



# Political Transition in Tunisia

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## Summary

On January 14, 2011, Tunisian President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali fled the country after weeks of mounting anti-government protests. Tunisia's mass popular uprising, dubbed the "Jasmine Revolution," sparked anti-government movements in other countries across the region. Ben Ali's departure was greeted by widespread euphoria within Tunisia. Yet disputes over reform priorities, economic crisis, labor unrest, tensions between the privileged coastal region and relatively impoverished interior, and lingering insecurity are continuing challenges. The humanitarian and security impact of events in neighboring Libya present additional difficulties.

National elections were held on October 23 to select a National Constituent Assembly. The Assembly has put in place a transitional government and is expected to draft a new constitution, ahead of new elections that have yet to be scheduled. Thousands of candidates competed for seats in the Assembly, but the outcome showed popular support to be primarily focused on a handful of political parties. Harakat al Nahda (alt: Ennahda/An-Nahda), a moderate Islamist party, won 41% of the seats, and has formed a governing coalition with two center-left secular parties, the Congress for the Republic (CPR) and the Democratic Forum of Labor and Liberties (FDTL/Ettakatol). Certain aspects of the Assembly's mandate, duration, and internal structure are still to be determined.

Prior to January 2011, Ben Ali and his Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) party exerted near-total control over parliament, state and local governments, and most political activity. Tunisia cultivated strong ties with France and the European Union, its largest trading partner, and with the United States. Despite many political and economic characteristics shared across the region, Tunisia exhibits a number of unique attributes: a relatively small territory, a sizable and well educated middle class, and a long history of encouraging women's socioeconomic freedoms. Some policymakers view these factors as advantageous, and Tunisia as a potential "test case" for democratic transitions in the region.

Tunisia's transition raises a wide range of questions for the future of the country and the region. These pertain to the struggle between reformists and entrenched forces carried over from the former regime; the potential shape of the new political order; the role and influence of Islamism in the government and society; the question of how to transform the formerly repressive security services; and the difficult diplomatic balance—for the United States and other actors—of encouraging greater democratic openness while not undermining other foreign policy priorities.

Congress authorizes and appropriates foreign assistance funding and oversees U.S. foreign policy toward Tunisia and the wider region. U.S.-Tunisian relations were, prior to 2011, highly focused on military assistance and counterterrorism. The Obama Administration has allocated roughly \$42 million in non-military "transition assistance," along with a range of additional efforts aimed at encouraging private sector investment and deepening U.S.-Tunisia relations. International financial institutions, which receive significant U.S. monetary support, and the G8 have also pledged aid for Tunisia. Some Members of Congress argue that additional bilateral aid should be allocated for democracy promotion and economic recovery in Tunisia, while others contend that budgetary cuts take precedence over new aid programs, or that economic stabilization may be best addressed by the private sector or by other donors. Related legislation includes H.R. 2055, S. 618/ H.R. 2237, S. 1388, and S.Res. 316

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## Tunisia's "Jasmine Revolution"

President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, in power since 1987, fled Tunisia for Saudi Arabia on January 14, 2011, following weeks of mounting anti-government protests (see text-box below). Tunisia's popular uprising, dubbed the "Jasmine Revolution," inspired reform and opposition movements in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, Jordan, Algeria, and elsewhere. The pro-democracy movement has been internationally heralded, but the wave of unrest across the Middle East has also sparked international concern over stability in a region associated with autocratic regimes previously viewed as secure and pro-West.

The early months of the post-Ben Ali government were marked by continuing unrest and popular contestation, partly in response to the interim government's initial decision to retain several longtime officials of the former ruling party. In addition, a security vacuum—amid reports of sabotage by unidentified militias, as police fled their posts and citizens formed self-defense groups—raised fears of violence and chaos.

On February 27, a more stable, if weak, interim government took shape under newly appointed Prime Minister Béji Caïd Essebsi, an elder statesman from the administration of founding President Habib Bourguiba. Caïd Essebsi replaced Mohamed Ghannouchi, who had served as Ben Ali's prime minister since 1999. Caïd Essebsi stated that his priorities would be to address security, reverse the economic crisis, and "to restore the prestige of the state."<sup>1</sup> Essebsi also introduced the idea, popular among members of the protest movement, of holding elections for an assembly charged with writing a new constitution—and thus choosing a new political system—before parliamentary and/or presidential polls would be held. Fouad Mebazaa, the former head of parliament, assumed the largely ceremonial position of Interim President upon Ben Ali's departure throughout the interim period.

With the election on October 23, 2011, of a National Constituent Assembly, attention has now turned to the process of constitution drafting, and to the mandates, structure, and authorities of the Assembly and other transitional bodies.

<sup>1</sup> Tarek Amara, "Tunisian Interim PM to Appoint New Government," *Reuters*, March 4, 2011.

Figure 1. Map of Tunisia



Source: Map Resources, adapted by CRS

### **The “Jasmine Revolution” Protests**

Protests were first reported on December 17, 2010, in the interior town of Sidi Bouzid, after a 26-year-old street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire to protest police interference and a lack of economic opportunities. By late December, protests had spread to the nearby cities of Kasserine and Thala, and to other urban centers. Feeding on local anger over high unemployment and a lack political and socioeconomic freedoms, as well as an underground networks of activists, hackers, and dissidents, the demonstrations escalated into an unprecedented popular challenge to the Ben Ali regime. Public demonstrations had previously been very rare in Tunisia, due to state repression and pervasive surveillance. From the start, protesters appeared to lack a central leader and were not necessarily aligned with a pre-existing political or ideological movement.

On January 12, riots erupted in the capital, Tunis. The military deployed to the streets and a national curfew was imposed. Rioters ransacked private properties belonging to Ben Ali’s wealthy relatives along the central coast, underscoring the deep antipathy many Tunisians felt toward members of the ruling elite. Authorities imposed a state of emergency, prohibiting gatherings of over three people and authorizing the use of force against “any suspect person who does not obey orders to stop.”<sup>2</sup> Police repeatedly opened fire on crowds and arrested protesters, journalists, opposition party members, lawyers, and rights advocates, some of whom were reportedly abused in detention. Over 200 people were killed in the uprising.<sup>3</sup>

Prior to his exile, Ben Ali offered a widening series of concessions on political and civil rights in an effort to stem the unrest. On January 13, the president 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 press for Ben Ali’s immediate resignation and the dissolution of the ruling party. On January 14, 2011, Ben Ali fled in a private plane for Saudi Arabia.

## **Background**

Prior to the January 2011 demonstrations, Tunisia was widely viewed as exhibiting a stable, albeit authoritarian, regime that placed a higher priority on economic growth than on political liberalization. It had only two leaders since gaining independence from France in 1956: the late Habib Bourguiba, a secular nationalist who helped lead Tunisia’s independence movement, and Ben Ali, a former Interior Minister and Prime Minister who assumed the presidency in 1987. Ben Ali cultivated the internal security services and the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) party as his power base, and placed severe restrictions on human rights, political participation, and freedom of expression. The president and his family were also seen as highly corrupt.

While Tunisia shares many characteristics with neighboring countries, many of its attributes are unique: a small territory, a relatively homogenous population (despite tribal and ethnic divisions in some areas), a liberalized economy, a substantial and well educated middle class, and a history of encouraging women’s socioeconomic freedoms.<sup>4</sup> Arabic-speaking Sunni Muslims make up the overwhelming majority of Tunisia’s population, but its urban culture and elite reflect a strong European influence. The population is young compared with developed countries, but its youth bulge is declining.<sup>5</sup> As many as a million Tunisians reside abroad, mainly in Europe.

<sup>2</sup> Tunisia 7 Television, “Tunisian Authorities Declare State of Emergency,” January 14, 2011, via Open Source Center.

<sup>3</sup> As of February 1, the United Nations estimated that at least 219 people were killed, including 72 killed in prison fires. Interim government investigators stated in July that they had documented 238 protesters killed and 1,380 wounded, mostly by the security forces. Marie Colvin, “High Noon as Lawyer Closes in on Officials Behind Tunisia Killings,” *The Sunday Times*, July 31, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Tunisia’s spending on education (7.2% of gross domestic product) is high by regional standards. CIA, *The World Factbook*, updated January 3, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> EIU, *Tunisia: Country Profile*, 2008.

The legal and socioeconomic status of women in Tunisia are among its particularities. Polygamy is banned, and women enjoy equal citizenship rights and the right to initiate divorce. Women serve in the military and in many professions, and constitute more than 50% of university students; the first woman governor was appointed in 2004. Many credit the country's relatively liberal Personal Status Code, promulgated under founding President Bourguiba, for these advances.

Despite its apparent relative prosperity, Tunisia has long exhibited a divide between rural and urban areas, and especially between the developed, tourist-friendly coast and the poorer interior. At least half of the population lives in Tunis and coastal towns, and there is population drift toward these areas.<sup>6</sup> Anti-government unrest, particularly when rooted in labor and economic grievances, has often originated in the interior (which includes hardscrabble mining areas)—as did the protests that unseated Ben Ali.

<b>Tunisia at a Glance</b>	
<b>Population:</b>	10.63 million (July 2011 est.)
<b>Income Level:</b>	Lower middle income
<b>Urbanization rate:</b>	67% of the population (2010)
<b>Life Expectancy:</b>	75 years (2011 est.)
<b>Religion:</b>	Muslim: 98%, Christian: 1%, Jewish and other, 1%
<b>Literacy:</b>	78% (2008)
<b>Key Exports:</b>	clothing, semi-finished goods (notably spare automotive parts), textiles, agricultural products
<b>Key Imports:</b>	textiles, machinery and equipment, hydrocarbons
<b>Major Trading Partners:</b>	France, Italy, Germany, Libya, China, Spain
<b>Female Labor Participation Rate (% of female population):</b>	26%
<b>Sources:</b>	CIA, <i>The World Factbook</i> , September 2011; World Bank, <i>World Development Indicators</i>

## Key Issues in the Transition

Nearly a year into their country's transition from authoritarian rule, Tunisians can point to a number of significant achievements—not least, the holding of widely praised national elections in October 2011 that put in place a National Constituent Assembly. Yet they and their new leaders continue to face steep challenges. The interim government led by Prime Minister Caïd Essebsi (February-December 2011) embarked upon a wide range of reforms, including the release of political prisoners, the authorization of some 100 new political parties, and the lifting of many online and media restrictions. The former ruling party, the RCD, was dissolved and its funds liquidated, and a number of former party officials and Ben Ali associates and relatives were arrested. Interim authorities initiated efforts (albeit limited) to dismantle the former regime's domestic security apparatus, and, with the help of the military, reinstated relative security in many parts of the country. The government also took steps to adhere to international human rights treaties, including the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

With the election of the Constituent Assembly, government activities have turned to defining the key issues inherent in drafting a new constitution and the processes through which they will be addressed. Likely areas of focus for the drafting process include the future system of government (parliamentary, presidential, or a combination), the shape of internal checks-and-balances within that system, the role and structure of the judiciary, the level of protection for individual rights, and the relationship between religion and state. Responding to pressing socioeconomic issues—such as high unemployment and the collapse of the tourism industry, a key economic driver—and

<sup>6</sup> EIU, *Tunisia: Country Profile*, 2008.

addressing acute regional inequality may also be priorities for the new leaders. Heated debates over the appropriate mechanisms to protect minority views while allowing efficient action by the majority coalition will likely define much of the Constituent Assembly's activity. Resurgent public demonstrations and sporadic riots and labor unrest are also likely to pose challenges.

Some observers hope that the new government, put in place via an election instead of an ad-hoc appointment process, will be able to act decisively under a popular mandate. At the same time, discussions of constitutional issues were largely absent from the campaign period, and the policy differences between parties and candidates were often opaque. While the main political factions accepted the results of the election, the campaign also entrenched mutual suspicions among some secularists and Islamists, and allegations of foul play—though difficult to verify—were made from a variety of angles, particularly with regard to campaign finance. Tensions have also burgeoned between representatives of the coastal elite and the disadvantaged interior, between the activist youth who led the uprising and those selected for government positions, and among political factions. “Economic stagnation, pent up social demands, and a combination of political and cultural tensions” remain potent.<sup>7</sup> Dissatisfaction and confusion over the transition process could resurface as elites continue to confront challenges over who is empowered to act and how to deliver tangible socioeconomic benefits to an impatient public. Vast and divided expectations could also undermine Tunisia's ability to make steady progress on institutional reforms.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Christopher Alexander, “Suspicion and Strategy in Free Tunisia,” *ForeignPolicy.com*, June 20, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Marina Ottaway, “Tunisia: The Revolution is Over, Can Reform Continue?” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 13, 2011.

### The October 2011 Elections

The October 23, 2011, elections were widely viewed as fair, transparent, and well-conducted, despite preparations having appeared disjointed at times and subject to delays. International observers stated that the voting process was marked by peaceful and enthusiastic participation, generally transparent procedures, and confidence in the independent electoral commission (known as the ISIE). At the same time, observers expressed some concerns regarding insufficient information about the allocation of voters to polling stations; administrative difficulties encountered by voters who had not formally registered, most of whom were eligible to vote at special polling centers; limited voter education; and a lack of detailed procedures and training for key parts of the process, including vote counting, tabulation, and election dispute resolution.<sup>9</sup> Turnout was officially estimated at 54% of eligible voters; it was much higher among those who had actively registered to vote in mid-2011.

A new electoral law promulgated in May 2011 set out a one-round voting system based on proportional representation that was designed to make it difficult for any party to gain an absolute majority. The law included a “parity” reservation for women on candidate lists.<sup>10</sup> Tunisians in the diaspora were able to vote. The law barred from candidacy certain senior officials of the former ruling party.<sup>11</sup> Over 1,400 candidate lists competed for seats, corresponding to over 11,600 candidates, including political party representatives, coalitions, and independents. The May 2011 law will not necessarily serve as a basis for future elections, and the independent electoral commission is expected to be dissolved pending new guidelines promulgated by the Constituent Assembly.

Despite the potentially high stakes of the election—determining who would shape the new political order through the process of constitution-drafting—reports indicated that many Tunisians felt alienated by the complexity of the transition process and a lack of understanding of the Constituent Assembly’s role.<sup>12</sup> Only 52% of estimated eligible voters registered to vote—although others were able to vote using their national identity cards—and two months ahead of election day, roughly one in three Tunisians reported being undecided about whom to vote for.<sup>13</sup> Efforts by the electoral commission to ban certain types of media coverage and political advertizing during the campaign were controversial, and may have contributed to confusion over policy differences among parties and candidates.<sup>14</sup>

The following sections discuss key issues in Tunisia’s transition.

## A New Government

The 217-seat National Constituent Assembly is charged with drafting a new constitution and preparing for future parliamentary and/or presidential elections, which will formally signal the next step in the transition process. The Assembly has also selected a government and may perform quasi-legislative functions. The main Islamist party, *Harakat al Nahda* (alt: *Ennahda/An-Nahda*, “Renaissance”), controls 89 seats (41%): by far the largest block in the Assembly, but not enough to rule without a coalition. It is followed by the center-left, secular *Congress for the Republic* (CPR), with 29 seats; a populist, conservative, and fractious independent coalition, *Al*

<sup>9</sup> See National Democratic Institute, “Tunisia Preliminary Election Statement,” October 24, 2011; International Republican Institute, “Tunisian Elections Historic Step Forward,” October 24, 2011; and Carter Center, “Preliminary Statement: Tunisian National Constituent Assembly Elections,” October 25, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Previously, Tunisia had a 25% female reservation requirement for party lists in parliamentary elections. Under the “parity” requirement, each list had to alternate male and female candidates. However, since male candidates were overwhelmingly placed at the top of lists, the requirement did not ensure an equal number of elected female candidates.

<sup>11</sup> Art. 15 of Decree Law N. 35 on Election of the National Constituent Assembly, May 10, 2011. Senior officials were defined as those who had occupied a “position of responsibility” in the government over the past ten years or who had signed a petition supporting Ben Ali’s 2014 re-election bid.

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Diplomatic Cable [UNCLASSIFIED], “Voter Registration Deadline Extended, Growing Frustration With Voter Apathy,” August 1, 2011; Kaouther Larbi, “Tunisie: défiance ou myopie, la moitié des électeurs boudent l’inscription,” *AFP*, August 14, 2011; Richard Valdmanis, “Confusion Reigns Ahead of Tunisia Vote,” *Reuters*, September 7, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Sigma Conseil, *Baromètre Politique*, Tunis, September 2011.

<sup>14</sup> TunisieNews.com, “Les Partis Politiques Défient la Décision de l’ISIE et Poursuivent Leurs Compagnes Publicitaires,” September 12, 2011.



Aridha al Chaabia (Popular Petition), with 26 seats<sup>15</sup>; the center-left, secular Ettakatol (also known as the Democratic Forum of Labor and Liberties or FDTL), with 20 seats; and the leftist, stringently secularist Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), with 16 seats. Twenty-two other parties and independent groupings won at least one seat each. Forty-nine women were elected to the Assembly, of whom 42 are Al Nahda delegates.

Following the election, Al Nahda formed a governing coalition with the CPR and Ettakatol, popularly referred to as the “Troika.” The agreement paved the way for Assembly delegates to elect Ettakatol’s leader, Mustapha Ben Jaafar, as president of the Assembly on November 22, and CPR leader Moncef Marzouki as President (a largely ceremonial position) on December 12. Marzouki, in turn, appointed Al Nahda’s secretary-general, Hamadi Jebali, as Prime Minister—the head of government and most powerful of the three roles. The delay in Marzouki’s election responded to demands among Assembly delegates that they first be able to debate a set of internal procedures that define some of the roles, decision-making processes, and mandates of the Assembly and its leadership. The procedures were adopted in a vote on December 10.

The “Troika” coalition may be subject to internal frictions, given the parties’ divergent histories, potential policy differences, and outside pressures. Within the fragmented opposition, the PDP is likely to lead a coalition of secularist parties opposed primarily to Al Nahda. The PDP led partial opposition boycotts of the December 10 and December 12 votes in order to protest purported efforts by Al Nahda to enhance the authorities of the Prime Minister at the expense of the Presidency, and a lack of term limits for the current government. While most of the main political parties—including Al Nahda and Ettakatol but not the CPR—had agreed in September to complete the draft constitution within one year,<sup>16</sup> Assembly delegates overruled PDP-led attempts to enact a firm deadline. Assembly members have also contended with street demonstrations by secularists and others opposed to Al Nahda’s growing influence, Islamists supportive of Al Nahda, and a wide range of other interest groups.

## **Islam, Politics, and the State**

The relationship between religion and the state is likely to be a key area of debate by members of the Constituent Assembly. The main political parties have agreed not to significantly alter Article 1 of Tunisia’s current constitution: “Tunisia is a free, independent and sovereign state. Its religion is Islam, its language is Arabic and its type of government is the Republic.” However, areas of disagreement may include the mandate or continued existence of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which regulates religious activities; the continuation (or alteration) of limits on the ability of religiously conservative Salafist groups to register as political parties; the legal status of religious minorities (98% of Tunisians are Sunni Muslims, but there are tiny Jewish and Christian communities); and how to balance freedom of expression and religious sensitivities.

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<sup>15</sup> The electoral success of the Al Aridha coalition, a previously little-known entity, was unforeseen by most observers and Tunisian elites. The coalition’s campaign appears to have focused on a populist platform and a grassroots approach that appealed to population segments in Tunisia’s interior that may have been ignored by the mainstream parties. Rivals accused Hamdi of violating Tunisia’s campaign finance rules and of being close to former president Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, who was deposed in January. Hamdi denies the allegations, and an attempt by the electoral commission to overturn seven seats won by Al Aridha on campaign finance grounds was overruled by the courts.

<sup>16</sup> *Tunisia Watch*, “Une ‘Déclaration du Processus Transitoire’ Signée par 12 Partis,” September 15, 2011.

The October elections confirmed the political rise of Tunisia's main Islamist party, Al Nahda. Al Nahda leaders have portrayed themselves as moderates who seek to participate in a democratic system, support the separation of mosque and state, and would not scale back women's freedom.<sup>17</sup> Ghannouchi has compared Al Nahda to Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). Al Nahda leaders, for example, have expressed support for preserving Tunisia's personal status code, which is a key focus of concern among secularists. The movement's detractors, however, often accuse Al Nahda of a "double discourse," i.e., of portraying a moderate face in order to enter government and gradually introduce more conservative, restrictive laws and institutions. Conversely, Al Nahda members purport to feel threatened by "leftist" actors, whom they accuse of seeking illegitimately to restrict Islamists' political influence. Increasing polarization between Islamists and secularists could portend gridlock within the Constituent Assembly.

Al Nahda's electoral gains appear to have stemmed from a range of factors. Clearly, the movement remained popular despite two decades of confinement to exile and underground activities. In addition, the repression meted out to Al Nahda activists under Ben Ali appears to have endeared the movement to many Tunisians and enhanced its popular legitimacy. Al Nahda did not play a significant role in the "Jasmine Revolution" uprising, but the organization raised its profile in 2011 through a series of politically savvy choices. For example, in early 2011, it joined the Committee to Defend the Revolution, a loose coalition of political party activists, unionists, and leftist groups that successfully called for the interim government to broaden consultation on political reforms and dismiss senior officials from the former regime. Al Nahda also is widely reported to have engaged in superior grassroots mobilization during the electoral campaign, and may have benefitted from campaign missteps by the most vocally secularist parties, such as the PDP and the Democratic Modernist Pole (PDM). These attempted to drive a wedge between Islamists and secularists, a strategy that may have backfired among Tunisians eager to reconcile democratic participation with what they view as their Arab/Muslim identity.<sup>18</sup> Conversely, voters appeared to reward secularist parties that signaled a willingness to work with Al Nahda, such as the CPR and Ettakatol. Indeed, a significant percentage of Tunisians, who may or may not have voted for Al Nahda, broadly desire Islam to play a more prominent role in public life.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, very few indicate that they prefer an Islamic system of government.<sup>20</sup>

Some Tunisians have expressed concerns that political power could become overly concentrated in Al Nahda's hands. At the same time, Al Nahda's actions are likely to be limited by a number of factors, including the party's own broad constituency (who cast votes for the party for a wide variety of reasons), the strategic constraints of vital state interests (such as security prerogatives and economic ties), and the pressures exerted by other domestic actors, including via street protests. Al Nahda may contend with internal divisions as it takes on a political leadership role, and could also find itself competing with emergent, more radical Islamist groups for public

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<sup>17</sup> For example, a Nahda spokesman told a journalist in April that "there is no developed country that does not have women's rights, these things go together." *Le Monde*, "En Tunisie, Les Multiples Visages d'Un Islamisme Qui Réapparaît au Grand Jour," April 10, 2011. See also Marc Lynch, "Tunisia's New al-Nahda," *ForeignPolicy.com*, June 29, 2011; and Al Nahda, "Address by the General-Secretary of 'Ennahda' Party : Positions and Dimensions," Sousse Business Forum, June 11, 2011. For a sympathetic account of Ghannouchi's political and philosophical evolution, see Azzam S. Tamimi, *Rachid Ghannouchi: A Democrat within Islamism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

<sup>18</sup> CRS interviews with political observers in Tunis, October 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Institut de Sondage et de Traitement de l'Information Statistique (ISTIS), "Sondage d'Opinion sur la Situation Politique et l'Impact de la Révolution sur les Média Presse," April 2011.

<sup>20</sup> State Department Office of Opinion Research, "Tunisians Up for Elections, But Down on Parties," August 31, 2011; Michael Robbins and Mark Tessler, "Tunisians Voted for Jobs, Not Islam," *ForeignPolicy.com*, December 7, 2011.

support. Al Nahda founder and president Rachid Ghannouchi, who was not a candidate in the October elections, has said that he will soon step down, allowing party members to select a new leader; this could place the future direction of the party in question.

Many analysts argue that Tunisia's secular traditions, educated middle class, and history of promoting women's socioeconomic equality are bulwarks against extremism. Still, radical Islamist groups, although marginal, have become more visible in the post-Ben Ali era, as previous state restrictions have been rolled back. Recent demonstrations and violent attacks by Salafists, including an assault on individuals attending the screening of a secularist film in Tunis in late June 2011, an attack on a television station in October that had broadcast an animated film briefly depicting God, and agitation on university campuses over bans on the *niqab* (full face veil), have sparked concerns. Some observers fear that these incidents have chilled free expression.<sup>21</sup>

### **Background on Al Nahda**

Al Nahda, presided over by Islamic scholar and activist Rachid Ghannouchi, was first formally organized by Ghannouchi and Abdel Fattah Moro in 1981—soon after multiparty politics were legalized under President Bourguiba—as the Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI). Although the MTI was relatively moderate compared to other Islamist groups, it was viewed as the most popular and therefore the most significant threat to the government.<sup>22</sup> The MTI organized demonstrations on university campuses, spurring arrests and clashes with the security forces and with leftist groups. The growing unrest, combined with that orchestrated by trade unions, undermined support for Bourguiba's presidency and laid the groundwork for Ben Ali's rise in 1987.<sup>23</sup>

Upon coming to power, Ben Ali promised greater pluralism and a dialogue with opposition groups. Hoping to gain legal recognition, the MTI changed its name to Al Nahda to comply with the 1988 political party law, which barred names based on religion. It was nonetheless denied legal status. Al Nahda candidates were permitted to run as independents in the 1989 parliamentary elections, but when they garnered a high level of support—reportedly 15% of the national vote—Ben Ali initiated a crackdown on the group. Ghannouchi left the country during this time.

Confrontations between the government and Al Nahda activists escalated, culminating in an attack on a ruling party office in 1991 that was blamed on Al Nahda. Al Nahda leaders condemned the attack and denied that those responsible belonged to their movement, an explanation that remains disputed. Ben Ali accused Al Nahda of plotting to overthrow the government and launched a campaign to eradicate the group and all signs of conservative Islam. The government subsequently claimed it had unearthed an Islamist plot to assassinate Ben Ali, and in 1992 Tunisian military courts convicted 265 Al Nahda members on charges of planning a coup. Al Nahda denied the accusations, and some rights advocates criticized the case as biased and lacking due process.<sup>24</sup> Ghannouchi was sentenced in absentia. Similar tensions between Islamists and government forces drove neighboring Algeria into civil war in the early 1990s.

## **The Security Forces**

A central challenge facing Tunisia's interim government is how to assert control over the size and mandate of the domestic security services, which formed a vast and secretive network under Ben Ali, without sowing the seeds of future instability. It may also take time before members of the public are willing to trust the police to ensure their security. The security services under Ben Ali were accused of abuses such as extrajudicial arrests, extensive internet surveillance, and torture. The number of security agents remains unknown, although it is thought by some analysts to far

<sup>21</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Tunisia: Police Inaction Allowed Assault on Film Screening; Action Needed to Curb Attacks on Artists Deemed 'Un-Islamic,'" June 30, 2011; see also OSC doc. GMP20110701405002, "'Supporters of Shari'ah' Condemn 'Attacks' on 'Sanctities of Muslims in Tunisia,'" Ansar al-Mujahidin Network, June 30, 2011.

<sup>22</sup> Henry Munson Jr., "Islamic Revivalism in Morocco and Tunisia," *The Muslim World*, 76:3-4 (1986).

<sup>23</sup> Munson 1986, op. cit.

<sup>24</sup> Christopher Alexander, *Tunisia: Stability and Reform in the Modern Maghreb*, Routledge: New York, 2010.

exceed the number of military personnel and could be as high as 200,000.<sup>25</sup> Several dozen senior security and Interior Ministry officials were fired in February, and in March 2011, the Interior Ministry announced it was dissolving entities “akin to ‘political police.’”<sup>26</sup> However, the number of affected personnel and whether they would retain their employment with the government was not made public. It is unclear to what extent the security services have been restructured.<sup>27</sup>

The interim government brought charges against a few senior security officials from the Ben Ali regime. However, opinions are divided as to whether to pursue lower- and mid-ranking officials and security officers. The U.N. Special Rapporteur on torture called on Tunisia in May 2011 to “promote accountability for past abuses,” including by prosecuting perpetrators of torture and other abusive acts; the rapporteur also suggested that torture may have continued, in a small number of cases, since Ben Ali’s departure.<sup>28</sup> Fears among police officers that they could be made to shoulder the blame for the regime’s decision to open fire on demonstrators in January 2011 have led to several police demonstrations in recent months.<sup>29</sup>

## **The Military**

There is a notable distinction between the security services, which were closely associated with Ben Ali’s repressive internal security apparatus, and the military, which has received fewer state resources and is viewed as relatively apolitical.<sup>30</sup> The military comprises roughly 35,000 personnel; military service is compulsory for one year, but many Tunisians reportedly evade it. Government spending on the military constitutes only 1.4% of GDP—a low proportion compared to other countries in the region.<sup>31</sup> The armed forces are positioned largely against external threats, and also participate (to a limited extent) in multilateral peacekeeping missions.

The government’s initial, heavy-handed response to the 2011 protests was led by the police and security services. The deployment of the military to the streets was a turning point, and military leaders appear to have subsequently played a key role in ending Ben Ali’s presidency. Notably, General Rachid Ammar, then army chief of staff (since promoted to the equivalent of joint chief of staff) is widely reported to have refused orders to open fire on demonstrators.<sup>32</sup> On January 23, Ammar publicly addressed protesters and promised to safeguard Tunisia’s “revolution.” While

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<sup>25</sup> Eric Goldstein/Human Rights Watch, “Dismantling the Machinery of Oppression,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 16, 2011. Others note that inflated figures on the number of security agents may have been purposefully tolerated (even circulated) by the former regime in order to exaggerate its ability to control the population.

<sup>26</sup> *TAP*, “Interior Ministry Decides to Remove State Security Division,” March 7, 2011.

<sup>27</sup> According to some human rights advocates, domestic intelligence services have not been dissolved, and may continue to conduct surveillance activities—although whether they are following orders or merely habit is unclear. See Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l’Homme (FIDH), *La Tunisie Post Ben Ali Face aux Démons du Passé: Transition démocratique et persistance des violations graves des droits de l’homme*, July 2011.

<sup>28</sup> *AFP*, “UN Torture Rapporteur Visits Tunisia,” and *Reuters*, “People Still Tortured in Tunisia—U.N. Rapporteur,” May 21, 2011. Local rights groups have also since highlighted cases of ongoing mistreatment of police detainees.

<sup>29</sup> See, e.g., *AFP*, “Tunisia Bans Police from Union Activities,” September 6, 2011. Divisions between police commanders and the rank-and-file were exposed in the immediate aftermath of Ben Ali’s exit, as thousands of police officers held their own demonstration to distance themselves from the RCD and call for better working conditions.

<sup>30</sup> In the late 1970s and mid-1980s, the military led the repression of anti-government protests. However, this role was largely relegated to the civilian security services under Ben Ali. Unlike in neighboring Algeria, the military leadership did not play a major role in the independence movement or in early state formation.

<sup>31</sup> Figures compared from the CIA *World Factbook*.

<sup>32</sup> E.g., Abdelaziz Barrouhi, “Tunisie: L’Homme Qui A Dit Non,” *Jeune Afrique*, January 30-February 5, 2011.

Ammar's comments were welcomed by many Tunisians, they sparked concern among some observers over whether the armed forces could interfere in domestic politics, particularly if the security situation should worsen.<sup>33</sup> Following Ben Ali's exit, members of the military led efforts to stabilize the security situation, including by pursuing elements of the domestic security apparatus and unidentified armed elements seen as loyal to the old regime.

## Security Concerns

Although the security situation has largely stabilized since the chaotic first few weeks after Ben Ali's departure, incidents of looting, theft, and destruction of property continue to occur. Incidents of religiously motivated violence were reported in early 2011, including the murder of a Polish priest on February 18 and harassment directed at Tunisia's tiny Jewish population. There have also reportedly been several large prison escapes, for unclear reasons.<sup>34</sup> Authorities have had to further contend with the influx of refugees from Libya, while inter-tribal violence has been reported in the southwest. Suspicions remain that elements of the security services could be seeking to provoke disorder, including by reportedly infiltrating demonstrations<sup>35</sup>; interim government officials blamed an armed attack on the Interior Ministry, in February 2011, on a conspiracy by members of the former regime's security forces. The "state of emergency" imposed by Ben Ali in early 2011 has been repeatedly extended (though many of its more draconian provisions have not been enforced), and the military is assisting in internal security operations.

Some analysts fear that Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), a regional affiliate of Al Qaeda with roots in Algeria's 1990s civil conflict, could take advantage of political instability and insecurity along Tunisia's southern borders, particularly when combined with upheaval in neighboring Libya.<sup>36</sup> AQIM released a statement in January 2011 hailing the departure of Ben Ali and warning against supposed U.S. and French efforts to subvert the revolution.<sup>37</sup> Al Qaeda's second-in-command, Ayman Al Zawahri, has released at least two statements seeking to portray uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt as motivated by Islamist sentiment and warning that the United States would seek to manipulate the outcomes.<sup>38</sup>

In mid-May 2011, Tunisian authorities announced they had arrested two suspected armed AQIM members near the Libyan border, described as an Algerian and a Libyan national.<sup>39</sup> According to

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<sup>33</sup> Issandr El Amrani, "Tunisia Diary: Ammar's Move?" *TheArabist.net*, January 24, 2011. In mid-2010, an analysis of Tunisia's political stability concluded that "a coup is a real possibility" should instability affect the transfer of power after Ben Ali. Veritiss, *Tunisia: Outlook 2011-2015* [UNCLASSIFIED], prepared For the Defense Intelligence Agency Defense Intelligence Open Source Program Office, August 2, 2010.

<sup>34</sup> *Le Monde*, "Incertitudes en Tunisie sur la Tenue des Elections, le 24 Juillet," May 10, 2011.

<sup>35</sup> Tara Bahrapour, "In Tunisia, First Steps Toward Democracy," *The Washington Post*, March 21, 2011; *Jeune Afrique*, "Tunisie: l'Ex-RCD Soupçonné d'Avoir Commandité des Attaques de Postes de Police," July 18, 2011.

<sup>36</sup> See CRS Report R41070, *Al Qaeda and Affiliates: Historical Perspective, Global Presence, and Implications for U.S. Policy*, coordinated by John Rollins.

<sup>37</sup> OSC doc. GMP20110128836001, "AQLIM Warns Tunisians Against Western 'Plots' To 'Abort' Tunisian Revolution," Al-Mujahidin Electronic Network, January 28, 2011. For 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.

<sup>38</sup> Maamoun Youssef, "Al-Qaida's No. 2 Incites Tunisians, Egyptians," *AP*, February 28, 2011; OSC doc. GMP20110913836004, "Al-Fajr Releases Al-Zawahiri Audio, Bin Ladin Video on 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of 9/11," Ana Al Muslim Network, September 13, 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Radio Tunisienne, "Tunisian Interior Ministry Provides More Information on 'Terrorists' Arrest," May 16, 2011, via (continued...)

Tunisian officials, this was the first arrest of AQIM militants within Tunisia. Days later, four Tunisian soldiers were killed in the northern town of Rouhia by a group described as affiliated with Al Qaeda. Two militants were also reported killed. In July, Tunisian authorities claimed to have halted AQIM militants from entering Tunisia from Algeria, and in August security forces engaged in skirmishes with “terrorists” at the Algerian border.<sup>40</sup> In September 2011, the Defense Ministry stated that an army air patrol exchanged fire with an unidentified, heavily armed convoy of nine vehicles traversing a remote southwest border region. Reportedly, the Tunisian armed forces, in a coordinated assault by ground troops and combat helicopters, destroyed seven of the vehicles and stopped the remaining two, killing six individuals and taking others into custody.<sup>41</sup> The State Department cited the incident in a travel alert to U.S. citizens in early October. Armed groups have also reportedly been stopped at the Libyan border.<sup>42</sup>

### **Terrorism in Tunisia: Background**

While Tunisia has not been subject to many large attacks, terrorism is a potential domestic threat and Tunisians have participated in plots abroad. Two notable incidents of terrorism on Tunisian soil were the 2002 bombing of a synagogue on the Tunisian island of Djerba (noted for its tiny Jewish population) and a series of street battles between alleged militants and security forces in Tunis in December 2006-January 2007. Al Qaeda deputy leader Ayman al Zawahiri appeared to claim responsibility for the Djerba bombing in a taped message broadcast in October 2002. In all, 14 German tourists, five Tunisians, and two French citizens were killed in the attack.<sup>43</sup> France, Spain, Italy, and Germany arrested expatriate Tunisians for alleged involvement. The roots of the 2006-2007 violence, in which 14 militants were reported killed, are more opaque.

In 2002, the U.S. State Department placed the Tunisian Combatant Group (TCG), which operated outside Tunisia, on a list of specially designated global terrorists and froze its assets.<sup>44</sup> The TCG sought to establish an Islamic state in Tunisia and was considered to be a radical offshoot of Al Nahda. The TCG was suspected of plotting, but not carrying out, attacks on U.S., Algerian, and Tunisian embassies in Rome in December 2001. One founder, Tarek Maaroufi, was arrested in Belgium the same month. The group appears to have since been inactive.

AQIM actively recruits Tunisians and reportedly had ties with the TCG.<sup>45</sup> In January 2007, following the aforementioned street battles, Tunisian security forces claimed that they had discovered terrorists linked to the GSPC who had infiltrated from Algeria and possessed homemade explosives, satellite maps of foreign embassies, and documents identifying foreign envoys. Some 30 Tunisians were subsequently convicted of plotting to target U.S. and British

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(...continued)

U.S. government Open Source Center (OSC).

<sup>40</sup> BBC Monitoring, “Militants From Al-Qa'idah Try to Sneak into Tunisia, Official,” July 2, 2011; OSC doc. GMP20110822280003, “Tunisian Sources Report Several Dead in Army Clashes with Terrorists Near Border,” *Le Temps d'Algerie*, August 20, 2011.

<sup>41</sup> AFP, “L'Armée Tunisienne Attaque un Convoi Armé dans le Sud, près de l'Algérie,” September 21, 2011; BBC Monitoring, “Algerian Forces Clash with ‘Terrorists’ Infiltrated from Tunisia,” *El Khabar*, September 22, 2011; AFP, “Six Killed in Tunisian Clashes Near Algeria: Diplomat,” September 23, 2011.

<sup>42</sup> *Le Temps*, “Menace Terroriste sur la Tunisie,” September 10, 2011.

<sup>43</sup> *Financial Times*, “Al-Qaeda Deputy Leader Signals Involvement in Attacks,” October 10, 2002.

<sup>44</sup> U.S. State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism, 2006*, released April 30, 2007.

<sup>45</sup> Craig S. Smith, “Tunisia is Feared as New Islamist Base,” *International Herald Tribune*, February 20, 2007.

interests in Tunisia. AQIM later claimed responsibility for kidnapping two Austrian tourists in Tunisia in February 2008.

Tunisian expatriates suspected of ties to Al Qaeda have been arrested in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Western Europe, Mauritania, and the United States. Several are reportedly detained at the U.S. Naval Base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and their possible return to Tunisia has proven to be controversial.<sup>46</sup> In April 2009, General David Petraeus, then-Commander of U.S. 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.<sup>47</sup>

Under Ben Ali, as many as 2,000 Tunisians were detained, charged, and/or convicted on terrorism-related charges, including under a sweeping anti-terrorism law passed in 2003.<sup>48</sup> Critics claimed that the law “makes the exercise of fundamental freedoms ... an expression of terrorism.”<sup>49</sup> These criticisms were echoed in the December 2010 report of the U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms While Countering Terrorism, who concluded that “the current definition of terrorism is vague and broad, hence deviating from the principle of legality and allowing for wide usage of counter-terrorism measures in practice.”<sup>50</sup> Rights advocates also accused anti-terror trials of relying on excessive pretrial detention, denial of due process, and weak evidence.

## **Anti-Corruption Efforts**

Tunisian authorities have brought dozens of criminal charges against Ben Ali and his wife, Leila Trabelsi, both of whom remain outside the country; many of these cases pertain to alleged corruption. Family members reportedly owned or controlled many of the country's biggest companies, with shares sometimes allegedly obtained through political pressure, and are thought to have stashed away significant resources overseas. However, the decision to carry out multiple and rapid trials of the former first couple in absentia, after Tunisian authorities unsuccessfully sought Ben Ali's extradition from Saudi Arabia, has been controversial.<sup>51</sup> Dozens of family members, along with former senior government and security officials, have also either been tried or face charges. An ad-hoc national commission appointed during the interim government carried out an eight-month investigation into corruption under the former regime, and submitted its final report to the government in early November 2011. The report, accompanied by thousands of documentary files, may lead to new prosecutions. While some Tunisian commentators have

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<sup>46</sup> According to recent news reports, 12 Tunisians were at one time detained in Guantanamo, but only five remain in U.S. custody. Five were repatriated to third countries, partly due to concerns over their possible torture if returned to Tunisia, while two others were returned to Tunisia and imprisoned. Bouazza Ben Bouazza, “Tunisia to Send Mission to US for Release of its Remaining Gitmo Detainees,” September 14, 2011.

<sup>47</sup> *House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies Holds Hearing on the US Central Command*, April 24, 2009, transcript via CQ.

<sup>48</sup> U.S. State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism, 2009*, released August 5, 2010.

<sup>49</sup> Jeremy Landor, “Washington's Partner,” *Middle East International*, March 5, 2004, pp. 23-24.

<sup>50</sup> U.N. Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur*, December 28, 2010, op. cit.

<sup>51</sup> The interim government had also issued an international arrest warrant through Interpol for Ben Ali, Leila Trabelsi, and several close relatives who have fled the country. Amnesty International called the first trial of Ben Ali “unfair” and warned that the Tunisian government “risks replicating the unfair justice system that was a hallmark of Tunisia under Ben Ali.” “Accountability in Tunisia and Egypt,” August 3, 2011.

welcomed a judicial approach, some are skeptical regarding the capacity and political leanings of the justice system, which was inherited from the Ben Ali regime.<sup>52</sup>

## Recovery of State Assets

Tunisian authorities have seized domestic assets belonging to the former president and his associates, and have identified at least 12 countries overseas where these individuals stored money, which could total billions of dollars. The financial and real estate holdings of the Ben Ali and Trabelsi families have been of particular interest, and public inquiries into these areas could continue. Western governments have cooperated with Tunisian efforts to freeze assets; however, the process for recovering such assets on behalf of the Tunisian state is complex and challenging.<sup>53</sup> Interim authorities have also moved to expropriate shares of domestic companies controlled by certain Ben Ali family members and associates accused of financial manipulation, but have allowed most such companies to continue operating under appointed managers.<sup>54</sup>

## Key Actors

Contenders for political influence in Tunisia include the political parties; trade unions; the security forces; Islamist actors who remain outside the political system; and, potentially, former RCD officials. The political party spectrum is fluid, but several broad groupings are emergent: Islamist parties, of which the largest is Al Nahda; center-left/secular parties willing to work with Al Nahda, such as the CPR and Ettakatol; stringently secularist parties, such as the PDP, the Democratic Modernist Pole (PDM) coalition (led by the Ettajdid party), and Afek Tounes; and parties whose founders were senior members of the former ruling RCD party, such as Al Moubadara (The Initiative). The Al Aridha coalition does not easily fit into these categories, as its candidates reportedly used both religious and populist messages in their campaigns; the coalition's membership also does not appear to be acting as a block. In addition to registered parties, religiously conservative Salafist groups—which were not permitted to participate in the elections—have expanded their activities and visibility. The internal and ideological cohesion of many parties remains untested.

## Selected Profiles

- **Hamadi Jebali, Prime Minister and Secretary-General of Al Nahda.** Born 1949 in Sousse, Jebali is an engineer by training and a longtime activist in Al Nahda (previously the Islamic Tendency Movement), having become a member of the group's political bureau in 1981 and served as its president from 1981 until 1984. He also directed Al Nahda's newspaper, *Al Fajr*. In the early 1990s, Jebali

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<sup>52</sup> Hamadi Redissi, "The Revolution Is Not Over Yet [op-ed]," *The New York Times*, July 15, 2011; Tarek Amara, "Tunisia Pledges Tougher Line on Ex-Leader's Allies," *Reuters*, August 18, 2011.

<sup>53</sup> Deborah Ball and Cassell Bryan-Low, "Arab Spring Regimes Face Long Slog to Recoup Assets," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 25, 2011. The *Wall Street Journal* reported in February that U.S. investigators had opened a preliminary probe into assets controlled by Ben Ali and family members. Joseph Palazzolo, "FBI Probe to Target Tunisia's Ex-Leader," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 9, 2011.

<sup>54</sup> *Le Monde*, "Orange Tunisie Passe Sous la Tutelle de l'Etat Tunisien," March 30, 2011; David Gauthier-Villars, "How 'The Family' Controlled Tunisia," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 20, 2011.



was sentenced to over 16 years in prison due to his association with Al Nahda, and spent 10 years in solitary confinement. After being freed in 2006, he rejoined Al Nahda and became the party's secretary-general. Previously, Jebali lived for 10 years in France, where he completed an engineering degree and was a founder of the French Muslim Association. Jebali has emphasized strong support for individual freedoms, women's rights, and foreign investment. He has rejected the label "Islamist"—maintaining that Al Nahda is a "civil political party"—and is viewed by some observers as the "moderate" or "reformist" face of the party.<sup>55</sup>

- **Moncef Marzouki, President and Leader of the Congress for the Republic (CPR).** Born in 1945, Marzouki is a medical doctor, author, and longtime human rights activist. After receiving medical training in France, he taught medicine at the University of Sousse from 1981 to 2000, while pursuing human rights advocacy through the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH). In 2001, Marzouki founded the leftist, secularist CPR party on a platform of establishing the rule of law and promoting human rights. It was soon banned, leading Marzouki to a decade of exile and diaspora activism in France. While outside the country and during the electoral campaign, Marzouki signaled he was willing to forge common cause with Al Nahda, at times criticizing stringent secularists for being out of touch with ordinary Tunisians.<sup>56</sup>
- **Mustapha Ben Jaafar, President of the Constituent Assembly and Leader of Ettakatol.** Ben Jaafar, a medical doctor born in Tunis in 1940, founded the center-left, secularist Ettakatol party in 1994. It became one of three "dissent" opposition parties legally recognized under Ben Ali, which operated under significant restrictions. After receiving his medical degree in France, Ben Jaafar became engaged in political and human rights advocacy, including within the LTDH, while also serving on the medical faculty at the University of Tunis. Ben Jaafar has publicly expressed concern that the interim government of 2011 did not represent a significant enough break with the past, and that Ben Ali loyalists may continue to hold sway within various official structures.<sup>57</sup>
- **Ahmed Nejib el Chebbi, Founder of the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) and Member of the Constituent Assembly.** Chebbi formally stepped down from the leadership of the PDP, also a legal but repressed opposition party under Ben Ali, in favor of longtime party activist Maya Jribi in 2006, but he continues to be the party's most prominent figure. Chebbi has portrayed himself as the most vocally secularist alternative to Islamist parties, and he and Jribi are likely to lead a secularist/left-leaning opposition block in the Constituent Assembly. A former student activist for leftist and pan-Arabist causes and a lawyer by training, Chebbi was imprisoned in the 1960s. The party directs a Tunis-based newspaper, *El Mawkif*, and Chebbi provided legal defense for several journalists targeted by the Ben Ali government.

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<sup>55</sup> "Profile: Tunisian Ennahdha Prime Minister Candidate Hammadi Jebali," via OSC, October 28, 2011; *Al Arabiya*, "Tunisia's Hamadi Jebali: The Face of Moderate Islam?" November 18, 2011.

<sup>56</sup> *LePoint.fr*, "L'Opposant Historique Moncef Marzouki Va Devenir Président," November 21, 2011.

<sup>57</sup> *AFP*, "'Pour l'opinion, il n'y a pas eu de vraie rupture avec le passé' (Ben Jaafar)," September 22, 2011; CRS interview with Ben Jaafar, Tunis, October 2011.

- **General Rachid Ammar, Armed Forces Chief of Staff.** Ammar is widely reported to have refused orders to fire on protesters in January 2011, and to have subsequently influenced Ben Ali's decision to step down. In the immediate aftermath of Ben Ali's departure, Ammar enjoyed massive popularity, and the army continues to benefit from high public regard. On January 24, 2011, Ammar publicly addressed protesters, promising to uphold Tunisia's "revolution" and guarantee stability ahead of elections. His comments were welcomed by demonstrators, but sparked concern among some analysts over whether the armed forces would seek a political role. Ammar was made chief of staff of the 27,000-person army in 2002, when his predecessor was killed in a helicopter crash. In April 2011, he was promoted to chief of staff of the armed forces.
- **Rachid Ghannouchi, President and Co-Founder of Al Nahda.** An Islamic scholar, teacher, and activist, Ghannouchi, 70, has led Tunisia's main Islamist movement for three decades. Ghannouchi's early focus was on religious and moral issues, but he grew more politically active by the late 1970s. He spent two decades in exile, largely in London, after Al Nahda was banned in 1991, but returned to Tunisia in January 2011 following the interim government's announcement of a general amnesty. Ghannouchi has emphasized that Al Nahda's goal is to participate within a democratic political system and that the party will not attempt to turn back women's rights or other liberal aspects of Tunisian society. However, Tunisian secularists view him with suspicion. Ghannouchi has stated he will not run for president and that he will soon step down from the leadership of the party.

### **Background on Tunisia's Trade Unions**

Since Tunisia's independence, the labor movement has served as a rare legal conduit for expressing dissent, and the main union federation, the Tunisian General Union of Labor (UGTT), wields political clout. The UGTT, which claims over half a million members, played a key role in sustaining the "Jasmine Revolution" protests, which it framed as rooted in economic grievances.<sup>58</sup> Since Ben Ali's departure, however, the UGTT has suffered from internal fragmentation—notably between a more radical grassroots and a leadership that is seen by some as having been subject to cooption by the Ben Ali regime. New unions and splinter movements have recently been formed, which may compete with the UGTT for influence. Ongoing labor unrest has also sparked a backlash among some segments of the middle class. UGTT activists formed candidate lists in the October 2011 election under the banner of the Tunisian Labor Party (PTT), but did not win any seats.

The UGTT was organized in the mid-1940s and was a force in Tunisia's independence movement. During the Cold War, it positioned itself as pro-West (non-Communist) and formed links with the American labor movement.<sup>59</sup> Tunisia's first president, Habib Bourguiba, strove to keep the unions under the government's wing; during the 1960s, former UGTT leader Ahmed Ben Salah led a decade-long period of socialist-oriented economic policy as minister for finance and planning. By the late 1970s and into the mid-1980s, however, amid growing economic unease, the union's leadership turned to overt confrontation with the government, particularly over wages and food price inflation.<sup>60</sup> The UGTT led a series of strikes and demonstrations that were met with heavy state repression. During Ben Ali's presidency, the government again attempted to influence the UGTT, including by interfering in its leadership selection. The UGTT nevertheless was a key instigator of anti-government unrest in recent years, including protests in the mining region of Gafsa in 2008 and 2010 that were arguably a precursor to the "Jasmine Revolution" uprising.

<sup>58</sup> UGTT, *Déclaration de la Commission Administrative Nationale*, January 4, 2011; see also <http://www.ugtt.org.tn>.

<sup>59</sup> Global Security, "Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens (UGTT)," at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/tunisia/ugtt.htm>.

<sup>60</sup> See Niger Disney, "The Working-Class Revolt in Tunisia," Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP) Reports, 67 (May 1978).

## The Economy

Damage from the December 2010-January 2011 unrest, political uncertainty, turmoil in neighboring Libya (which caused the return of tens of thousands of migrant Tunisian workers and the related loss of remittance revenues), and economic crisis in Europe have contributed to severe economic difficulties. Tunisia experienced economic contraction in the first quarter of 2011, and its central bank has predicted 0% growth in 2011, compared to 3.7% growth in 2010. Tourism receipts were reportedly down by 40% and foreign direct investment by 60% in the first six months of 2011.<sup>61</sup> Ongoing labor unrest, particularly in the interior, including phosphate mining areas, represents an additional challenge, as do rising food and fuel prices and recent flooding. According to interim government estimates, up to 20% of the working-age population can't find work, and up to a quarter of them are university graduates.<sup>62</sup> The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has suggested that future economic growth is probable if reforms provide "greater access to opportunity and more competition." However, in October 2011 the IMF projected that the worsening global economic outlook would negatively affect Tunisia's growth prospects in the near future and warned of the potential for widening fiscal deficits due to social spending.<sup>63</sup> A significant challenge for post-Ben Ali authorities has been managing public expectations.

Officials have sought to encourage the return of tourists, garner donor support for economic stabilization, and reassure investors, with mixed effects. Under the interim government, then-Finance Minister Jaloul Ayed led efforts to respond to socioeconomic pressures, including through an increase in public sector hiring, new infrastructure construction in the interior, expanded access to microcredit for poor families, the encouragement of public-private partnerships, and social assistance programs for unemployed youth and others. Ayed appealed for \$4 billion in immediate foreign loans, while then-Prime Minister Caïd Essebsi stated in May 2011 that Tunisia would need at least \$5 billion in aid per year for five years to finance infrastructure and job creation.<sup>64</sup> Interim authorities also indicated that some assets seized from the Ben Ali family would be used as seed money for public-private development projects.

The interim government's economic proposals were formalized in the September 2011 release of a five-year "development strategy," dubbed the "Jasmine Plan," which was positively received by Western donors. It emphasized pursuing greater exports and foreign investment; fostering a larger role for the private sector in job creation; increasing public investment in infrastructure and education, with a focus on addressing regional inequalities; reviving privatization programs; and reducing public debt. The degree to which the Jasmine Plan will serve as a blueprint for economic policy under the Constituent Assembly is unclear. Al Nahda leaders have stated their support for private sector and foreign investment while calling for a more equal distribution of wealth.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> *AFP*, "Tunisie: Après le Retour au Calme, Place au Grand Chantier Economique," March 9, 2011; *Le Temps*, "Appel des 17 Pour Soutenir la Transition Démocratique en Tunisie," May 19, 2011; Mark Tran, "Tunisia Offers Wake-Up Call for Development," *The Guardian*, June 9, 2011.

<sup>62</sup> Peter Wonacott, "Tunisia's Leadership Faces Restive Unemployed," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 4, 2011.

<sup>63</sup> IMF, *Regional Economic Outlook: Middle East and Central Asia*, April 2011; *IMF Survey*, "Mideast Outlook Varies Markedly Across Regions," October 26, 2011.

<sup>64</sup> *AP*, "Tunisie: Adoption d'un Plan de Relance Economique," April 1, 2011; *Reuters*, "Tunisia Will Need \$4 Bln in Loans in 2011—FinMin," April 1, 2011; *Reuters*, "Tunisia Economy Needs Foreign Help to Recover—Minister," May 20, 2011; David Gauthier-Villars, "Tunisia to Seek Backing for Aid," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 21, 2011.

<sup>65</sup> CRS interviews with Al Nahda officials, Tunis, October 2011; *TAP*, "Hamadi Jebali: 'Les Hommes d'Affaires Partenaires dans la Prise de Décision,'" November 2, 2011.

During Ben Ali's presidency, many analysts contended that there was 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. Prior to the "Jasmine Revolution," this strategy appeared to have contained latent dissatisfaction from disrupting the political status quo. Tunisia is considered a middle-income country, and one of the best-performing non-oil exporting Arab countries. Home and car ownership are widespread. Despite the impact of the global economic crisis in 2009—which produced a decrease in exports, a contraction in the industrial sector, and a lower expansion in services, largely due to a decrease in market demand in Europe—the economy quickly rebounded in 2010 with fiscal stimulus programs.

Textile exports and tourism have driven much of Tunisia's economic growth in recent years. The tourism sector is a major employer and previously provided some 11% of the country's hard currency receipts, up to 7% of GDP, and an estimated 400,000 jobs. Tunisia has also attempted to attract foreign investment in its nascent oil and gas sector. Phosphate ore reserves are significant and are the basis of a chemicals industry, but their value is reduced by their low grade. In 2009, the World Bank cited Tunisia as a "top regional reformer," citing progress in the areas of starting a business, getting credit, protecting investors, paying taxes, and border defense.<sup>66</sup> In September 2010, the IMF predicted that Tunisia's growth could continue 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>67</sup> In 2009, public debt stood at roughly \$22 billion, or about 47% of gross domestic product (GDP), according to the World Bank.

Tunisia's strong economic record has long masked significant disparities. Wealth has long been concentrated in the capital and along the eastern coast, while the interior has suffered from poverty and government neglect. Unemployment and underemployment are major problems, notably for recent college graduates. According to the African Development Bank (AfDB), the unemployment rate among university graduates was over 20% in 2010 and "increased by a factor of ten over the last two decades" due to "the youth bulge, high throughput in universities, mismatch in the demand and supply of skilled workers, and the relatively low quality of training received by many graduates." Moreover, unemployment is over 22%, on average, in interior regions such as Kasserine and Gafsa, which were epicenters of the early 2011 unrest.<sup>68</sup> Blatant official corruption under Ben Ali reinforced many Tunisians' perceptions that the economic deck was stacked against them, even if they enjoyed relatively high living standards within the region.

In light of these issues, analysts have debated the role that economic factors played in the Tunisian uprising. While most agree that a desire for greater individual freedoms and "social justice" was a driving force in the protests, socioeconomic grievances doubtless spurred demands for change. Since then, numerous segments of the society have expressed demands for jobs, higher wages, and wealth distribution. Indeed, such calls have soared even as political unrest has contributed to severe economic contractions. Some observers fear that a failure to address such grievances could lead an impatient public to lose faith in the transition process.

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<sup>66</sup> See World Bank, "Tunisia: A Top Regional Reformer According to Doing Business 2009," September 2008.

<sup>67</sup> Joël Toujas-Bernate and Rina Bhattacharya, International Monetary Fund, "Tunisia Weathers Crisis Well, But Unemployment Persists," September 10, 2010.

<sup>68</sup> African Development Bank, *The Revolution in Tunisia: Economic Challenges and Prospects*, March 2011.

## Foreign Relations

Al Nahda officials and other political leaders have emphasized continuity in Tunisia's foreign relations, for instance regarding international agreements and commitments made under Ben Ali. Al Nahda leaders have stated that they wish to protect and expand foreign direct investment and international trade, including with traditional partners in the West. The party has also indicated a desire to cultivate closer economic ties with other Arab and Muslim states.<sup>69</sup> Rachid Ghannouchi's first foreign trip after the October elections was to Qatar, highlighting the potentially increased influence of Arab Gulf states in post-Ben Ali Tunisia. Relations with Turkey could also be bolstered. In September, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan visited Tunisia as the first stop on a regional tour of countries affected by democratic uprisings; his public remarks emphasized the compatibility of Islam and democracy.

## Israel and the Palestinians

Tunisians broadly sympathize with the Palestinians; Tunisia hosted the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) headquarters in exile from 1982 to 1993. 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. Under Ben Ali, Israeli and Tunisian foreign ministers sometimes met. 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. Israel's then-foreign minister, who was born in Tunisia, and then-communications minister attended the World Summit on the Information Society in Tunisia in 2005. (Then-Prime Minister Sharon was invited along with leaders of all U.N. member states; his invitation provoked demonstrations in Tunisia.)

Al Nahda leader Ghannouchi refers to Israel as an "occupying state," and has indicated that the creation of a Palestinian state is a prerequisite for discussing Tunisian-Israeli ties<sup>70</sup>; in November 2011, Al Nahda's secretary-general, Hamadi Jebali, hosted a public meeting with a Hamas official. At the same time, Al Nahda's position on Israel and the Palestinians does not appear to be very different from other political parties in Tunisia. Tunisia's interim foreign ministry—led by secularists—announced in September 2011 that it would support the Palestinians' bid for a U.N. recognition of statehood. Indeed, some domestic critics have accused Al Nahda of being too conciliatory toward Israel.<sup>71</sup>

## Europe

Tunisia and the European Union (EU) have cemented a close relationship by means of an Association Agreement, aid, and loans.<sup>72</sup> More than 60% of Tunisia's trade is conducted with

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<sup>69</sup> CRS interviews with Rachid Ghannouchi and Hamadi Jebali, Tunis, October 2011.

<sup>70</sup> CRS interviews with Rachid Ghannouchi and Hamadi Jebali, Tunis, October 2011; and Ghannouchi statements at the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED), November 30, 2011.

<sup>71</sup> E.g., *Al-Haqaiq* editorial on Ghannouchi and Israel, December 9, 2011.

<sup>72</sup> At the same time, EU leaders periodically expressed concerns over Tunisia's record on human rights and political freedom under Ben Ali.

Europe.<sup>73</sup> The Association Agreement, which was signed in 1995 and entered into force in 1998, 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 greater trade benefits, were restarted under the interim government.<sup>74</sup> Tunisia receives aid from the EU’s Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (MEDA) and soft loans from the European Investment Bank, the financing arm of the EU. Europeans hope that aid will help Tunisia’s economic growth and thereby reduce illegal immigration and Islamic fundamentalism.

EU officials have focused high-level attention on Tunisia’s political transition. The EU has imposed targeted sanctions against individuals associated with the former regime and has promised new economic, trade, and governance assistance, while seeking to ensure that Tunisia’s previous commitments, such as the prevention of illegal emigration, will be maintained.<sup>75</sup> Relations with Italy were strained in February 2011 when thousands of Tunisian migrants began arriving by boat to Italy’s southern Lampedusa island; Tunisia rejected direct Italian intervention but indicated it would cooperate with Italy and the EU on stemming illicit population flows. Italy pledged over 200 million euros in aid and credit lines to help block departures and create jobs to dissuade potential migrants, and also provided Tunisia with maritime patrol equipment.<sup>76</sup>

Relations with France were strained over French support for Ben Ali, which was extended even as his security forces cracked down on pro-democracy protesters. French authorities have sought to ingratiate themselves with post-Ben Ali authorities by replacing the French ambassador to Tunisia, imposing an asset freeze on members of the Ben Ali family and associates, dispatching senior officials on state visits, and pledging new bilateral aid, in addition to supporting multilateral assistance.<sup>77</sup> French officials congratulated Al Nahda on its election victory, but only after two weeks had passed; suspicion of Islamists reportedly persists in French political circles.

## **Regional Relations**

Tunisia has generally sought cordial relations with its immediate neighbors, although Ben Ali’s entente with neighboring Libya’s Muammar al Qadhafi was strained. Although it declined to participate militarily in U.S. and NATO military operations in Libya, Tunisia’s interim government has been strongly supportive of the transition there. Tunisia’s interim government reportedly froze assets belonging to Qadhafi’s family, and recognized Libya’s Transitional National Council (TNC) on August 21.<sup>78</sup> Tunisian authorities hope that an end to turmoil in Libya will stabilize border areas and, eventually, produce an economic rebound that would allow Libya to reabsorb some of Tunisia’s low-skilled labor surplus. In December 2011, Al Nahda leader Ghannouchi participated in a TNC-led Libyan reconciliation and reconstruction forum.

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<sup>73</sup> World Trade Organization, *Tunisia Profile*, October 2010.

<sup>74</sup> Haykel Tlili, “Chômage: L’Union Européenne Prépare une Task Force pour la Tunisie,” *Le Temps*, August 23, 2011. 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>75</sup> While some migrants are Tunisian, many are Sub-Saharan Africans who traverse Tunisia in search of passage to Europe. Concerns over immigration have heightened with the flow of Libyans across the border and to southern Italy.

<sup>76</sup> *Reuters*, “Italy, Tunisia Sign Deal to Ease Migrant Crisis,” April 5, 2011.

<sup>77</sup> See G8 Summit, “The Deauville Partnership: Helping the Arab Countries in Their Transition to Free and Democratic Societies,” Deauville, May 27, 2011.

<sup>78</sup> The main political parties in Tunisia supported the interim government’s decision to recognize the CNT.

Algeria and Morocco have been publicly supportive of Tunisia's transition: Algeria has offered financial assistance, while Morocco and Tunisia signed a bilateral military cooperation agreement in May 2011. Tunisia is a member of the Arab Maghreb Union, established in 1989 by Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Libya, and Mauritania, though the organization is inactive due to tensions between Morocco and Algeria. Tunis is also the temporary headquarters location of the African Development Bank (AfDB), which receives significant financial support from the United States. It moved to Tunisia in 2005 due to unrest in Côte d'Ivoire, its permanent location.

## **U.S.-Tunisian Relations**

Obama Administration officials have expressed strong support for Tunisia's political transition and have emphasized Tunisia's role as an "important test case" for the region.<sup>79</sup> In a speech in May 2011 on U.S. policy toward Middle East, President Obama called on the United States "to show that America values the dignity of the street vendor in Tunisia more than the raw power of the dictator," and argued that Tunisia and Egypt "can set a strong example through free and fair elections, a vibrant civil society, accountable and effective democratic institutions, and responsible regional leadership."<sup>80</sup> U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice has stated that "it matters enormously to American national security and our national interests" that democratic transitions in Tunisia and Egypt "succeed."<sup>81</sup> A number of senior U.S. officials have visited Tunisia since Ben Ali's departure, including Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs William Joseph Burns and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.<sup>82</sup> Then-interim Prime Minister Caïd Essebsi visited Washington DC in October 2011, where he met with President Obama at the White House. In May 2011, President Obama and Caïd Essebsi had met on the sidelines of the Group of Eight (G8) summit, where they discussed Tunisia's democratic reforms.<sup>83</sup>

Regarding the October elections, U.S. officials repeatedly stated that they would work with the new government, whatever its ideological leanings. With regard to Islamist parties such as Al Nahda, Secretary Clinton stated that "what parties call themselves is less important to us than what they actually do."<sup>84</sup> On October 23, President Obama congratulated the Tunisian people and encouraged them to meet the challenges of "forming an interim government, drafting a new Constitution, and charting a democratic course that meets the aspirations of all Tunisians."<sup>85</sup>

The United States and Tunisia have enjoyed continuous relations since 1797. Tunisia was the site of significant battles during World War II, and was liberated by Allied forces in 1943 in Operation Torch. A U.S. cemetery and memorial near the ancient city of Carthage (outside Tunis) holds

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<sup>79</sup> House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing, "Developments in Egypt and Lebanon," February 10, 2011, Statement of James B. Steinberg, Deputy Secretary, Department of State.

<sup>80</sup> The White House, "Remarks by the President on the Middle East and Africa," May 19, 2011.

<sup>81</sup> "U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Rice Interviewed on CNN," May 19, 2011, transcript via *CQ*.

<sup>82</sup> Clinton expressed strong support for the Tunisian revolution and pressed for economic and political reforms. Her visit was protested by several hundred demonstrators in Tunis who said they opposed American "interference." John Thorne, "Hillary Clinton Visits Tunisia to Press for Reform," *The National*, March 18, 2011.

<sup>83</sup> "Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes and National Security Council Senior Director for European Affairs Liz Sherwood-Randall Hold Media Availability," May 27, 2011, via *CQ*.

<sup>84</sup> Bradley Klapper, "Championing Democracy, Clinton Says US Can Work with Islamist Parties Gaining from Arab Spring," November 8, 2011.

<sup>85</sup> Barack Obama, "Statement on Elections in Tunisia," October 23, 2011.

nearly 3,000 U.S. military dead. During the Cold War, Tunisia pursued a pro-Western foreign policy despite a brief experiment with leftist economic programs in the 1960s. Still, U.S.-Tunisian ties were strained by the 1985 Israeli bombing of the Palestinian Liberation Organization headquarters in Tunis, which some viewed as having been carried out with U.S. approval.<sup>86</sup>

Tunisia 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. U.S.-Tunisian relations during Ben Ali's presidency largely emphasized security cooperation. The United States considered Ben Ali to be an ally, a moderate Arab ruler, and a partner in international counterterrorism efforts. Allegations have been made that Tunisia cooperated in at least one case of U.S. "rendition" of a terrorist suspect, in 2004.<sup>87</sup> However, Tunisia did not support the 1991 Gulf War or the 2003 Iraq war.<sup>88</sup>

Despite generally positive bilateral ties with the Ben Ali regime, U.S. officials occasionally voiced public criticism of Tunisia's record on political rights, the conduct of elections, and freedom of expression.<sup>89</sup> Numerous international and regional news reports and analyses have referenced internal communications among U.S. diplomats that were reportedly 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 protests that eventually unseated Ben Ali.<sup>90</sup> In parallel with these criticisms, the United States continued to provide military and economic assistance to the Tunisian government.

U.S.-Tunisian trade is relatively low in volume because Tunisia is a small country and conducts most of its trade with Europe. In 2010, U.S. exports to Tunisia totaled \$571 million and imports totaled \$405 million; in 2009, exports totaled \$502 million and imports \$326 million. While Tunisian imports of U.S. goods did not fluctuate significantly due to the global economic recession, U.S. imports from Tunisia have yet to rebound to 2008 levels, when they totaled \$644 million.<sup>91</sup> Tunisia is eligible for special trade preferences, i.e., duty-free entry for listed products, under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) Program. A bilateral trade investment framework agreement (TIFA) was signed in 2002, and a bilateral investment treaty entered into force in 1993. TIFAs can be the first step toward a free-trade agreement (FTA). U.S. foreign direct investment (FDI) in Tunisia totaled \$220 million in 2009 (latest available).

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<sup>86</sup> Chicago Tribune Wires, "Bush Visits Tunisia to Patch Relations," March 9, 1986; Jonathan C. Randal, "Raid Left Scars on U.S.-Tunisia Ties," *The Washington Post*, March 5, 1987.

<sup>87</sup> U.N. Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms While Countering Terrorism*, Martin Scheinin, December 28, 2010, U.N. document A/HRC/16/51/Add.2.

<sup>88</sup> *Tunis Infotunisie*, "Ben Ali Expresses 'Deep Regret' at Start of War Against Iraq," March 20, 2003, Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) Document AFP20030320000266.

<sup>89</sup> See, e.g., U.S. State Department annual reports on human rights; State Department Daily News Briefing, October 26, 2009; U.S. State Department, "Secretary of State Clinton Delivers Remarks on Internet Freedom," January 21, 2010; U.S. State Department Daily Press Briefing, July 9, 2010.

<sup>90</sup> Christopher Alexander, "Tunisia's Protest Wave: Where It Comes From and What It Means," *ForeignPolicy.com*, January 3, 2011.

<sup>91</sup> U.S. International Trade Commission data, accessed at <http://dataweb.usitc.gov/scripts/query.asp>.



### U.S. Reactions to the January 2011 Uprising

U.S. criticism of the government's response to the January 2011 demonstrations was initially muted, but grew critical as protests mounted. On January 11, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said 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"; at the same time, she stressed that "we are not taking sides," and indicated that she had not been in direct communication with Tunisian authorities since the protests began.<sup>92</sup> In a speech in Doha, Qatar, on January 13, Secretary Clinton challenged Middle Eastern leaders to address the needs of their citizens and provide channels for popular participation, or else risk instability and extremism. Events in Tunisia provided a vivid backdrop to her remarks.

After Ben Ali's departure on January 14, President Barack Obama stated, "I applaud the courage and dignity of the Tunisian people," and called on the Tunisian government to hold "free and fair elections in the near future that reflect the true will and aspirations of the Tunisian people."<sup>93</sup> Secretary Clinton echoed the call for elections and encouraged "economic, social, and political reforms," adding that "the United States stands ready to help."<sup>94</sup> In his January 2011 State of the Union address, President Obama stated, "[W]e saw that same desire to be free in Tunisia, where the will of the people proved more powerful than the writ of a dictator.... The United States of America stands with the people of Tunisia and supports the democratic aspirations of all people."

Several Members of Congress expressed concerns that the United States appeared to lack sufficient intelligence on Middle East protest movements and their potential to upset governments in the region, concerns which executive branch officials have disputed.<sup>95</sup>

### U.S. Assistance

Prior to 2011, U.S. bilateral assistance was highly focused on military aid and counterterrorism cooperation. Since January 2011, the Obama Administration has identified a range of funding sources for providing support to Tunisia's unanticipated transition, notably including funds appropriated for other purposes that have been reallocated for Tunisia. Transitional assistance efforts have been led by the State Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), along with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and other agencies. MEPI has a regional office in Tunis, responsible for programming to enhance political, economic, and educational reforms in the region, but prior to 2011 implemented limited bilateral programs. In early September, the Administration named William B. Taylor to coordinate U.S. development and other civilian aid to transitional countries in the Middle East and North Africa.

The Administration in 2011 designated a total of roughly \$42 million in bilateral, non-military "transition support" for Tunisia (see **Table 1**).<sup>96</sup> This includes:

- Approximately \$23.3 million in "transition support" assistance administered by MEPI. This aid is aimed at helping Tunisia establish independent media, civil society, political parties, and a new electoral framework, and implement economic reforms.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>92</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)*.

<sup>93</sup> The White House, "Statement by the President on Events in Tunisia," January 14, 2011.

<sup>94</sup> U.S. State Department, "Recent Events in Tunisia," January 14, 2011.

<sup>95</sup> Testimony of Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, House Select Intelligence Committee Hearing on Worldwide Threats, February 10, 2011, via *CQ*.

<sup>96</sup> Figures based on CRS analysis of State Department and USAID congressional notifications, data provided to CRS by the State Department, and public statements by the Administration.

<sup>97</sup> State Department Congressional Notification Transmittal Sheets, March 11, 2011 and July 25, 2011. The MEPI funding, which is drawn from the Economic Support Fund (ESF) account, has largely come from funding appropriated (continued...)

- Approximately \$10 million in USAID-administered funding, including \$5 million in FY2010 Complex Crises Fund (CCF) funding, which is intended to support planned community development projects and political reforms in the interior and southeast, \$2 million for USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives, and \$3 million in support of the electoral process.<sup>98</sup>
- Just under \$3 million in International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) funds, provisionally allocated for police and justice sector reform initiatives.<sup>99</sup>

In addition, the Administration has indicated that it intends to initiate a Peace Corps program in Tunisia; consider the provision of a Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) "Threshold" grant; re-launch trade and investment talks under the 2002 U.S.-Tunisia Trade and Investment Framework Agreement; provide increased funding for academic and cultural exchanges; initiate negotiations on a possible "Open Skies" agreement on direct air links; and consider a range of additional technical assistance.<sup>100</sup> The U.S. Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) plans to offer regional financial support in the form of direct loans, guarantees, and political risk insurance, and is already supporting two Tunisian private equity firms that are focused on small and medium-size businesses. OPIC will also support visits by American business investors.<sup>101</sup> The Administration also supports the establishment of a Tunisian-American Enterprise Fund and the provision of U.S. loan guarantees, both of which require congressional authorization ("Congress and Aid to Tunisia," below).<sup>102</sup>

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(...continued)

in FY2010 for other purposes and reallocated for programs in Tunisia, subject to congressional notification. MEPI also plans to support partnerships between Tunisian civil society groups and U.S. technology companies to enhance information and communications capacity.

<sup>98</sup> USAID Congressional Notification, June 3, 2011; figures communicated to CRS by the State Department's Office of the Director of U.S. Foreign Assistance, September 2011.

<sup>99</sup> State Department Congressional Notification, July 25, 2011; State Department, FY2012 Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations.

<sup>100</sup> State Department, "Statement on U.S.-Tunisia Political and Economic Partnership," September 22, 2011; White House, "Fact Sheet: President Obama's Framework for Investing in Tunisia," October 7, 2011.

<sup>101</sup> State Department, "Secretary of State Clinton Delivers Remarks with Tunisia Foreign Minister Mouldi Kefi," March 17, 2011. Assistant Secretary of State Michael H. Posner has stated that OPIC would provide "up to \$2 billion in financial support for private-sector investments in the Middle East and North Africa." Statement before the House Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia, "Political Transitions in the Middle East," May 5, 2011.

<sup>102</sup> Testimony of William J. Burns before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearing on "U.S. Policy and Uprisings in the Middle East," March 17, 2011.

**Table I. Foreign Assistance to Tunisia, Selected Accounts**

(appropriations, thousands of current dollars)

	<b>FY2009</b>	<b>FY2010</b>	<b>FY2011 Est.</b>	<b>FY2012 Request</b>
FMF	12,000	18,000	17,124	4,900
ESF (Bilateral)	800	2,000	5,000	0
ESF (MEPI)	-	<i>18,324</i>	5,000	Not available
ESF (USAID non-bilateral)	-	830	0	Not available
IMET	1,700	1,945	1,950	1,675
INCLE	0	<i>1,427</i>	1,500	0
NADR	100	1,200	175	0
DCHA	-	<i>8,000</i>	2,000	Not available
IDA	-	-	100	Not available
Section 1206	8,800	0	20,900	Not available
<b>Total, above allocations</b>	<b>23,400</b>	<b>51,726</b>	<b>53,749</b>	<b>6,575</b>

**Notes:** FMF=Foreign Military Financing; ESF=Economic Support Funds; IMET=International Military Education and Training; INCLE=International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement; NADR=Non-Proliferation, Anti-Terrorism, Demining, and Related Programs; DCHA= Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance; IDA=International Disaster Assistance; Section 1206=Defense Department funds authorized for use in training and equipping foreign military forces for certain purposes.

**Items in italics** refer to funding appropriated in FY2010 for other countries and/or purposes, then reallocated for Tunisia in 2011. This chart does not reflect aid allocated under regional counterterrorism initiatives.

**Sources:** State Department Congressional Budget Justifications for Foreign Operations, FY2009-FY2012; communications from the State Department's Office of the Director of U.S. Foreign Assistance; Defense Department Congressional Notification; CRS Report RS22855, *Security Assistance Reform: "Section 1206" Background and Issues for Congress*, by Nina M. Serafino.

## Military Assistance

A U.S.-Tunisian Joint Military Commission meets annually and joint exercises are held regularly. The Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) reports that Tunisia relies on U.S. Foreign Military Financing (FMF) assistance to “maintain its aging 80s and early 90s era inventory of U.S.-origin equipment, which comprises nearly 70% of Tunisia’s total inventory.”<sup>103</sup> According to private sector analysis, the United States is Tunisia’s primary supplier of military equipment, largely purchased through Foreign Military Sales (FMS) agreements.<sup>104</sup> FMF and Defense Department-administered “Section 1206”<sup>105</sup> security assistance funds have also provided Tunisia with equipment for border and coastal security, which the United States views as a key area of

<sup>103</sup> Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), “Tunisia Summary,” updated January 13, 2011.

<sup>104</sup> Forecast International, *International Military Markets—Middle East & Africa*, “Tunisia: Section 3—Market Overview,” May 2009.

<sup>105</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.

counterterrorism prevention. 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 funds forfeited by Mauritania.<sup>106</sup> Tunisia has also been one of the top 20 recipients of International Military Education and Training (IMET) since FY1994.<sup>107</sup> In May 2011, General Carter Ham, commander of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), visited Tunisia on his first trip to North Africa since assuming the position in March.

In August 2011, the Department of Defense notified Congress of its plans to provide three new Section 1206 packages for Tunisia totaling \$20.9 million, which the Department said would "build the capacity of Tunisia's national military forces to conduct CT [counterterrorism] operations by providing equipment and training." The assistance is intended to provide maritime equipment, related operational training, land vehicles, and helicopter surveillance equipment.<sup>108</sup>

Tunisia is one of 10 countries participating in the U.S. Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP), an interagency regional program aimed at helping North and West African countries better control their territory, strengthen their counterterrorism capabilities, and cooperate regionally on security issues. The Defense Department allocated over \$13 million between FY2007 and FY2009 for TSCTP-related military cooperation with Tunisia, including bilateral and multinational exercises, regional conferences, and Joint-Combined Exchange Training programs conducted by U.S. special operations forces.<sup>109</sup> Defense Department funds have also been allocated for programs designed to counter violent extremist messages.

## **Multilateral Assistance**

Several multilateral institutions that receive significant U.S. financial support have pledged economic aid for Tunisia during its transition process. The World Bank and African Development Bank (AfDB) have each pledged \$500 million in budget support to Tunisia, which is aimed at providing emergency financial reserves while addressing regional disparities, reducing youth unemployment, and improving civil liberties and economic governance.<sup>110</sup> AfDB President Donald Kaberuka indicated in early June that there is an additional \$500 million in Tunisia aid "in the pipeline," which he hoped would be disbursed by year's end, while the World Bank said in May that it envisaged an additional \$1 billion.<sup>111</sup> The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), which also receives U.S. financial support, is considering extending aid to North African countries, potentially including Tunisia. In May 2011, G8 countries pledged \$20 billion in aid for Tunisia and Egypt over three years, to be disbursed via multilateral financial institutions.<sup>112</sup> French President Nicolas Sarkozy indicated that an additional \$10 billion would be provided by Gulf states, and another \$10 billion by the IMF.<sup>113</sup> In September, the G8 pledged an

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<sup>106</sup> This assistance is described as supporting the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP).

<sup>107</sup> DSCA, op. cit.

<sup>108</sup> Deputy Secretary of Defense, Congressional Notification, August 25, 2011.

<sup>109</sup> Funding figures provided to CRS by the State Department, 2010.

<sup>110</sup> African Development Bank (AfDB), "AfDB Supports Accountability in Tunisia," May 20, 2011.

<sup>111</sup> AfDB, "AfDB and Tunisia Formally Sign USD 500M Budget Support Accord at Annual Meetings," June 10, 2011; World Bank, "World Bank Group Announces Up to \$6 Billion for Egypt and Tunisia," May 30, 2011.

<sup>112</sup> Declaration of the G8 on the Arab Springs, Deauville, May 26-27, 2011 (released on May 27, 2011).

<sup>113</sup> Liz Alderman, "Group of 8 Pledges \$20 Billion Aid to Egypt and Tunisia," *The New York Times*, May 27, 2011.

additional \$38 billion in new aid to transitional countries in the region, although reports indicated that little of the previously promised funding had materialized.<sup>114</sup>

## **Congress and Aid to Tunisia**

Congress authorizes, appropriates, and oversees foreign assistance funding, and regularly authorizes arms sale proposals. There is a congressional Tunisia Caucus. Some Members of Congress have advocated new assistance to support Tunisia's transition to democracy and economic stabilization. Others contend that budgetary cuts take precedence over new assistance programs, or that economic stability in Tunisia and elsewhere is best addressed via private sector engagement and/or support from other donors. Some have additionally pointed to uncertainties over the current and prospective nature of Tunisia's government. The discussion regarding potential new assistance has proceeded amid larger federal budget debates and disagreements over funding priorities, including foreign aid. The FY2012 Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act (Division I, H.R. 2055) authorizes up to \$30 million in FY2011 Economic Support Fund (ESF) for the cost of loan guarantees for Tunisia, and authorizes and appropriates up to \$20 million in ESF for a U.S.-Tunisia Enterprise Fund aimed at promoting private sector investment and economic reforms.

Congress has been supportive of U.S. military assistance to Tunisia, including during the latter years of Ben Ali's presidency. In an explanatory statement accompanying P.L. 111-8, the Omnibus Appropriations Act, 2009 (enacted on March 11, 2009), appropriators directed the State Department to allocate \$12 million in FMF assistance for Tunisia, far more than the State Department's budget request for \$2.6 million. At the same time, appropriators wrote in the 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>115</sup> In the conference report accompanying P.L. 111-117, the FY2010 Consolidated Appropriations Act (enacted on December 16, 2009), appropriators directed the State Department to allocate \$18 million in FMF for Tunisia, \$3 million more than the requested amount. The conference report also allocated \$2 million in ESF—the amount requested—for "programs and activities in southern Tunisia and to promote respect for human rights."<sup>116</sup>

## **Outlook**

Tunisians face a wide range of questions regarding their country's future and that of the region. Recent events, including widening political contestation and unrest across the Middle East and North Africa, also raise potential issues for Congress pertaining to the oversight of U.S.-Tunisian bilateral relations, foreign assistance, and broader U.S. policy priorities in the Middle East.

Questions include the following.

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<sup>114</sup> Alderman, "G-8 Nations Pledge New Aid to Arab Spring Economies," *The New York Times*, September 11, 2011.

<sup>115</sup> *Congressional Record*, February 23, 2009, p. H2417.

<sup>116</sup> *Congressional Record*, December 8, 2009, p. H14350.

- To what extent is Tunisia a “test-case” for democratic transitions in the Middle East? To what extent is Tunisia a priority for U.S. policy in the region?
- What are the key issues in constitution drafting, and how will Tunisians seek to overcome strongly felt differences in policy preferences? Will the new constitution provide protections and equality for religious, ethnic, and political minorities? What will the new constitution say—if anything—regarding the relation between Islam and the state, women’s rights, government decentralization, and the ability of Salafist groups to participate in politics?
- What will the future Tunisian government and political order look like? Is a consensus among Islamist and secularist political factions possible? Will there be a free and independent press and civil society in Tunisia?
- Do continued protests and insecurity constitute significant threats? Do elements of the former regime continue to influence events in Tunisia? How will transitional authorities approach the question of reforming the security and domestic intelligence services?
- Which individuals and groups currently enjoy significant popular credibility in Tunisia, and what are their likely courses of action? What coalitions among political and interest groups are likely?
- What is the potential medium-term impact of recent events on foreign investment and economic growth in Tunisia and the region? What steps are being taken to promote economic growth and job creation, and to address socioeconomic grievances and regional economic disparities?
- What has been the impact of U.S. statements and actions, and what are the prospects for future U.S. influence on the evolution of events in Tunisia? How should the U.S. government shape its future foreign aid programs? What course of U.S. action is most likely to fulfill foreign policy and national security goals?

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## **Acknowledgments**

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