Moroccan-administered Western Sahara, although Tunisia's foreign ministry asserted that Tunisia maintained "neutrality" on the issue.⁸⁰ Morocco-Tunisia relations suffered as a result.⁸¹ Tunisia's relations with sub-Saharan African countries have come under pressure due to President Saïed's assault on migrants: African Union (AU) Commission Chairperson Moussa Faki conveyed in early 2023 the AU's "deep shock and concern at the form and substance of [Saïed's] statement targeting fellow Africans."⁸²

U.S. Policy

The United States and Tunisia cultivated warm ties after 2011, underpinned by U.S. support for Tunisia's nascent democracy and increased security cooperation to counter regional terrorism threats. The two countries have a Joint Economic Commission and a Joint Military Commission. President Obama initiated a Bilateral Strategic Dialogue in 2014 and designated Tunisia a Major Non-NATO Ally in 2015, after Tunisia adopted a new constitution and held multiparty elections. The Biden Administration initially pursued high-level diplomatic engagement in the first half of 2021, prior to President Saïed's assertion of sweeping executive powers.⁸³ The State Department indicates that it is a U.S. priority "to help Tunisia provide a secure environment conducive to the development of democratic institutions and practices, and to inclusive economic growth."⁸⁴

Following President Saïed's suspension of parliament on July 25, 2021, a White House-led delegation visited Tunisia and called for a "swift return to the path of Tunisia's parliamentary democracy," while acknowledging economic and health challenges that preceded Saïed's moves.⁸⁵ In 2023, the State Department criticized "a troubling escalation by the Tunisian government against perceived opponents."⁸⁶ The State Department also voiced alarm at reports that some political detainees' case files cited contacts with U.S. diplomats.⁸⁷ Assistant Secretary of State Barbara Leaf has visited Tunisia several times, including in early 2023, after which she

⁷⁷ *Tehran Times*, "Tunisian President makes historic visit to Iran to honor late Iranian President," May 22, 2024. See also Frédéric Bobin, "Tunisia: Kais Saïed's inclination to turn to Iran," *Le Monde*, May 25, 2024.

⁷⁸ Reuters, "Saudi Arabia to give Tunisia \$500 million as soft loan and grant," July 20, 2023.

⁷⁹ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "Tunisian Foreign Policy Under Kais Saïed."

⁸⁰ Middle East Eye, "Morocco recalls Tunisia ambassador over Polisario Front invite," August 27, 2022.

⁸¹ Morocco World News, "Morocco-Tunisia Relations: Is the Ice Finally Melting?" August 16, 2024.

⁸² AU, "The Chairperson of the African Union Commission strongly condemns the racial statements on fellow Africans in Tunisia," February 24, 2023.

⁸³ White House, "Readout of Vice President Kamala Harris Call with President Kais Saïed of Tunisia," May 11, 2021.

⁸⁴ State Department, "U.S. Relations with Tunisia," June 6, 2022 [current].

⁸⁵ White House, "Readout from NSC Spokesperson Emily Horne on Senior Administration Officials Travel to Tunisia," August 13, 2021. In the days following President Saïed's actions on July 25, 2021, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan each spoke to Saïed to express support for Tunisian democracy (State Department, "Secretary Blinken's Call with Tunisian President Kais Saïed," July 26, 2021; and White House, "Readout ...of National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's Call with President Kais Saïed of Tunisia," July 31, 2021).

⁸⁶ State Department, "Statement on Arrests of Political Opponents in Tunisia," April 19, 2023.

⁸⁷ State Department press briefing, March 2, 2023.

voiced “enormous concern about where Tunisia is headed, guided by this president.”⁸⁸ The Administration has supported continued military cooperation, including via an August 2024 visit by General Michael Langley, Commander of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM).⁸⁹

U.S.-Tunisia Relations: Background

U.S.-Tunisian relations date back to a 1797 Treaty of Peace and Friendship. Tunisia was the site of significant World War II battles, and a U.S. cemetery and memorial in Carthage (outside Tunis) holds nearly 3,000 U.S. military dead. During the Cold War, Tunisia pursued a pro-Western foreign policy, despite an experiment with leftist economic policies in the 1960s. Still, U.S.-Tunisian ties were strained by Israel’s 1985 bombing of the PLO headquarters in Tunis, which some Tunisians viewed as having been carried out with U.S. approval.⁹⁰ A 2012 mob assault on the U.S. embassy and American school, days after the militant attacks on U.S. facilities in Benghazi, Libya, temporarily cooled relations as U.S. officials criticized the then-government’s handling of the investigation.⁹¹

U.S. Foreign Assistance and Security Cooperation

U.S. bilateral aid for Tunisia has decreased since FY2021 (**Table 1**), attributable to actions by both the Biden Administration and Congress. The Administration has proposed cuts to economic and security aid in successive budget requests, while Congress has not set a minimum floor of U.S. funds for Tunisia since FY2022, with the practical effect of not protecting aid to Tunisia amid competing regional and global demands. (Congress provided a minimum level of aid for Tunisia in appropriations acts for FY2016-FY2021.) The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) approved a \$499 million aid compact in early July 2021, but never signed it.⁹² The MCC’s authorizing legislation sets specific governance criteria for countries to receive a compact.⁹³

Congress has not enacted specific legislative restrictions on aid to Tunisia, but introduced new notification requirements regarding planned aid for Tunisia in the FY2022 and FY2023 Department of State and Foreign Operations (SFOPS) appropriations acts, along with reporting requirements related to Tunisia’s economic reforms and the behavior of its state security forces.⁹⁴ The FY2024 SFOPS appropriations act provided that “Funds appropriated under titles III and IV of this Act shall be made available for assistance for Tunisia for programs to support democratic governance and civil society, protect due process of law, and maintain regional stability and security, following consultation with the Committees on Appropriations” (§7041[j] of P.L. 118-47, Division F). The FY2024 act also required State and USAID to submit a spend plan for assistance for Tunisia to the Appropriations Committees, and retained a requirement to notify the committees of any planned aid obligations or expenditures for the country (§762[b] and §715[f]). Other Tunisia-specific reporting requirements were moved to the explanatory statement.⁹⁵

⁸⁸ Reuters, “US says Tunisia president weakened checks and balances,” March 23, 2023.

⁸⁹ AFRICOM Public Affairs, “AFRICOM Commander Visits Tunisia,” August 30, 2024.

⁹⁰ Jonathan C. Randal, “Raid Left Scars on U.S.-Tunisia Ties,” *The Washington Post*, March 5, 1987.

⁹¹ See, e.g., U.S. Embassy Tunis statement, May 29, 2013.

⁹² MCC, “MCC’s Board Approves nearly \$500 Million for Tunisia Compact,” June 30, 2021. The MCC’s FY2025 budget justification indicates that compact funding for Tunisia has been “paused” since FY2023.

⁹³ See CRS Report RL32427, *Millennium Challenge Corporation: Overview and Issues*, by Nick M. Brown.

⁹⁴ See, for FY2023, §7015f [“country notification requirements”] and §7041k [“Tunisia”] of P.L. 117-328, Div. K.

⁹⁵ The FY2024 explanatory statement tasks the Secretary of State to submit a report to the Committees on Appropriations on any economic reforms or steps to restore democratic governance in Tunisia, and the extent to which Tunisia’s government “is maintaining the independence of the judiciary, not inappropriately utilizing military courts, and holding security forces who commit human rights abuses accountable; and (3) the Tunisian military has remained an apolitical and professional institution.”

While citing concerns about Tunisia’s democratic trajectory, U.S. officials have defended sp,e continued security cooperation in the context of regional threats and global strategic competition.⁹⁶ State Department-administered Foreign Military Financing (FMF) allocated for Tunisia has decreased by nearly half since FY2021, but remains the highest allocation among countries in AFRICOM’s area of responsibility. The Administration has requested \$45 million in FMF funding in FY2025, same as the FY2023 allocation (latest available), asserting that Tunisia’s armed forces “remain on the front lines of the fight against [the Islamic State] and other terrorist groups and the instability emanating from Libya and serve as an important institution in Tunisian society.”⁹⁷ As FMF levels have fallen, the Department of Defense has maintained support for Tunisia’s military using its global train-and-equip authority (10 U.S.C. §333). The State Department has also continued to approve arms sales, with congressional assent.⁹⁸

Tunisia has continued to host and co-host U.S.-led military exercises, including AFRICOM’s largest annual joint and combined exercise, African Lion (most recently in 2024), and an annual North Africa maritime exercise, Phoenix Express (most recently in 2023).⁹⁹ Tunisia maintains a State Partnership Program with the Wyoming National Guard.

Table I. U.S. Bilateral Aid to Tunisia: FY2021-FY2025 Request

millions of current U.S. \$, allocations by year of appropriation

Account	FY2021 Actual	FY2022 Actual	FY2023 Actual	FY2024 Request	FY2025 Request
FMF	85.0	60.0	45.0	45.0	45.0
ESF	42.8	12.0	11.2	14.5	14.5
INCLE	13.0	6.0	4.0	4.0	3.6
NADR	6.1	6.1	4.0	2.5	2.5
IMET	2.3	1.5	2.0	2.3	2.3
DA	45.0	10.5	11.3	0.0	0.0
Total	194.2*	96.1	77.5	68.3	67.9

Source: Department of State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs Congressional Budget Justifications (FY2023-FY2025). Table excludes funds administered on a regional or global basis, or by federal entities other than the State Department and USAID. FMF=Foreign Military Financing; ESF=Economic Support Fund; INCLE=International Narcotics Control & Law Enforcement; NADR=Nonproliferation, Antiterrorism, Demining & Related programs; IMET=International Military Education & Training; DA=Development Assistance.

Notes: *In FY2021, Congress directed an additional \$50 million in prior-year appropriations for Tunisia under P.L. 116-260 and the accompanying explanatory statement.

⁹⁶ See, e.g., Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism, “FY 2025 Budget Request for the Middle East and North Africa,” June 18, 2024.

⁹⁷ U.S. Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification: Foreign Operations, Fiscal Year 2025*, p. 171.

⁹⁸ See, e.g., Defense Security Cooperation Agency, “Tunisia – 65’ Safe Archangel Boats,” August 20, 2024.

⁹⁹ Department of Defense, “U.S. Africa Command’s Largest Annual Exercise Kicks Off in Tunisia,” May 1, 2024; Defense Visual Information Distribution Service, “Phoenix Express 2023,” n.d.

Congressional Actions

Congress held oversight hearings on Tunisia and U.S. policy in 2021 and 2023.¹⁰⁰ In the 118th Congress, the Safeguarding Tunisian Democracy Act of 2023 (S. 2006), as reported by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, would limit certain aid obligations for Tunisia (excepting funds for civil society), unless the Secretary of State certifies that the government has ceased its use of military courts to try civilians, is making progress in releasing political prisoners, and has “terminated all states of emergency.” The bill would also authorize appropriations for a Tunisia Democracy Support Fund to encourage reforms. S.Res. 260 and H.Res. 613, as introduced, would commend the Tunisian people for democratic achievements following the 2011 uprising, criticize democratic backsliding under President Saïed, and urge the government of Tunisia to release all political prisoners, respect civil liberties, and support a free presidential election in 2024.

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¹⁰⁰ Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia and Counterterrorism, “U.S. Policy on Tunisia,” April 26, 2023; and House Foreign Affairs Committee, “Tunisia: Examining the State of Democracy and Next Steps for U.S. Policy,” October 14, 2021.