



CRS Report for Congress

Tunisia: Current Issues

Carol Migdalovitz
Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs
Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division

Summary

Tunisia has a stable, authoritarian government led by President Zine ben Ali, who was elected to a fourth term on October 24, 2004. Ben Ali's Constitutional Democratic Rally party controls parliament, state and local governments, and most political activity. There are significant limitations on human rights but marked advancements for women and girls. Tunisia has experienced occasional attacks by Islamist terrorists, and Tunisian expatriates have been arrested in Europe, North America on terrorism-related charges. Tunisia is a non-oil-exporting, middle-class country with a diverse, growing economy, and high unemployment. It has long enjoyed good relations with the United States. This report will be updated as developments warrant.

Government

Tunisia has a stable, authoritarian government that places a higher priority on economic growth than on political liberalization. It has had only two leaders since gaining independence from France in 1956: the late Habib Bourguiba and Zine el-Abidine ben Ali, a former Minister of National Security, Minister of the Interior, and Prime Minister, who has been president since 1987. Constitutional amendments approved in May 2002 lifted term limits for the presidency and raised the age allowed for a candidate to 75. The 68-year-old Ben Ali easily won a fourth five-year term with 94.49% of the vote, with a 91% voter turnout, on October 24, 2004. His Democratic Constitutional Rally party (Rassemblement Constitutionnel Democratique/RCD) has called on him to run for a fifth term in 2009. Three small "official" opposition parties also fielded candidates in 2004; other opposition parties endorsed Ben Ali. ("Official" opposition parties are those which the government allows to hold seats in parliament.) The powerful President appoints the Prime Minister, the cabinet, and 24 regional governors. There is no vice president or designated successor to Ben Ali. Mohammed Ghannouchi has been prime minister since 1999.

RCD controls the Chamber of Deputies or lower house of parliament with 152 out of 189 seats.¹ Five weak, official opposition parties share the remaining, reserved 37

¹ The RCD is the current incarnation of the Neo-Destour Party, which was formed in 1934 and (continued...)

seats. Two others are not represented in parliament. One of these, the Democratic Progressive Party (PDP), withdrew its candidates from the parliamentary elections, charging official “harassment,” including the rejection of candidate lists and the banning of its election manifesto, which criticized the regime and the President. Commenting on the 2004 elections, the U.S. State Department noted, “The ruling party’s domination of state institutions and political activity precluded credible and competitive electoral challenges from unsanctioned actors.” There are 43 women in parliament mainly due to Ben Ali’s decision to reserve 25% of the slots on the RCD parliamentary list for women. A referendum in 2002 created a Chamber of Advisors of 126 members: 85 elected by municipal councils, professional associations, and trade unions and 41 appointed by the president. Parliament does not originate legislation and passes government bills with minor or no changes.

Terrorism

The Tunisian government harshly suppressed what it considered to be a violent, domestic Islamist terrorist group, An-Nahdah (Renaissance), in 1991, after unearthing an alleged conspiracy. An-Nahdah denied the charge, and some analysts consider Rashid Ghannouchi, An-Nahdah’s leader in exile, to be a moderate seeking to accommodate Islam with democracy.²

The U.S. State Department considers the Tunisian Combatant Group (TCG), a terrorist group that seeks to establish an Islamic state in Tunisia, to be an offshoot of An-Nahdah. In 2002, it labeled TCG a group of concern and froze its assets.³ The TCG was suspected of plotting, but not carrying out, attacks on U.S., Algerian, and Tunisian embassies in Rome in December 2001. The Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), now known as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), actively recruits Tunisians and reportedly has ties with the TCG.⁴ In January 2007, in somewhat mysterious circumstances, Tunisian security forces claimed to have engaged in gun battles with terrorists linked to GSPC who had infiltrated from Algeria and possessed homemade explosives, blueprints of foreign embassies, and documents identifying foreign envoys. AQIM claimed responsibility for kidnaping two Austrian tourists in Tunisia in February 2008. Algerian and Tunisian authorities have arrested Tunisians along their border, going in both directions. Tunisians have fought with Al Qaeda in Iraq.

In 2002, Tunisian authorities convicted 34 persons (31 in absentia) of belonging to another alleged terrorist group linked to Al Qaeda — Al Jamaa wal Sunnah (idiomatically, the Followers of Tradition), who were accused of recruiting European-

¹ (...continued)

led the movement for independence.

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

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

⁴ Craig S. Smith, “Tunisia is Feared as New Islamist Base...,” *International Herald Tribune*, February 20, 2007. Note, GSPC renamed itself Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in January 2007.

based expatriate Tunisians to fight in Chechnya, Bosnia, and Afghanistan.⁵ Tunisian expatriates suspected of ties to Al Qaeda have been arrested in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Western Europe, and the United States. Some have been detained at the U.S. Naval Base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Tunisians, mainly residents of Italy, are on a U.N. Security Council Al Qaeda watch list. A Tunisian-Canadian who allegedly plotted acts against the United States was on U.S. alert lists issued in 2003 and 2004. In August 2005, Syria extradited to Tunisia 21 suspected Islamist extremists it had detained following clashes with security forces in June. In December 2006, Turkish authorities arrested a Tunisian suspected of helping Al Qaeda insurgents infiltrate into Iraq. In 2007, Tunisians were with the Al Qaeda-inspired, and perhaps linked, Fatah al Islam organization that fought and fell to the Lebanese army in the Nahr al Barid Palestinian refugee camp.

Al Qaeda deputy leader Ayman al-Zawahiri appeared to acknowledge an Al Qaeda presence in Tunisia in a taped message broadcast in October 2002. He seemed to claim responsibility for the bombing of a synagogue on the Tunisian island of Djerba in April 2002, in which 21 tourists, mainly Germans, were killed.⁶ France, Spain, Italy, and Germany arrested expatriate Tunisians for alleged involvement in the attack.

In December 2003, the Tunisian parliament passed a sweeping antiterrorism law. The U.S. State Department called it “a comprehensive law to ‘support the international effort to combat terrorism and money laundering,’” but critics said that it “makes the exercise of fundamental freedoms ... an expression of terrorism.”⁷

Human Rights

The Ben Ali regime uses the fear of an Islamist threat and the example of Islamist-fueled civil conflict in neighboring Algeria to justify its poor human rights record and failure to carry out political reforms. Ben Ali maintains that he is ushering in democratic reforms in a “measured way” so that religious extremists cannot take advantages of freedoms.⁸ Yet, most observers fail to see evidence of even a gradual reform program.

The U.S. State Department notes many human rights abuses in Tunisia. It observes significant limitations on citizens’ right to change their government and notes that local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have reported that security forces tortured and physically abused prisoners and detainees and arbitrarily arrested and detained individuals. The security forces acted with impunity sanctioned by high-ranking officials. Lengthy pretrial and incommunicado detention remained serious problems. The government infringed on citizens’ privacy rights and imposed severe restrictions on freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and association. It remained intolerant of public criticism and used intimidation, criminal investigations, the court system, arbitrary

⁵ “Assets of Tunisia Group Are Frozen,” *New York Times*, October 11, 2002.

⁶ “Al-Qaeda Deputy Leader Signals Involvement in Attacks,” *Financial Times*, October 10, 2002.

⁷ *Patterns of Global Terrorism, 2003*, and Member of Parliament Moktar Jallali, quoted by Jeremy Landor, “Washington’s Partner,” *Middle East International*, March 5, 2004, pp. 23-24.

⁸ “Tunisian President Says He Wants to Share Experience in Handling Islamic Extremism with Bush,” Associated Press, February 13, 2004.

arrests, residential restrictions, and travel controls to discourage human rights and opposition activists.⁹

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) lists President Ben Ali among the world's worst press freedom predators; its website is inaccessible in Tunisia. International human rights organizations claim that Tunisia's internet policies are among the most repressive: all internet cafes are state-controlled; authorities aggressively filter internet websites; President Ben Ali's family and friends control local internet service providers; and independent bloggers have been jailed. In November 2005, Tunisia hosted the U.N. World Summit on the Information Society in an effort to burnish its image, but its conduct had the opposite effect. Before the summit, local authorities closed the Association of Judges, which had called for a more independent judiciary, and prevented conferences of journalists and the League of Human Rights. They also beat a French correspondent who had reported on clashes between police and supporters of Tunisian hunger strikers. During the conclave, the European Union complained after plainclothes policemen physically prevented international NGOs from meeting and stopped the German ambassador from meeting with their representatives. The Swiss government complained after its delegation head's speech that referred to these events was censored. After the summit, Tunis banned the International Federation of Journalists' website.

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

Economy

Tunisia has been making a transition from a socialist to a market economy for about 20 years. It is considered a middle-class country, and one of the best-performing non-oil exporting Arab countries. Widespread home and car ownership support that characterization. Ben Ali's 2004 election manifesto called for diversification, that is, ending reliance on textiles, which have been a primary engine of economic growth, due to increased competition

Basic Facts

Population	10.2 million (2007 est.)
Gross Domestic Product Growth Rate	6.3% (2007 est.)
GDP per capita	\$7,500 (2007 est.)
Inflation rate	2.9% (2007 est.)
Unemployment rate	13.9% (2007 est.)
Exports	clothing, semi-finished goods, agricultural products
Imports	textiles, machinery and equipment, hydrocarbons,
Trading Partners	France, Italy, Germany Spain, Libya

Source: CIA, *The World Factbook*, March 6, 2008.

⁹ U.S. State Department, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, Tunisia*, released March 11, 2008.

from China; modernization by providing investment incentives to foreign businesses and passing legal reforms; liberalization with the coming free-trade zone with the EU; and privatization. Unemployment remains a major problem; the official rate is high and the unofficial rate is believed to be even higher.

Relations with the United States

The United States and Tunisia have enjoyed continuous relations since 1797. The Bush Administration considers Tunisia to be an important ally, a moderate Arab, Muslim state, and a partner in the global war on terror. However, Tunisia did not support the 1991 Gulf War or the 2003 war against Iraq. When the 2003 war began, Ben Ali expressed regret and fear that the conflict might destabilize the Middle East.¹⁰ Tunisian officials' criticism was not voiced directly at the United States and was circumspect, and their stance did not harm bilateral relations.

In FY2008, Tunisia received an estimated \$8.345 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF), \$992,000 in Economic Support Funds (ESF), \$1.713 million for International Military Education and Training (IMET), and \$198,000 for International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE). The Administration has requested \$2.262 million in FMF and \$1.7 million in IMET for FY2009. A U.S.-Tunisian Joint Military Commission meets annually and joint exercises are held regularly. Tunisia agreed to exempt U.S. military personnel from the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court. Tunisia is part of the U.S. Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), helping countries in the region better control their territory and strengthen their counterterrorism capabilities, cooperates in NATO's Operation Active Endeavor, providing counterterrorism surveillance in the Mediterranean, participates in NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue, and allows NATO ships to make port calls at Tunis.

Tunisia participates in the U.S. State Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI); a MEPI regional office, responsible for Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, and Morocco as well as Tunisia, opened in Tunis in August 2004. Yet, MEPI has run very few bilateral programs in Tunisia; many refuse to attend those because they oppose U.S. policies in the region.¹¹ Given the Administration's emphasis on building democracy in the Middle East, critics suggest that it may be sending mixed signals to Tunisia by aiding the military while not supporting democratizing elements. During President Ben Ali's visit to Washington in February 2004, Secretary of State Colin Powell expressed U.S. interest "in (Tunisia's) carrying on political reforms, media openness, and other issues," and President Bush publicly said that he would discuss with Ben Ali "the need to have a press corps that is vibrant and free, as well as an open political process." Ben Ali claimed to share the U.S. desire for "the establishment of states on the basis of democracy..." but preferred to emphasize the "strategic dimension" of the bilateral relationship.¹² During a February 2006 visit to the country, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld avoided human rights

¹⁰ "Ben Ali Expresses 'Deep Regret' at Start of War Against Iraq," *Tunis Infotunisie*, March 20, 2003, Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) Document AFP20030320000266.

¹¹ Vivienne Walt, *Tunisia: The Price of Prosperity*, Time.com, October 31, 2007.

¹² Remarks by President Bush, President of Tunisia before Meeting, U.S. Newswire, February 18, 2004.

issues and praised Tunisia as “a moderate Muslim nation that has been and is today providing very constructive leadership in the world.... The leadership here ... certainly in the presidency and in the other senior ministries are all people who have the courage to stand up and speak on behalf of moderation and against violence and against extremism.”¹³

U.S.-Tunisian trade is relatively low in volume because Tunisia is a small country and conducts most of its trade with Europe. In 2007, the United States imported \$448.4 million in goods from Tunisia and exported \$394.9 million in good to Tunisia.¹⁴ Tunisia is eligible for special trade preferences, that is, duty-free entry for listed products, under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) Program. The United States and Tunisia have a trade investment framework agreement (TIFA) and a bilateral investment treaty. TIFAs can be the first step toward a free-trade agreement (FTA); the Tunisian government has expressed interest in concluding an FTA with the United States.

Other Foreign Policy Issues

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

Tunisia and the EU have cemented a close relationship by means of an Association Agreement, aid, and loans. In 1996, Tunisia entered into an Association Agreement with the EU to remove all tariff and other trade barriers on most goods by 2008. As part of the agreement, the EU is assisting Tunisian businesses to prepare for global competition. More than 80% of Tunisia’s trade is conducted with Europe. Tunisia receives aid from the EU’s Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (MEDA) program and soft loans from the European Investment Bank, the financing arm of the EU. The Europeans hope that their aid will help Tunisia to progress economically, and thereby eliminate some causes of illegal immigration and Islamic fundamentalism. The EU and Tunisia have discussed additional cooperation to control illegal immigration and manage legal immigration flows, a subject that probably is of greater interest to Europe than to Tunisia. Aspiring for closer ties, Prime Minister Ghannouchi has said that Tunisia would like to secure an intermediate status between association and membership in the EU, and to seek a “more solid, more diversified, and more fruitful partnership.”¹⁵

¹³ Secretary Rumsfeld’s Press Availability in Tunisia, February 11, 2006.

¹⁴ U.S. International Trade Commission, [<http://dataweb.usitc.gov>].

¹⁵ “Tunisia Wants Special Status with European Union: Prime Minister,” *Agence France-Presse*, April 1, 2003.