



Political Transition in Tunisia

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Summary

On January 14, 2011, President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fled the country for Saudi Arabia following weeks of mounting anti-government protests. Tunisia's mass popular uprising, dubbed the "Jasmine Revolution," appears to have added momentum to anti-government and pro-reform sentiment in other countries across the region, and some policy makers view Tunisia as an important "test case" for democratic transitions elsewhere in the Middle East.

Ben Ali's departure was greeted by widespread euphoria within Tunisia. However, political instability, economic crisis, and insecurity are continuing challenges. On February 27, amid a resurgence in anti-government demonstrations, Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi (a holdover from Ben Ali's administration) stepped down and was replaced by Béji Caïd Essebsi, an elder statesman from the administration of the late founding President Habib Bourguiba. On March 3, the interim government announced a new transition "road map" that would entail the election on July 24 of a "National Constituent Assembly." The Assembly would, in turn, be charged with promulgating a new constitution ahead of expected presidential and parliamentary elections, which have not been scheduled. The protest movement has greeted the road map as a victory, but many questions remain concerning its implementation.

Until January, Ben Ali and his Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) party exerted near-total control over parliament, state and local governments, and most political activity. Tunisia has cultivated strong ties with France and the European Union, its largest trading partner, as well as with the United States. Despite many political and economic characteristics shared across the region, Tunisia exhibits a number of unique attributes: it has a relatively small territory, a large and highly educated middle class, and a long history of encouraging women's socioeconomic freedoms. Islamist parties were banned by Ben Ali, but some have now gained legal recognition.

Tunisia's unexpected and rapid 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 future role of Islamist and/or radical movements in the government and society; the role of the military and security services in steering political events; 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 funding for bilateral assistance and conducts oversight of U.S. policies toward Tunisia and the wider region.

U.S.-Tunisian relations have been highly focused on military assistance and counterterrorism. Some Members of Congress argue that new aid should be allocated for democracy promotion and economic recovery in Tunisia, while others contend that budgetary cuts take precedence over new aid programs, and that economic stabilization may be best addressed by the private sector or other donors. The Obama Administration has proposed \$20 million in "transition support" for Tunisia to be administered by the State Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), as well as financial support through the Overseas Private Investment Corporation. S. 618 (Kerry) would authorize the President to establish a Tunisian-American Enterprise Fund to promote private sector investment and better corporate governance. Congress has been supportive of security assistance programs in Tunisia in the past, directing the State Department to allocate levels of Foreign Military Financing (FMF) that surpassed executive branch budget requests.

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Recent Developments

New Prime Minister and Transition “Road Map”

On February 27, Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi (a holdover from the former regime) stepped down amid a resurgence of anti-government demonstrations. He was replaced by Béji Caïd Essebsi, an elder statesman from the administration of founding President Habib Bourguiba. Several other government ministers also announced their resignations, including the two last remaining holdovers from the former regime as well as two opposition party leaders. During the week, tens of thousands of protesters had rallied in Tunis to call for Ghannouchi’s dismissal and a new interim government. Some reportedly shouted, “We don’t want the friends of Ben Ali!”¹ The protests turned violent on February 26, and rioters attacked the Interior Ministry with knives and stones, according to news reports. Five protesters were reportedly killed and 16 security officers injured. In his first public appearance as prime minister, Essebsi stated that his priorities would be to address security, reverse the economic crisis, and “to restore the prestige of the state.”² His is Tunisia’s third interim government since Ben Ali’s departure on January 14, 2011.

On March 3, Interim President Fouad Mebazaa announced a new transition “road map,” in which Tunisians will vote on July 24 to select a “National Constituent Assembly.” The Assembly will, in turn, be responsible for promulgating a new constitution ahead of presidential and parliamentary elections, which have not been scheduled. The parliament, which was dominated by supporters of the former regime, voted on February 9 to allow Interim President Mebazaa to rule by decree and has since suspended its activities. Mebazaa is expected to step down after the July vote.³

On April 12, the members of the government’s High Commission on Political Reform adopted a new electoral law, pending Interim President Mebazaa’s signature, which is expected to serve as the framework for the July 2011 election. The law sets out a one-round voting system based on proportional representation, and includes a 50% reservation for women on party lists.⁴ Members of the government, regional governors, judges, and local officials cannot run as candidates unless they resign their posts. The law also bars former senior RCD officials (defined as those who occupied a “position of responsibility” in the Ben Ali government or who signed a petition supporting Ben Ali’s bid for the 2014 presidential election) from running.⁵

Interim authorities appear to be sincerely attempting to respond to the public’s demands for a transformation of the political system based on broad consultations, and the announcement of the transition road map was greeted as a victory by the protest movement. However, many questions remain concerning its implementation. These include the duration, mandate, authorities, and mode of operation of the Constituent Assembly once it is elected. As discussed below (“Reform Efforts”), debates over the implementation of reforms continue. Another central challenge facing

¹ *Reuters*, “Tunisia Forces Fire in Air, Fail to End Rally,” February 20, 2011.

² Tarek Amara, “Tunisian Interim PM to Appoint New Government,” *Reuters*, March 4, 2011.

³ CRS communications with Tunisian government representative, April 2011.

⁴ Previously, Tunisia had a 25% female reservation requirement for party lists in parliamentary elections. According to news reports, the women’s representation provision was supported by the main Islamist party, Al Nahda.

⁵ *TAP*, “Decree-Law on Constituent Assembly’s Election Adopted,” April 12, 2011.

Tunisia's interim government is how to assert control over the size and mandate of the domestic security services, which formed a vast and repressive network under Ben Ali, without sowing the seeds of future instability (see "The Security Forces," below). In late March, Interior Minister Ferhat Rajhi, who had been seen as a popular reformist in the interim government, was dismissed and replaced with Habib Essid, a longtime civil servant who served in the Interior Ministry under Ben Ali. The decision sparked controversy, as Essid was seen by some as too close to Ben Ali. Prime Minister Essebsi defended the appointment as "in the general interest" and disputed the idea that Essid "constitutes a symbol of the former regime," without further explanation.⁶

While the number of protesters in Tunis has declined since late February, public demonstrations over various issues remain common. Labor strikes and localized demonstrations over wages, quality of life issues, and access to land and jobs have also surged, and some have led to rioting and violence.⁷ Islamist groups have demonstrated for the repeal of secularist regulations (such as those barring women from wearing the headscarf in public buildings) and against prostitution (which, unusually for the region, is legal in Tunisia). Although ongoing protests are evidence that Tunisians are exploring new-found freedoms of expression and assembly, they have also led some to fear that vast and divided expectations could undermine Tunisia's ability to make steady process on institutional reforms.⁸ Mebazaa has appealed for "patience" from those demanding wage increases and better living conditions.⁹ Since Ben Ali's departure, the government's response to protests has been relatively tempered, with security forces largely relying on nonlethal crowd-control tactics, and the focus of security forces has turned toward containing disorder. However, in some instances, police have reportedly assaulted protesters and journalists.

Reform Efforts

Government officials have promised a range of reforms. Thousands of individuals identified as political prisoners have been released from prison, including over a thousand released under an amnesty decree approved on February 18, and prisons have been opened up to international human rights observers.¹⁰ Dozens of new political parties have been authorized. Many online restrictions have been lifted, and the media (along with citizen activists) are exploring vast new freedoms. The dismantling of the former regime's security apparatus is ongoing, and the Interior Ministry announced on March 7 that it was dissolving the State Security Division and other elements of the "political police." The number of affected personnel and their future status have not been made public. The former ruling party, the Rally for Constitutional Democracy (RCD), has been dissolved and its funds liquidated, and several former party officials and Ben Ali associates have been arrested.¹¹ As noted above, the electoral law is being significantly revised.

⁶ *Kapitalis*, "Caid Essebsi S'Explique sur la Nomination de Habib Essid," April 6, 2011; CRS communications with Tunisian government representative, April 2011.

⁷ Some rights advocates have accused members of the former regime's security apparatus of infiltrating demonstrations to provoke violence. See Eric Goldstein/Human Rights Watch, "Dismantling the Machinery of Oppression," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 16, 2011.

⁸ Soumaya Ghannoushi, "The Story of Tunisia Today," *The Guardian*, February 16, 2011.

⁹ *Reuters*, "Tunisia Struggles to Tame Revolutionary Spirit," February 15, 2011.

¹⁰ Analysts have pointed to the difficulty in distinguishing prisoners of conscience from suspects who may have been sentenced without due process, including under Tunisia's heavy-handed terrorism laws. Many former terrorist suspects have been released, but an unknown number, estimated at "a dozen" in one news report, continue to be detained. *Le Monde*, "Tunisie: Tous les Prisonniers Politiques Auraient Eté Libérés," March 2, 2011.

¹¹ *Agence Tunis Afrique Presse (TAP)*, "Former RCD Party SG Arrested," April 12, 2011; *TAP*, "Committal Order (continued...)"

The interim government has formed working committees to:

1. Advise on political and legal reforms;
2. Investigate recent human rights violations, including those committed by security forces during the December-January protests; and
3. Investigate corruption by the former ruling elite.

While broad propositions of political reform have been welcomed, Tunisians have struggled with how to resolve differences of opinion over reform priorities, the relative legitimacy of various leaders, and the details of implementation. A persistent question is whether the interim authorities have sufficient space and credibility to sell proposed reforms to the public, as political and civic factions regularly threaten to return to street demonstrations if their demands are not met. Some political parties have contested the electoral timetable contained in the transition roadmap, which they fear won't allow sufficient time to organize. One analyst recently noted that "the lack of revolutionary leadership and the late entry of the political parties into the revolution mean that there is no group able to negotiate political reforms in the revolution's name. Groups claiming to represent the people have been proliferating, yet they offer significantly different visions."¹²

The reform committees thus continue to face contestation over their membership, perceived representativeness, and mandate. For example, the work of the political reform commission was suspended twice, once due to disputes over its composition and the second time after members clashed with the chairman over whether to issue a statement condemning the appointment of the new Interior Minister in March.¹³ Some press freedom advocates have criticized a draft press law circulated by the political reform commission, which they say was drawn up without sufficient consultation with journalists. The work of the anti-corruption commission was suspended in March, pending challenges to its legal status, although investigations led by prosecutorial officials are ongoing.

The public prosecutor has announced an investigation into the financial and real estate holdings of Ben Ali; his wife, Leila Trabelsi; and selected family members. Members of the Ben Ali and Trabelsi families reportedly own or control many of the country's biggest companies, and are thought to have stashed away significant resources overseas.¹⁴ On January 26, the interim government issued an international arrest warrant through Interpol for Ben Ali, his wife Leila Trabelsi, and several close relatives who have fled the country.¹⁵ Dozens of extended family members have reportedly been arrested inside Tunisia since January; in March, a brother-in-law of the former president was convicted to two months in prison and a \$32 million fine for customs violations related to his clothing business.¹⁶ These efforts are perceived to be widely popular

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Against Former Minister Under Ben Ali Abderrahim Zouari," April 13, 2011; *AFP*, "Tunisie: Détention de Trois Proches Collaborateurs de Ben Ali," March 12, 2011.

¹² Asma Nouira, "Obstacles on the Path of Tunisia's Democratic Transformation," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Arab Reform Bulletin*, March 30, 2011.

¹³ *AFP*, "Tunisia's New Electoral Chief Threatens to Resign," March 30, 2011.

¹⁴ Colin Freeman, "Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and His Family's 'Mafia Rule,'" *The Telegraph* (UK), January 16, 2011.

¹⁵ In mid-April, Tunisian prosecutors announced at least 18 charges against Ben Ali, including murder, conspiracy, trafficking, and drug use.

among ordinary Tunisians; in the days before Ben Ali's exit, protesters attacked and looted luxury homes belonging to members of the ruling elite. Individuals targeted in corruption probes have been restricted from foreign travel.

Western governments are cooperating with Tunisian efforts to pursue members of the former president's family: France, Switzerland, and the European Union have initiated asset freezes, while Canada has revoked the citizenship of Ben Ali's brother-in-law. It is unclear what position Saudi Arabia, which granted sanctuary to Ben Ali and some members of his family, will take; Tunisian authorities have sought his extradition to face charges related to the crackdown on protesters, so far unsuccessfully. On February 18, news reports alleged that Ben Ali was in a Saudi hospital after suffering a stroke.

Security Concerns

Although the security situation has stabilized relative to the chaotic days that immediately followed Ben Ali's departure, there continue to be reports of vandalism, looting, and activities by armed gangs. As noted above, anti-government protests turned violent on February 26 and culminated in an assault on the Interior Ministry building. Interim government officials blamed a previous attack on the Interior Ministry, on February 1, on a conspiracy by members of the former regime's security forces. Authorities are also struggling with the influx of tens of thousands of refugees from Libya, which has created a humanitarian crisis along the border.

The police leadership was purged following the February 1 attack. However, suspicions remain that elements of the security services are seeking to provoke disorder.¹⁷ The interim government has extended the "state of emergency" imposed by Ben Ali during the initial wave of protests (though its provisions barring the public assembly of more than three persons have not been enforced), and has called up military reservists to assist with security operations. Over 11,300 "delinquents" have been arrested since February 1, 2011, for looting, theft, destruction of property, drug trafficking, or "terrorizing civilians," according to the Interior Ministry.¹⁸

Incidents of religiously motivated violence have also been reported, including the murder of a Polish priest on February 18 and harassment directed at Tunisia's tiny Jewish population. These acts were condemned by the interim authorities and leaders of Tunisia's main Islamist movement, Hizb Al Nahda, as well as by hundreds of Tunisians who demonstrated on February 19 in favor of a secular state. The Interior Ministry stated that the priest's killing appeared to have been carried out by "extremist terrorist fascists," and that those responsible would be severely punished.¹⁹

Some analysts fear that Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), a regional affiliate of Al Qaeda (see "Terrorism," below), could take advantage of the uprising and subsequent insecurity. AQIM released a statement in January hailing the departure of Ben Ali and warning against

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¹⁶ *Reuters*, "Factbox—Tunisia's Ex-First Family and Its Vast Riches," January 19, 2011; *AP*, "Two Killed in New Protest Violence in Tunisia; Brother-in-Law of Ousted President Convicted," March 11, 2011; *Reuters*, "Ben Ali Brother Arrested in Tunisia: Report," April 10, 2011.

¹⁷ Tara Bahrapour, "In Tunisia, First Steps Toward Democracy," *The Washington Post*, March 21, 2011.

¹⁸ *AP*, "Tunisie: Arrestations de Plus de 11.300 Délinquants Ayant 'Terrorisé' la Population," April 12, 2011.

¹⁹ Bouazza Ben Bouazza, "Tunisia: Government, Islamist Party Condemn Grisly Slaying of Catholic Priest," *The Associated Press (AP)*, February 19, 2011.

supposed U.S. and French efforts to subvert the revolution. Al Qaeda's second-in-command, Ayman Al Zawahri, also released a statement that sought to portray uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt as motivated by Islamist sentiment and warned that the United States would seek to manipulate the outcomes.²⁰

Tunisia's "Jasmine Revolution"

President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, in power since 1987, fled the country for Saudi Arabia on January 14, 2011, following weeks of mounting anti-government protests. Tunisia's popular uprising, dubbed the "Jasmine Revolution," appears to have inspired reform and opposition movements in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Jordan, Algeria, and other countries. The pro-democracy movement has been internationally heralded, but the wave of protests across the Middle East has also sparked international concern over stability in a region associated with previously secure, autocratic, pro-Western regimes.

The unexpected and rapid transition in Tunisia raises a wide range of questions for the future of the country and the region. Questions for U.S. policy include:

- 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?
- How, if at all, should the U.S. government reshape its assistance programs for Tunisia in response to recent and continuing events?
- What has been the impact to date of U.S. public statements and actions?
- What are the prospects for future U.S. influence on the evolution of events?
- What course of U.S. action will be most likely to fulfill foreign policy and national security goals?

Figure 1. Map of Tunisia



Source: Map Resources, adapted by CRS

²⁰ Maamoun Youssef, "Al-Qaida's No. 2 Incites Tunisians, Egyptians," *AP*, February 28, 2011.

The December-January Protests

Anti-government protests began in Tunisia's interior in mid-December 2010. Public demonstrations had previously been very rare in Tunisia, where state repression and the close surveillance of dissidents have traditionally been effective at curbing the expression of anti-government views. The demonstrations initially seemed to stem from discontent related to high unemployment, but quickly spiraled into an unprecedented popular challenge to Ben Ali's authoritarian regime. From the start, protesters appeared to lack a central leader and were not necessarily aligned with a pre-existing political or ideological movement.

Unrest was first reported on December 17 in the interior town of Sidi Bouzid, after a 26-year-old street vendor set himself on fire to protest police interference and a lack of economic opportunities. He died in early January in a Tunis hospital. By late December, the protests had spread to the nearby cities of Kasserine and Thala, as well as other urban centers. On January 12, riots erupted in the capital, Tunis. The military deployed to the streets and a national curfew was imposed. The following day, rioters ransacked a private home belonging to one of Ben Ali's wealthy relatives in the beach community of Hammamet, underscoring the deep antipathy many Tunisians felt toward members of the ruling elite. Authorities imposed a state of emergency on January 14, prohibiting gatherings of over three people and authorizing the use of force against "any suspect person who does not obey orders to stop."²¹

As the demonstrations mounted in early January, police repeatedly opened fire on crowds and arrested protesters, journalists, opposition party members, lawyers, and rights advocates. Some detainees were reportedly tortured.²² According to the United Nations, over 200 people were killed in the uprising.²³ On January 18, then-Prime Minister Ghannouchi said on television that he had instructed the security forces not to open fire on demonstrators, and promised that "all those who initiated this massacre, this carnage, will be brought to justice."²⁴ Interim President Mebazaa has referred to those who died in the uprising as "the martyrs of dignity and freedom," and three days of national mourning were held in their honor.²⁵ The government has also pledged to compensate victims' families.

Prior to his exile, Ben Ali offered a widening series of concessions on political and civil rights in an effort to stem the anti-government uprising. The president reshuffled his cabinet, replaced the governor of the Sidi Bouzid region and the interior minister, and promised 300,000 new jobs. At the same time, he initially maintained that police had used their weapons only in "legitimate defense" against attacks by demonstrators, and accused protest leaders of being foreign-influenced "extremists" and terrorists.²⁶ On January 13, Ben Ali gave an address on national television in which he pledged to step down when his term was up in 2014, to allow fresh parliamentary elections before then, and to end state censorship. However, these promises did not placate demonstrators, who continued to press for Ben Ali's immediate resignation and the dissolution of the ruling party.

Mohamed Ghannouchi, who had served as prime minister since 1999, initially assumed power in Ben Ali's absence. On January 15, Ghannouchi turned over the role of acting president to the speaker of parliament, Fouad Mebazaa, in line with constitutional prerogatives.²⁷ The first interim cabinet, which was announced on January 17, was immediately revealed to be unstable as members of the public accused opposition leaders and civil society members of being overly conciliatory to elements of the former regime. A day after being appointed, the trade union members of the interim government withdrew, along with an opposition party leader, and demonstrators called for the complete dissolution of Ben Ali's RCD party. Mebazaa, Ghannouchi, and other RCD members in the cabinet formally resigned from the party, but this did not bring an end to demonstrations. In late January, new waves of protesters streamed

²¹ Tunisia 7 Television, "Tunisian Authorities Declare State of Emergency," January 14, 2011, via Open Source Center.

²² *Reuters*, "Interview-UN Rights Boss Urges Tunisia to Probe Killings," January 13, 2011.

²³ As of February 1, the United Nations estimated that at least 219 people were killed, including 72 killed in prison fires.

²⁴ David D. Kirkpatrick, "Tunisia Unity Government Fractures," *The New York Times*, January 18, 2011.

²⁵ National Tunisian TV (Tunis), "Tunisian Acting President Promises to 'Protect Will of the People,'" January 19, 2011, via Open Source Center.

²⁶ *Global Insight*, "Unrest in Tunisia Highlights Underlying Troubles," January 7, 2011; *Agence France Presse (AFP)*, "Tunisia Leader Slams 'Terrorist Acts,' Pledges More Jobs," January 10, 2011.

²⁷ Article 57 of Tunisia's constitution states that "should the office of President of the Republic become vacant because of death, resignation, or absolute disability," the President of the Chamber of Deputies "shall immediately be vested with the functions of interim president of the republic for a period ranging from 45 to 60 days." The Article further stipulates that elections should be held during that time period to elect a new president for a five-year term, and that the interim president may not stand as a candidate.

into the capital from poorer, rural areas—including the town of Sidi Bouzid, where demonstrations first began—and organized a sit-in around the prime minister’s office. This pressure prompted the announcement of a new cabinet on January 27, which initially quieted anti-government unrest, until its resurgence in mid-February over Ghannouchi’s continuation as prime minister.

Relations with the United States

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 as part of Operation Torch. A U.S. cemetery and memorial near the ancient city of Carthage (outside Tunis) holds nearly 3,000 U.S. military dead. During the Cold War, Tunisia pursued a strongly pro-Western foreign policy despite a brief experiment with leftist economic policies in the 1960s. U.S.-Tunisian ties were nonetheless strained in the mid-1980s 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.²⁸

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. 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. Allegations have been made that Tunisia cooperated in at least one case of U.S. “rendition” of a terrorist suspect, in 2004.²⁹ However, Tunisia did not support the 1991 Gulf War or the 2003 war against Iraq and, when the 2003 war in Iraq began, Ben Ali expressed regret and fear that the conflict might destabilize the Middle East.³⁰ Tunisian officials’ criticism was not voiced directly at the United States, and their stance did not significantly harm bilateral relations.

Despite generally positive bilateral ties with the Ben Ali regime, U.S. officials occasionally publicly criticized Tunisia’s record on political rights and freedom of expression. The State Department was critical of the 2004 and 2009 elections and said the United States would continue to press for “political reform.”³¹ In a January 2010 speech on global Internet freedom, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton singled out Tunisia as one of five countries contributing to a “spike in threats to the free flow of information.”³² In July, the State Department expressed “deep” concern over “the decline in political freedoms, notably severe restrictions on freedom of expression in Tunisia,” particularly with regard to the sentencing of an independent journalist to four years in

²⁸ 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.

²⁹ 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.

³⁰ *Tunis Infotunisie*, “Ben Ali Expresses ‘Deep Regret’ at Start of War Against Iraq,” March 20, 2003, Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) Document AFP20030320000266.

³¹ U.S. State Department Daily News Briefing, October 26, 2009, via CQ; U.S. State Department, “Tunisia,” *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 2004*, released February 28, 2005.

³² U.S. State Department, “Secretary of State Clinton Delivers Remarks on Internet Freedom,” January 21, 2010; via CQ.

prison.³³ In parallel with these expressions of concern, the United States continued to provide military and economic assistance to the Tunisian government (see “U.S. Assistance,” below).

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 anti-government protests that eventually unseated Ben Ali.³⁴ The United States criticized Tunisia’s repression of the protesters, and since Ben Ali’s departure has conveyed support for the uprising and new interim government (see “The U.S. Response to Recent Events,” below).

In March 2011, Tunisia’s interim government, while not explicitly opposing U.S. and NATO military operations in Libya, stated that it would be “out of the question” for Tunisia to contribute militarily.³⁵ Tunisia reportedly froze assets belonging to family of Libyan leader Muammar al Qadhafi, and its overall stance does not appear to have harmed U.S. ties.

U.S.-Tunisian trade is relatively low in volume because Tunisia is a small country and conducts most of its trade with Europe. In 2009, the United States imported \$325.8 million in goods from Tunisia and exported \$502.1 million in goods to Tunisia. While Tunisian imports of U.S. goods did not fluctuate significantly due to the global economic recession, U.S. imports from Tunisia nearly halved between 2008 and 2009.³⁶ 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 U.S. Response to Recent Events

U.S. criticism of the government’s response to the December-January demonstrations, although initially muted, mounted as the protests grew. On January 7, the State Department released a statement relaying concern about the demonstrations and government Internet surveillance. The statement called on “all parties to show restraint as citizens exercise their right of public assembly” and noted that U.S. officials had “conveyed our views directly to the Tunisian government.”³⁷ In response, the Tunisian government summoned U.S. Ambassador Gordon Gray to protest the United States’ characterization of events.

On January 11, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in an interview with the Saudi-funded Arabic-language satellite television channel *Al Arabiya* that “we are worried, in general, about the unrest and the instability, and what seems to be the underlying concerns of the people who are protesting.”³⁸ At the same time, Clinton stressed that “we are not taking sides,” and indicated that

³³ U.S. State Department Daily Press Briefing, July 9, 2010. For further background on Boukadous’ sentencing, see Committee to Protect Journalists, “Tunisia Must Release Ailing Journalist on Hunger Strike,” October 21, 2010.

³⁴ Christopher Alexander, “Tunisia’s Protest Wave: Where It Comes From and What It Means,” *ForeignPolicy.com*, January 3, 2011.

³⁵ *Reuters*, “Tunisia Won’t Join Military Intervention in Libya,” March 18, 2011.

³⁶ U.S. International Trade Commission data.

³⁷ U.S. State Department, “Recent Protests and Website Hackings in Tunisia,” January 7, 2011.

³⁸ *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)*.

she had not been in direct communication with senior authorities since the protests began. In a speech in Doha, Qatar, on January 13, Secretary Clinton challenged Middle Eastern leaders to address the fundamental needs of their citizens and provide channels for popular participation, or else risk facing instability and extremism. Events in Tunisia provided a vivid backdrop to her remarks.

After Ben Ali's departure on January 14, President Barack Obama stated, "I condemn and deplore the use of violence against citizens peacefully voicing their opinion in Tunisia, and I applaud the courage and dignity of the Tunisian people." He also called on the Tunisian government to hold "free and fair elections in the near future that reflect the true will and aspirations of the Tunisian people."³⁹ Secretary Clinton echoed the president's call for elections and encouraged the Tunisian government to "build a stronger foundation for Tunisia's future with economic, social, and political reforms," adding that "the United States stands ready to help."⁴⁰ On January 22, the State Department announced it had revoked the diplomatic visas of former Tunisian government officials and their family members, who were no longer entitled to them.⁴¹ In his January 25 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.

In testimony on February 10 before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg noted that Tunisia would "serve as an important test case.... the people of the region are watching closely to see how Tunisia navigates the challenging transition to democratic governance." He added, "We fully support this effort," and listed free and fair elections, "vibrant" political parties, and free media as key ingredients in a successful transition.⁴²

The State Department has maintained close contact with interim authorities since Ben Ali's departure. On January 22, Secretary of State Clinton called then-Prime Minister Ghannouchi to express support for reforms.⁴³ From January 24 through January 26, the State Department's Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs, Jeffrey Feltman, traveled to Tunisia to meet with government officials, political party leaders, and civil society members. This was followed by a visit in late February by Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs William Joseph Burns. In mid-March, Hillary Clinton visited Tunisia and met with Mebazaa and other senior officials.⁴⁴

Several Members of Congress have 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.⁴⁵ Congressman Howard

³⁹ The White House, "Statement by the President on Events in Tunisia," January 14, 2011.

⁴⁰ U.S. State Department, "Recent Events in Tunisia," January 14, 2011.

⁴¹ U.S. Embassy, Tunisia, "Revocation of Diplomatic Visas," January 22, 2011.

⁴² House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing, "Developments in Egypt and Lebanon," February 10, 2011, Statement of James B. Steinberg, Deputy Secretary, Department of State.

⁴³ U.S. State Department, "Secretary Clinton's Call to Tunisian Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi," January 23, 2011.

⁴⁴ 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.

⁴⁵ Testimony of Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, House Select Intelligence Committee Hearing on (continued...)

Berman, the ranking Democrat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, has urged the executive branch to assist Tunisia's interim authorities in locating and seizing assets linked to the Ben Ali regime, as several other governments have pledged to do.⁴⁶ *The Wall Street Journal* reported on February 9 that U.S. investigators had opened a preliminary probe into assets controlled by Ben Ali and family members, though U.S. officials have not confirmed whether this is true.⁴⁷

U.S. Assistance

U.S. aid is modest by regional standards and has focused on military assistance and counterterrorism cooperation (**Table 1**, below), with small amounts allocated in FY2009 and FY2010 (\$300,000 and \$500,000, respectively) for "governing justly and democratically" programs.⁴⁸ The Obama Administration, which submitted its proposed FY2012 foreign assistance budget in early 2011, did not initially request any democracy and governance funding for Tunisia in FY2011 or FY2012, but the Administration currently intends to provide support through a range of potential funding sources. Deputy Secretary of State James B. Steinberg indicated in congressional testimony that "global democracy funds," the State Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), and the Complex Crises Fund could be vehicles for short-term assistance.⁴⁹ The Administration also supports S. 618 (Kerry), which would authorize the President to establish a Tunisian-American Enterprise Fund⁵⁰ (see "Congress and Bilateral Aid," below).

Administration assistance initiatives include the following:

- MEPI announced on March 22 that it would provide \$20 million in "transition support" assistance to help Tunisia establish independent media, civil society, political parties, a new electoral framework, and economic reforms. The funding would come from unspent money appropriated for other purposes, subject to congressional notification. MEPI will also support partnerships between Tunisian civil society groups and U.S. technology companies to enhance information and communications capacity.⁵¹
- The U.S. Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) plans to offer financial support in the form of direct loans, guarantees, and political risk insurance, and is already supporting two Tunisian private equity firms that are

(...continued)

Worldwide Threats, February 10, 2011, via *CQ*.

⁴⁶ Office of Congressman Berman, "Rep. Berman Urges Quick U.S. Action to Seize Stolen Tunisian Funds," February 8, 2011.

⁴⁷ Joseph Palazzolo, "FBI Probe to Target Tunisia's Ex-Leader," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 9, 2011.

⁴⁸ U.S. State Department, *Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations*, FY2011 and FY2012.

⁴⁹ House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing, "Developments in Egypt and Lebanon," February 10, 2011, Statement of James B. Steinberg, Deputy Secretary, Department of State.

⁵⁰ 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, via *CQ*.

⁵¹ State Department, "New Initiatives to Support Tunisia's Democratic Transition," March 22, 2011; Mary Beth Sheridan, "U.S. to Give \$20 Million to Help Tunisia's Fledgling Democracy," *The Washington Post*, March 23, 2011. As of early April, Senator Richard Lugar had placed a hold on the MEPI assistance package, citing concerns that it would involve re-programming funds originally intended to support scholarships. See Josh Rogin, "Lugar Holding Up State Department Funds for Tunisian Democracy," *The Cable*, April 6, 2011.

focused on small and medium-size businesses. OPIC will also support visits by American business investors.⁵²

- The Administration has also provided humanitarian aid in response to the massive influx of refugees from neighboring Libya.⁵³

MEPI has a regional office in Tunis, responsible for programming to enhance political, economic, and educational reforms in Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, and Morocco as well as Tunisia, but has implemented limited bilateral programs in Tunisia to date.

Table I. Bilateral Foreign Assistance to Tunisia, Selected Accounts

Annual and Supplemental Appropriations, \$ Thousands

	FY2008 Actual	FY2009 Actual	FY2010 Enacted	FY2011 Request	FY2012 Request
FMF	8,300	12,000	18,000	4,900	4,900
ESF	1,200	800	2,000	0	0
IMET	1,700	1,700	1,950	2,300	1,675
INCLE	198	0	0	0	0
NADR	100	425	200	Not Available	0
Section 1206	10,000	8,800	0	Not Available	Not Available
Total, above accounts	21,498	23,725	22,150	7,200	6,575

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; Section 1206=Defense Department funds authorized for use in training and equipping foreign military forces for certain purposes.

This table does not reflect assistance disbursed through accounts administered by agencies other than the State Department and USAID (other than Section 1206 funds), or through State Department- or USAID-administered regional accounts.

Source: State Department Congressional Budget Justifications for Foreign Operations, FY2009-FY2012; CRS Report RS22855, *Security Assistance Reform: "Section 1206" Background and Issues for Congress*, by Nina M. Serafino.

Security 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.”⁵⁴ According to private sector analysis, the United States is Tunisia’s primary supplier of military equipment,

⁵² U.S. State Department, “Secretary of State Clinton Delivers Remarks with Tunisia Foreign Minister Mouldi Kefi,” March 17, 2011, via *CQ*.

⁵³ U.S. State Department Daily News Briefing, February 28, 2011, via *CQ*.

⁵⁴ Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), “Tunisia Summary,” updated January 13, 2011.

largely purchased through Foreign Military Sales (FMS) agreements.⁵⁵ FMF and Defense Department-administered “Section 1206”⁵⁶ security assistance funds have also provided Tunisia with equipment for border and coastal security, which the United States views as a key area of counterterrorism prevention. Since 2003, this equipment has included helicopters, machine guns, body armor and helmets, parachutes, and night vision devices for sniper rifles. Other equipment has been provided through the State Department’s Peacekeeping Operations (PKO) account, with plans to procure seven Scan Eagle Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) with \$4.1 million in FY2008 PKO funds forfeited by Mauritania (which had been temporarily rendered ineligible for security assistance due to a military coup).⁵⁷ Tunisia has also been one of the top 20 recipients of International Military Education and Training (IMET) since FY1994.⁵⁸

Tunisia is one of 10 countries participating in the U.S. Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP), a State Department-led, interagency regional program aimed at helping North and West African countries better control their territory and strengthen their counterterrorism capabilities. 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, which are conducted by U.S. special operations forces.⁵⁹ This is in addition to Section 1206 funds allocated in FY2008 and FY2009, which supported the provision of equipment (as discussed above) and training related to counterterrorism.

Congress and Bilateral Aid

Congress authorizes, appropriates, and oversees foreign assistance funding and regularly authorizes arms sale proposals. There is also 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, and that economic stability in Tunisia and elsewhere is best addressed via private sector engagement and/or support from other donors. The discussion regarding potential new assistance has proceeded amid larger budgetary debates and disagreements over funding priorities. S. 618 (Kerry), introduced on March 17, 2011, would authorize the President to establish a Tunisian-American Enterprise Fund to promote private sector investment and improve corporate governance, among other aims.

Congress has been supportive of U.S. military assistance to Tunisia in recent years. 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 \$2.62 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

⁵⁵ Forecast International, *International Military Markets—Middle East & Africa*, “Tunisia: Section 3—Market Overview,” May 2009.

⁵⁶ 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.

⁵⁷ This assistance is described as supporting the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP).

⁵⁸ DSCA, op. cit.

⁵⁹ Funding figures provided to CRS by the State Department, 2010.

rights defenders are of concern and progress on these issues is necessary for the partnership between the United States and Tunisia to further strengthen.”⁶⁰ In the conference report accompanying P.L. 111-117, the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2010 (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 Economic Support Fund (ESF)—the amount requested—for “programs and activities in southern Tunisia and to promote respect for human rights, as proposed by the Senate.”⁶¹

Emerging Actors

As political uncertainty continues to characterize the situation in Tunisia, it is difficult to distinguish which groups and individuals have the ability and popular credibility to decisively influence events. Emerging contenders for influence include Tunisia’s trade union federation; the security forces; the “legal” opposition parties; and the formerly banned Islamist movement, which appears poised to re-enter the political sphere. Background on these entities is provided below. Other formerly banned groups include the Tunisian Workers’ Communist Party (PCOT), which was founded in the 1980s and operated clandestinely under Ben Ali, and the Congress for the Republic (CPR), led by Moncef Marzouki, who recently returned to Tunisia from exile and announced his intention to run for president. Further background on selected individuals is given in the “Profiles” text-box, below.

While Tunisia’s trade union federation and the banned Islamist movement have, at different times, constituted the main vehicles for the mass expression of anti-government dissent, the potential for either group to present a cohesive political vision is unclear. Both, along with registered political parties and leftist movements, have long been subject to government repression, harassment, and co-option. Although they have at times collaborated in organizing protests, as during a series of general strikes in the mid-1980s, their leaders reportedly view each other with suspicion.⁶²

The Trade Unions

Since Tunisia’s independence, the labor movement has served as a rare legal conduit for expressing dissent, and many analysts view the main union federation, the Tunisian General Union of Labor (UGTT), as an important political force. The UGTT, which claims over half a million members, reportedly played a key role in sustaining the December-January protests, which its leadership framed as rooted in economic grievances.⁶³

At the same time, the UGTT is highly fragmented, with a relatively conservative, pro-government leadership frequently diverging from its more radical middle-tier and grass-roots membership. This tension may explain the decision by three UGTT representatives to accept, then immediately

⁶⁰ *Congressional Record*, February 23, 2009, p. H2417.

⁶¹ *Congressional Record*, December 8, 2009, p. H14350.

⁶² Christopher Alexander, “Opportunities, Organizations, and Ideas: Islamists and Workers in Tunisia and Algeria,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 32 (2000).

⁶³ UGTT, *Déclaration de la Commission Administrative Nationale*, January 4, 2011; on membership, see the UGTT’s website, at [www.ugt.org.tn].

resign from, cabinet positions in the first transitional government. In early February, some UGTT members protested against UGTT head Abdesslem Jrad, whom they accused of being estranged from the union's base. New unions and splinter movements have also been formed, and labor unrest has continued, reportedly sparking a backlash among some segments of the middle class.

The UGTT was formed in the mid-1940s and was a force in Tunisia's independence movement. During the Cold War, it positioned itself as pro-Western (non-Communist) and formed links with the American labor movement.⁶⁴ Tunisia's first president, Habib Bourguiba (in power from 1956 through 1987), 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, however, amid growing economic unease, the union's leadership turned to overt confrontation with the government, particularly over grievances related to low wages and food price hikes.⁶⁵ The UGTT led a series of mass strikes and demonstrations—notably in 1978 and in the mid-1980s—which were met with heavy state repression. During Ben Ali's presidency, the government again attempted to co-opt the UGTT, including by influencing its leadership selection process. The UGTT resurged as a key instigator of anti-government unrest in recent years, organizing protests in the mining region of Gafsa in 2008 and 2010 that were the nearest precursor to the December-January uprising.

The Security Forces

Ben Ali's unexpected departure led analysts to examine the role and cohesion of Tunisia's security forces. There is a notable distinction between the internal security forces, elements of which were closely associated with Ben Ali, and the military, which receives fewer state resources and has been seen as relatively apolitical.⁶⁶ The government's initial, heavy-handed response to the December-January protests was led by the police, who opened fire on demonstrators and reportedly conducted other abuses.⁶⁷ The deployment of the military to the streets on January 12 turned out to be a turning point, and many analysts contend that military leaders subsequently played a key role in ending Ben Ali's presidency; General Rachid Ammar, the army chief of staff, is widely reported to have refused orders to open fire on demonstrators. On January 23, Ammar publicly addressed protesters and promised to safeguard Tunisia's "revolution."⁶⁸ While Ammar's comments were welcomed by many members of the public, they sparked concern among some observers over whether the armed forces could interfere in domestic politics, particularly if the security situation fails to stabilize.

⁶⁴ Global Security, "Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens (UGTT)," at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/tunisia/ugtt.htm>.

⁶⁵ See Niger Disney, "The Working-Class Revolt in Tunisia," Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP) Reports, 67 (May 1978).

⁶⁶ 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 role in the independence movement or in early state formation.

⁶⁷ Human Rights Watch, "Tunisia: Hold Police Accountable for Shootings," January 29, 2011.

⁶⁸ Issandr El Amrani, "Tunisia Diary: Ammar's Move?" *TheArabist.net*, January 24, 2011. As recently as 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.

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, such as Algeria (3.3%), Egypt (3.4%), Libya (3.9%), and Morocco (5%).⁶⁹ The armed forces are positioned largely against external threats, and also participate (to a limited extent) in multilateral peacekeeping missions. Civilian-led security services are primarily responsible for domestic security and have been accused of a wide range of abuses, including extrajudicial arrests, denial of due process, torture, and the mistreatment of detainees. While the exact number of domestic security agents is unknown, it is thought by some analysts to far exceed the number of military personnel and could be as high as 200,000.⁷⁰ Divisions between police commanders and the rank-and-file were exposed in the aftermath of Ben Ali's exit, as thousands of police officers held their own anti-government demonstration to distance themselves from the RCD and call for better working conditions.⁷¹

Members of the military have led efforts to stabilize the security situation in recent weeks, including by pursuing elements of the domestic security apparatus seen as loyal to the old regime. In the immediate aftermath of Ben Ali's departure, international media reports referenced violence by civilian-clothed "militias" seen as allied to the former president, whose identity and relationship to formal security structures remains unclear.⁷² On January 16, the government announced arrest warrants for the former head of presidential security, Ali Seriati, and several of his "accomplices," for allegedly plotting against the state.⁷³ The police leadership has also been purged, and on March 7, the Interior Ministry announced it was dissolving the State Security Division and other entities "akin to 'political police,'" according to the official news agency.⁷⁴ The number of affected personnel, and whether they will be permitted to retain their employment with the government, has not been made public. Efforts to assert control over the security situation are ongoing, and debate continues over the best way for interim authorities to alter the size and mandate of the domestic security services without leading to future instability.

Political Parties

A number of political parties were legally recognized under Ben Ali and participated in electoral politics. However, many of these—including those with the highest numbers of seats in the legislature after the RCD—were seen, in effect, as loyal offshoots of the ruling party, and hewed close to official government policies. Only three previously legal parties constitute the "dissident" opposition:

- the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), founded by Ahmed Nejjib El Chebbi;
- Ettajdid (a leftist, former Communist party), led by Ahmed Brahim; and

⁶⁹ CIA World Factbook; figures dated 2006.

⁷⁰ Eric Goldstein/Human Rights Watch, "Dismantling the Machinery of Oppression," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 16, 2011.

⁷¹ Hadeel Al-Shalchi, "Tunisia's Police Also Protest," *AP*, January 23, 2011.

⁷² Angelique Chrisafis, "Confusion, Fear and Horror in Tunisia as Old Regime's Militia Carries on the Fight," *The Guardian* (UK), January 17, 2011.

⁷³ David D. Kirkpatrick, "Military Backs New Leaders in Tunisia," *The New York Times*, January 16, 2011.

⁷⁴ *TAP*, "Interior Ministry Decides to Remove State Security Division," March 7, 2011.

- the Democratic Forum of Labor and Liberties (FDTL), led by Mustafa Ben Jaafar.

The PDP is thought to be the largest of these three parties, but the degree of popular support for any of them is difficult to gauge. Only Brahim's Ettajdid competed in the most recent presidential and parliamentary elections, in 2009; Ettajdid won three parliamentary seats but Brahim garnered less than 2% of the presidential vote. In the run-up to the 2009 election, Chebbi decided not to compete in order not to give the authorities what he termed "fake legitimacy"; his candidacy may not have been accepted, anyway, under Tunisia's restrictive electoral code.⁷⁵ The Constitutional Council rejected Ben Jaafar's candidacy because he allegedly had not been selected at least two years before the date of submission of his candidacy as required by a 2008 law. The FDTL was also barred from participating in the 2009 parliamentary campaign.

Tunisia's interim authorities have authorized dozens of new political parties, including the main Islamist movement (discussed below). The ideological cohesion and potential mass appeal of these new parties are as yet untested.

The Islamist Movement

The status of Islamist groups is the subject of ongoing debate among Tunisians, many of whom are proud of the country's secularist traditions. Thousands of suspected Islamists were detained during Ben Ali's presidency, during which time Islamist groups were banned and all signs of religious devotion were considered grounds for surveillance or prosecution under the 2003 anti-terrorism law (see "Terrorism," below). Some, as with other detainees, were reportedly tortured or disappeared in custody. A number of new Islamist groups have surfaced or been created since January and are vying for popular support; some have been denied political party recognition on the grounds that the 1988 party law forbids those based uniquely on religion. Some political liberalization steps undertaken by the interim government are controversial because they are considered to reflect Islamist preferences, such as Interior Ministry announcements that women may be pictured in a headscarf, and men in a beard, on their national identity cards.⁷⁶

Ben Ali routinely emphasized the threat of Islamist extremism in order to justify his authoritarian rule. Despite the number of detentions (which may have been amplified through questionable trial procedures), and apparent signs of growing personal religiosity among some segments of the population, the full extent of popular support for Islamist political platforms is unknown. Islamists did not play a prominent role in the protests that unseated Ben Ali, and some analysts believe Tunisia's relative prosperity, effective social services, and well-educated population weigh against the potential influence of radical Islamist movements. At the same time, movements that were repressed under the former regime may enjoy greater credibility in the post-Ben Ali era. When asked by a journalist whether the July 2011 vote might reveal "a country closer to Islamism than people think," Prime Minister Essebsi replied, "We will not authorize those who want to exploit freedom in order to crush it" but gave few further details.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Chebbi's candidacy reportedly did not fulfill Article 66 of Tunisia's electoral code, which stipulated that presidential candidates must be supported by at least thirty members of the legislature or municipal council chairs.

⁷⁶ *Le Monde*, "En Tunisie, Les Multiples Visages d'Un Islamisme Qui Réapparaît au Grand Jour," April 10, 2011.

⁷⁷ *Paris Marianne*, "Tunisia's Essebsi: Libyan Crisis a 'Domestic Matter' for Tunisians," March 23, 2011; via OSC.

The Islamist group thought to be Tunisia's largest is the formerly banned Hizb Al Nahda party, which is led by Rachid Ghannouchi. Ghannouchi, who was in exile (mostly in London) for the past two decades, returned to Tunisia on January 30 following the interim government's announcement of a general amnesty. Tunisia's interim authorities granted Al Nahda legal status as a political party in March 2011, and have included it (along with other parties) in the interim commission on political reforms. Ghannouchi has generally portrayed himself as a moderate who would participate in the political system and not seek to scale back women's rights, and has compared Al Nahda to Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP).⁷⁸ However, he espoused more radical rhetoric during confrontations with the government in the 1980s and early 1990s, and his return is reportedly viewed with some trepidation by some Tunisian secularists. Some activists in the movement are also thought to be relatively more extremist in their views. Ghannouchi has said he will not run for president and that he will step down before the end of the year, following which party members may elect a new leader.

Al Nahda was first formally organized as the Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI) in 1981—soon after multiparty politics were legalized by then-President Bourguiba—by Ghannouchi and Abdel Fattah Moro, who became the party's secretary-general. Although the MTI was relatively moderate compared to other Islamist groups in operation, it was viewed as the most popular and therefore the most significant threat to the government. Soon after the MTI applied for legal recognition as a political party, over 100 of its most prominent activists were arrested.⁷⁹ Clashes with the security forces (and with leftist groups) mounted, as the MTI organized mass demonstrations and protests on university campuses. In an effort to appease the movement, the government of Habib Bourguiba had its leaders released from jail in 1984, and in 1985 permitted the MTI to form a "cultural society," while continuing to reject its attempts to gain political party status.⁸⁰ MTI-orchestrated demonstrations nonetheless escalated and Ghannouchi was again arrested in early 1987 along with dozens of other party members. The unrest, combined with that orchestrated by trade unions, undermined popular support for Bourguiba's presidency and laid the groundwork for Ben Ali's palace coup in November 1987.⁸¹

Initially upon coming to power, Ben Ali promised greater pluralism and a dialogue with Islamist and other opposition groups. Hoping to gain legal recognition, the MTI changed its name to Hizb Al Nahda to comply with the 1988 law, which barred party names based on explicitly religious references. In the 1989 parliamentary elections, Al Nahda candidates were allowed to run as independents. However, when Al Nahda garnered a high level of support—15% of the national vote, 30% in Tunis, according to official statistics—Ben Ali denied the party legal status and initiated a crackdown targeting suspected Islamists. Ghannouchi left the country during this time.

Violent confrontations between the government and Al Nahda activists escalated, culminating in an alleged Islamist attack on a ruling party office in 1991. Al Nahda leaders condemned the attack and denied that those responsible belonged to their movement. Whether this was true or not, Ben

⁷⁸ 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 David D. Kirkpatrick, "Opposition in Tunisia Finds Chance for Rebirth," January 21, 2011; Lin Noueihed, "Analysis—What Role for the Islamists in the New Tunisia?" *Reuters*, January 22, 2011. For a sympathetic background on Ghannouchi's political and philosophical evolution, see Azzam S. Tamimi, *Rachid Ghannouchi: A Democrat within Islamism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

⁷⁹ Henry Munson Jr., "Islamic Revivalism in Morocco and Tunisia," *The Muslim World*, 76:3-4 (1986).

⁸⁰ Munson 1986, op. cit.

⁸¹ Jonathan Randal, "Tunisia at the Brink," *The Washington Post*, May 31, 1987.

Ali accused Al Nahda of plotting to violently overthrow the government and launched a campaign to eradicate the group and all signs of fundamentalist Islam. The government subsequently claimed it had unearthed an Islamist plot to assassinate Ben Ali and topple the government, and in 1992 Tunisian military courts convicted 265 Al Nahda members on charges of planning a coup. Al Nahda denied the accusations, and rights advocates criticized the case as biased and insufficiently protective of due process.⁸² Ghannouchi was sentenced in absentia.

⁸² Christopher Alexander, *Tunisia: Stability and Reform in the Modern Maghreb*, Routledge: New York, 2010.

Selected Profiles of Key Figures⁸³

Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Former President (See also “The Ben Ali Government (1987-January 2011),” below.)

Ben Ali, who left the country on January 14, 2011, and is now living in exile in Saudi Arabia, spent much of his career in intelligence and security. He assumed the presidency in November 1987 by sidelining ailing former President Habib Bourguiba, in what many observers viewed as a palace coup. Bourguiba had named Ben Ali interior minister in 1986 and promoted him to prime minister in October 1987, placing him in line for the presidential succession. Previously, Ben Ali had served as director of military security and head of the national security service. He reportedly played a key role in coordinating military and police crackdowns on trade union and Islamist unrest in the late 1970s and mid-1980s.⁸⁴ A military general, Ben Ali trained at France’s elite St. Cyr military academy and reportedly received intelligence and security training in the United States.⁸⁵ On February 18, news reports alleged that Ben Ali was in a Saudi hospital after suffering a stroke.

Béji Caïd Essebsi, Prime Minister

Essebsi, 84, was named interim prime minister on February 27 after then-Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi resigned. Ghannouchi had served in the position since 1999 and was originally appointed by Ben Ali; he was pushed to resign by growing numbers of demonstrators who objected to his continuation in office. Essebsi is a lawyer and was a close aide to Tunisia’s founding president, Habib Bourguiba. In the 1960s and early 1970s, he served in a variety of positions including interior minister and defense minister. In 1978, he joined the Movement of Democratic Socialists (MDS), an opposition party, before being reappointed to the cabinet as foreign minister in 1981. Essebsi was elected to parliament in 1989 and served until 1991.

Abdelkrim Zbidi, Minister of Defense

Zbidi, 60, was appointed defense minister in the cabinet reshuffle of January 27.⁸⁶ He replaced Ridha Grira, who was seen as too close to Ben Ali. Zbidi has a background in medicine. He received his medical degree from Lyon, France, and he previously served in several ministerial positions under Ben Ali, including as minister of public health (2001) and minister of research (1999-2000 and again in 2002). Zbidi also headed several government councils and committees on science and public health. In the early 1990s, prior to serving in the government, he worked for a time for the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Mouldi Kefi, Minister of Foreign Affairs

Kefi, 65, is Tunisia’s third foreign minister since Ben Ali’s departure. He was appointed on February 21, a week after his predecessor, Ahmed Ounaies (who had himself been appointed on January 27), quit amid public criticism that he had praised a French government minister seen as too close to Ben Ali. A career diplomat, Kefi entered the foreign service in 1967 and served in a variety of positions within the Foreign Ministry and in Prague, Berlin, and London. He was also Tunisia’s ambassador to Nigeria, Indonesia, and Russia. He has a master’s in philosophy from France.

Habib Essid, Minister of the Interior

Interim President Mebazaa appointed Essid Interior Minister in late March, replacing Ferhat Rejhi, who was dismissed for unclear reasons. Essid’s appointment was controversial, as Rejhi had been seen as a popular reformist within the interim government, while Essid was viewed by some as close to Ben Ali. Essid, 52, is an agricultural economist who has spent his entire career in government administration, mostly in agricultural and development policy but also as chief of staff in the Interior Ministry from 1997 to 2000. He reportedly has a masters degree in agricultural economics from the University of Minnesota.

Yadh Ben Achour, Head of the High Commission on Political Reform

Ben Achour is a Tunisian lawyer and legal scholar, the former head of the law faculty at the University of Tunis, and a member of the Institute for International Law. On January 17, then-Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi appointed him to head the entity responsible for legal and political reforms. The High Commission’s current mandate is to

⁸³ Drawn from international news articles, profiles compiled by BBC Monitoring and the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), political party websites, and other open-source documents.

⁸⁴ William G. Blair, “Strong Hand for Tunisia: Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali,” *The New York Times*, November 8, 1987.

⁸⁵ Edward Cody, “Tunisian President, ‘Senile,’ Is Removed by His Deputy; Habib Bourguiba’s 30-Year Rule Ends,” *The Washington Post*, November 8, 1987.

⁸⁶ Mr. Zbidi’s official biography is available on the website of Tunisia’s defense ministry: <http://www.defense.tn>.

reform Tunisia's electoral laws ahead of elections scheduled for July 2011 and to propose constitutional revisions that may be adopted after that date. In late March, the Commission's membership doubled in size, to roughly 130 members, in response to criticism that it was insufficiently representative; it now includes representatives from across the political spectrum and civil society, as well as legal and constitutional experts.

Ahmed Nejib El Chebbi, Founder of the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP)

Chebbi, who was appointed to the interim cabinet on January 17 (albeit in a minor role) but resigned on March 1, is a founding member of the PDP, one of three "dissident" opposition parties that were legally registered during Ben Ali's presidency. (Chebbi formally stepped down as PDP leader in 2006, but continues to represent the party.) Although Chebbi and the PDP boycotted the 2009 presidential and parliamentary elections, and his current popularity is untested, he is viewed by many observers as the most credible of the "legal" opposition figures, and potentially more credible than members of the opposition who left Tunisia for exile abroad.⁸⁷ In resigning from the interim government, Chebbi stated that he was protesting the Essebsi's appointment as prime minister and a government measure requiring cabinet ministers to abstain from running in the upcoming presidential elections. A former student activist for leftist and pan-Arabist causes, Chebbi was imprisoned for several years in the 1960s. He founded the Socialist Progressive Rally (RSP) in the 1980s, renaming it the PDP in 2001. A lawyer by training, Chebbi directs a Tunisian-based newspaper, *El Mawkif*, and provided legal defense for several journalists targeted by the Ben Ali government.⁸⁸

General Rachid Ammar, Army Chief of Staff

Ammar, 63, has been chief of staff of the 27,000-person army since 2002, when his predecessor was killed in a helicopter crash. French press reports indicate that he received at least a year of military training in France.⁸⁹ Ammar is widely reported to have refused to open fire on protesters during the December-January uprising, and to have subsequently influenced Ben Ali's decision to step down. Due to these reports, he currently enjoys a high level of popularity. On January 24, Ammar publicly addressed protesters, promising to uphold Tunisia's "revolution" and guarantee stability until elections are held. His comments sparked concern among some analysts over whether the armed forces, which were seen as relatively apolitical under Ben Ali, could become an arbiter of domestic politics.

Rachid Ghannouchi, Leader of Hizb Al Nahda (Renaissance)

A former Islamic scholar, teacher, and activist, Ghannouchi has led Tunisia's main Islamist movement for over three decades. He spent the last two in exile, largely in London, after his party, Al Nahda, was banned in 1991. Ghannouchi returned to Tunisia on January 30 following the interim government's announcement of a general amnesty. Ghannouchi has portrayed himself as a moderate who would participate within a democratic political system and not attempt to overturn women's rights. He espoused more radical rhetoric during confrontations with the government in the 1980s and early 1990s, and Tunisian secularists and some international observers view him with suspicion. He has stated he will not run for president.

Ghannouchi's early focus was on religious and moral issues, but he became increasingly politically radical by the late 1970s.⁹⁰ He was imprisoned several times in the 1980s after he co-founded Al Nahda's predecessor movement, the Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI), which clashed with the government of then-President Bourguiba. When Ben Ali came to power, he initially appeared to seek reconciliation with the Islamist movement; however, the president cracked down on Al Nahda after claiming to unearth an Islamist anti-government plot.

Moncef Marzouki, Advocate and Leader of the Congress for the Republic (CPR)

Born in 1945, Marzouki is a medical doctor, author, and human rights advocate who has been living in exile in France.⁹¹ He returned to Tunisia on January 18 and announced his intention to run for president. Marzouki trained as a doctor in France and taught at the medical school of Sousse before rising through the ranks the Tunisian League for Human Rights (LTDH), which was among the first independent human rights organizations in the Middle East.

(...continued)

⁸⁷ Al Jazeera English, "Ben Ali's Possible Successors," January 15, 2011.

⁸⁸ *France24.com*, "Ahmed Néjib Chebbi, l'Homme Qui Cherche à Rassembler l'Opposition," January 15, 2011.

⁸⁹ *Le Point*, "Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, un Saint-Cyrien Très Discret," January 18, 2011.

⁹⁰ Munson 1986, op. cit.

⁹¹ Marzouki's official biography is at [www.moncefmarzouki.com].

⁹² Abdelaziz Barrouhi, "LTDH : Ça Passe ou Ça Casse...", *Jeune Afrique*, October 6, 2010.

Marzouki was elected president of the LTDH in 1989. During the height of confrontation between the Ben Ali regime and Al Nahda, he criticized Islamist political thought as insufficiently protective of human rights, while also advocating on behalf of Islamists' civil liberties. He also criticized Iraq's 1991 invasion of Kuwait, which provoked a public backlash in Tunisia and elsewhere in the region. Marzouki was arrested several times during the 1990s, and the LTDH leadership was subsequently somewhat co-opted by the regime.⁹² In 2001, Marzouki founded the CPR party on a platform of establishing the rule of law and promoting human rights. It was banned the following year.

Abdesslem Jrad, Secretary-General of the Tunisian General Trade Union (UGTT)

Jrad has been involved in Tunisia's labor movement since the 1960s, and was imprisoned in 1978 amid a government crackdown on massive UGTT-led strikes. He became secretary-general of the UGTT, Tunisia's main union federation, in 2000 when the union's former leader was forced out over accusations of mismanagement. Jrad, who was seen as relatively conservative and conciliatory toward Ben Ali's government, was re-elected to his position during the UGTT convention of February 2002. In early February, dozens of UGTT members protested against Jrad, reportedly accusing the union's leadership of "betraying its base."

Background on Tunisia

Prior to the December-January demonstrations, Tunisia was viewed as having a stable, authoritarian government 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 whose political rise was tied to Tunisia's independence movement, and Ben Ali, a former minister of the interior and prime minister who became president in 1987.

While Tunisia shares many political and economic characteristics with neighboring countries, it also exhibits a number of unique attributes: a small territory, an ethnically homogenous population, a liberalized economy, a large and highly educated middle class, and a long history of encouraging women's socioeconomic freedoms. Tunisia's spending on education (7.2% of gross domestic product) is high by regional standards.⁹³ Arabic-speaking, Sunni Muslims make up the overwhelming majority of Tunisia's population, but its urban culture and elite reflect a strong European influence.⁹⁴ The population is young compared with developing countries, but its youth bulge is declining: 26% of the population was under 15 in 2007, compared

Tunisia at a Glance

Population: 10.6 million (2010 est.)
GDP Growth Rate: 3% (2009 est.)
Income Level: Lower Middle Income
Unemployment rate: 13.3% (2009 est.); reportedly much higher in the interior and among young people
Urbanization rate: 67% of the population (2008)
Life Expectancy: 76 years
Religion: Muslim 98%, Christian 1%, Jewish and other 1%
Literacy: 78% (2008)
Key Exports: clothing, semi-finished goods and textiles, agricultural products
Key Imports: textiles, machinery and equipment, hydrocarbons
Major Trading Partners: France, Italy, Germany, Libya, China, Spain
Female Labor Participation Rate (% of female population): 26%
Source: CIA, *The World Factbook*, January 3, 2011; World Bank, *World Development Indicators*

⁹³ CIA, *The World Factbook*, updated January 3, 2011.

⁹⁴ Christopher Alexander, *Tunisia: Stability and Reform*, op. cit.

to 37% in 1990.⁹⁵ An estimated 700,000 Tunisians (nearly 7% of the population) reside abroad, mainly in Europe.

The legal and socioeconomic status of women in Tunisia is one of its particularities. Tunisia 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.

Despite its apparent prosperity, Tunisia has long exhibited a vast divide between rural and urban areas, and particularly between the developed, tourist-friendly coast and the far poorer interior. At least half of the population lives in Tunis and coastal towns, and there is population drift toward these areas.⁹⁶ Anti-government demonstrations, in particular those rooted in labor and economic grievances, have often originated in the dispossessed interior (which includes hardscrabble mining areas)—as did the unrest that unseated Ben Ali.

Tunisia's first president, Habib Bourguiba, was a stringently secularist and nationalist independence leader who has been compared to Turkey's Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in terms of his modernizing influence. He is credited with promoting women's rights and with starting a tradition of providing effective government services. He attempted to moderate the influence of Islam on daily life, and famously tried to convince Tunisians not to practice the Ramadan fast by drinking a glass of orange juice live on national television.⁹⁷ However, he also stifled political liberalization: he maintained a monolithic political system controlled by his Socialist Destourian Party (the successor to his pro-independence, nationalist Neo-Destour Party; *destour* means constitution in Arabic) and proclaimed himself president-for-life. Confrontations with trade unions and the budding Islamist movement grew increasingly violent in the 1980s, leading to widespread civil unrest.

The Ben Ali Government (1987-January 2011)

Ben Ali became president in 1987 in what some viewed as a palace coup, sidelining the aging Bourguiba a month after being promoted to prime minister. He renamed the ruling party the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) and initially promised political reforms, abolishing the lifetime presidency and opening a process of "dialogue" with the opposition. The new president also ordered the release of thousands of political prisoners, allowed the legalization of new political parties, and relaxed the press laws. However, the 1989 parliamentary elections—in which Al Nahda candidates, running as independents, won 15% of the national vote, surprising the ruling authorities—were a turning point. As tensions between the government and the Islamist movement heightened, Ben Ali attempted to eradicate Al Nahda and instituted tighter political controls. Similar tensions between Islamists and government forces drove neighboring Algeria into civil war in the early 1990s. Tunisia's repression of Islamists came at the cost of an increasingly authoritarian political system.

⁹⁵ EIU, *Tunisia: Country Profile*, 2008.

⁹⁶ EIU, *Tunisia: Country Profile*, 2008.

⁹⁷ On early interactions between Bourguiba and the Islamist movement, see Norma Salem, *Habib Bourguiba, Islam and the Creation of Tunisia*, Croom Helm: UK, 1984.

Ben Ali cultivated the domestic security services and the RCD as his power base. The government banned some potential challengers and restricted or co-opted others, including a handful of opposition parties, human rights organizations, unions, and other civil society entities. Ben Ali maintained that he was ushering in democratic reforms in a “measured way” so that religious extremists could not exploit freedoms.⁹⁸ Still, most observers saw no evidence of even a gradual reform program. Constitutional amendments approved in May 2002 lifted term limits for the presidency and raised the age allowed for a candidate to 75. Ben Ali easily won a fourth five-year term on October 24, 2004, with 94.49% of the vote and a 91% voter turnout. He won yet another term on October 25, 2009, with 89.62% of the vote and an 89.4% voter turnout. Even under the revised age limits, Ben Ali was not eligible to run again unless the constitution were revised once more.

Human Rights

Ben Ali effectively used the fear of an Islamist threat and the example of civil conflict in neighboring Algeria to systematically suppress human rights and fail to carry out political reforms. The government routinely infringed on citizens’ privacy rights and imposed severe restrictions on freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and association. It was intolerant of public criticism and used intimidation, criminal investigations, the court system, arbitrary arrests, residential restrictions, and travel controls to discourage human rights and opposition activists.⁹⁹ In a 2010 report, Amnesty International accused Tunisian authorities of “subverting” human rights organizations and other dissenting groups “by infiltrating them and provoking turmoil.”¹⁰⁰

The security services under Ben Ali were accused of a wide range of abuses, including torture. In June 2008, an Amnesty International report, *In the Name of Security: Routine Abuses in Tunisia*, detailed concerns “regarding serious human rights violations being committed in connection with the government’s security and counterterrorism policies.”

International media advocacy groups routinely cited Ben Ali’s government as one of the world’s most repressive toward freedom of expression.¹⁰¹ Journalists, bloggers, and dissidents were subject to surveillance, harassment, physical assault, and prison. All Internet cafes were state-controlled; authorities aggressively filtered Internet websites and reportedly conducted surveillance at Internet cafes. The current status of this censorship regime is in flux.

Emergence of Discontent

Although Ben Ali’s government was widely viewed as stable, signs of increasing public discontent emerged in recent years. These signs were often portrayed as economically motivated, although this may have been because the regime tolerated the limited vocalization of economic, but not political, grievances. In 2008, social unrest broke out in the impoverished mining region of Gafsa, where unemployment is particularly high. The government sent in the army to aid the

⁹⁸ AP, “Tunisian President Says He Wants to Share Experience in Handling Islamic Extremism with Bush,” February 13, 2004.

⁹⁹ U.S. State Department, “Tunisia,” *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 2009*, released March 11, 2010.

¹⁰⁰ Amnesty International, “Tunisia Urged to End Subversion of Groups Critical of the Authorities,” July 12, 2010.

¹⁰¹ See, e.g., Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Press Freedom “Predators,” updated May 3, 2010, at <http://en.rsff.org/predators,21.html>; Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), “10 Most Censored Countries,” May 2, 2006.

police, who were unable to contain the demonstrations. Some 38 people were imprisoned in connection with the protests on charges of forming a criminal group with the aim of destroying public and private property, armed rebellion, and assault on officials during the exercise of their duties. Unrest was again reported in Gafsa in early 2010.

In retrospect, the Gafsa riots have been interpreted by some analysts as a precursor to the December-January protests, which originated in the nearby town of Sidi Bouzid. Some have argued that the key difference was that in December 2010, images and reporting on the Sidi Bouzid unrest quickly emerged through social media and on Al Jazeera, which drew ever-wider groups of people into the demonstrations and made it more difficult for the government to suppress news of what was happening.

Terrorism

Tunisian authorities have emphasized terrorism as a potential domestic threat. The two most recent incidents were the 2002 bombing of a synagogue on the Tunisian island of Djerba (noted for its tiny Jewish population) and a series of gun 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.¹⁰² France, Spain, Italy, and Germany arrested expatriate Tunisians for alleged involvement in the attack. In January 2009, French authorities put two alleged culprits on trial. The roots of the 2006-2007 violence, in which 14 militants were reported killed, are much less clear.

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.¹⁰³ 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.

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), formerly known as the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), actively recruits Tunisians and reportedly had ties with the TCG.¹⁰⁴ In January 2007, following the aforementioned mentioned gun 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. Eastern Algeria is an AQIM/GSPC stronghold. Some 30 Tunisians were subsequently convicted of plotting to target U.S. and British interests in Tunisia. AQIM later claimed responsibility for kidnapping two Austrian tourists in Tunisia in February 2008. Algerian and Tunisian authorities have arrested Tunisians along their border, going in both directions.

¹⁰² *Financial Times*, "Al-Qaeda Deputy Leader Signals Involvement in Attacks," October 10, 2002.

¹⁰³ U.S. State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism, 2006*, released April 30, 2007.

¹⁰⁴ Craig S. Smith, "Tunisia is Feared as New Islamist Base..." *International Herald Tribune*, February 20, 2007. Note, GSPC renamed itself Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in January 2007. For further background on AQIM, see CRS Report R41070, *Al Qaeda and Affiliates: Historical Perspective, Global Presence, and Implications for U.S. Policy*, coordinated by John Rollins.

Tunisian expatriates suspected of ties to Al Qaeda have been arrested in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Western Europe, and the United States. Some are reportedly detained at the U.S. Naval Base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and their possible return to Tunisia has proven to be somewhat controversial.¹⁰⁵ On April 24, 2009, General David Petraeus, then-Commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), told a House Appropriations Committee subcommittee that the perpetrators of suicide bombings in Iraq that month may have been part of a network based in Tunisia.¹⁰⁶

In December 2003, the Tunisian parliament passed a sweeping anti-terrorism law. The U.S. State Department called it “a comprehensive law to ‘support the international effort to combat terrorism and money laundering.’”¹⁰⁷ Since passage of the law, as many as 2,000 Tunisians have been detained, charged, and/or convicted on terrorism-related charges.¹⁰⁸ Critics claim that the law “makes the exercise of fundamental freedoms ... an expression of terrorism.”¹⁰⁹ 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.”¹¹⁰ Rights advocates have also accused anti-terror trials of relying on excessive pretrial detention, denial of due process, and weak evidence. While the current interim government has promised to release all political prisoners, there is an ongoing debate about whether individuals convicted under the anti-terrorism law fall under this category, and many such detainees have not been released.

The Economy

During the presidency of Ben Ali, 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. Until the December-January protests, this strategy appeared to have contained latent disaffection 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. Unemployment and underemployment remain a major problem, however; the official unemployment rate is high (over 13%) and the unofficial rate is believed to be even higher, particularly among young people.

¹⁰⁵ An editorial in the *Orange Country Register* on November 16, 2008, stated, “In 2006, the U.S. sent two prisoners (from Guantanamo) to Tunisia with the explicit understanding that they would not be tortured or mistreated. The Tunisian government broke its promise and inflicted cruel treatment and kangaroo-court trials.” In May 2009, the United States asked Italy to receive two Tunisian detainees who objected to their return to Tunisia for fear that they would be subjected to torture. On May 26, 2009, the Tunisian Minister of Justice said that his government was prepared to receive another 10 Guantanamo detainees. Al Jazeera TV, “Tunisia asks US to Hand Over two Guantanamo Detainees,” May 29, 2009.

¹⁰⁶ *House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies Holds Hearing on the US Central Command*, April 24, 2009, transcript via CQ.

¹⁰⁷ U.S. State Department, *Patterns of Global Terrorism, 2003*, released April 29, 2004.

¹⁰⁸ U.S. State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism, 2009*, released August 5, 2010.

¹⁰⁹ Jeremy Landor, “Washington’s Partner,” *Middle East International*, March 5, 2004, pp. 23-24.

¹¹⁰ U.N. Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur*, December 28, 2010, op. cit.

The economic impact of the December-January protests is still being determined, as is the potential impact of perceived political instability. The protests themselves reportedly caused hundreds of millions of dollars in damages, and credit rating agencies have severely lowered Tunisia's ratings due to political uncertainty.¹¹¹ Government officials estimated, as of February 2011, that the political transition had caused total economic losses of over \$3.6 billion; tourism revenues were reportedly down by 45% in January and February compared to the previous year.¹¹² Government officials have sought to restart tourism, garner additional donor support for economic stabilization, and reassure investors by pledging greater economic transparency.¹¹³ Ongoing labor unrest represents an additional potential obstacle, though the main union federation, the UGTT, has expressed support for Prime Minister Essebsi's leadership. In April, Finance Minister Jalloul Ayed announced an "economic and social recovery plan" that aims to create 40,000 new jobs (through a combination of public sector hiring and pro-business measures), new infrastructure in the interior, access to microcredit for poor families, and a monthly stipend for unemployed young people. The finance minister also appealed for \$4 billion in foreign loans.¹¹⁴ The interim government has also moved to expropriate shares of companies controlled by certain Ben Ali family members and associates suspected of financial manipulation.¹¹⁵

Ben Ali's 2004 election manifesto called for diversification, that is, ending reliance on textiles (which have been a primary engine of economic growth), due to increased competition from China; modernization by providing investment incentives to foreign businesses and passing legal reforms; liberalization with an anticipated free-trade zone with the EU; and greater privatization. The textile sector has since shifted to higher quality goods. The tourism sector also has been emphasized; it is a major employer and earns some 11% of the country's hard currency receipts.¹¹⁶ 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.¹¹⁷

The European recession in 2009 affected the Tunisian economy, producing a decrease in exports, a contraction in the industrial sector, and a lower expansion in services. Tunisia's economy nevertheless fared relatively well given the severity of the global economic crisis, and the country did not experience a recession. The government responded to the economic setback with fiscal stimulus emphasizing development projects, the creation of more state jobs, and increases in state payrolls.¹¹⁸ In September 2010, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) projected that economic growth would reach 3.8% in 2010, after having slowed to 3% in 2009; the Fund predicted that Tunisia's growth could continue to increase gradually, "provided that policies and reforms

¹¹¹ *AFP*, "Fitch Downgrades Tunisia's Sovereign Debt," March 2, 2011; Maher Chmaytelli, "Tunisia Revolt Caused \$637 Million of Damage, Assabah Reports," *Bloomberg*, February 1, 2011; *Reuters*, "Moody's Cuts Tunisia Credit Rating, Could Lower it Further," January 19, 2011; Alyssa Rallis, "S&P Puts Tunisia on Credit Watch Negative Following Continued Unrest," *Global Insight*, January 19, 2011.

¹¹² *AFP*, "Tunisie: Après le Retour au Calme, Place au Grand Chantier Economique," March 9, 2011.

¹¹³ Paul Taylor, "Davos—Stay in Our Economy and Out of Our Politics—Tunisia," *Reuters*, January 29, 2011.

¹¹⁴ *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.

¹¹⁵ *Le Monde*, "Orange Tunisie Passe Sous la Tutelle de l'Etat Tunisien," March 30, 2011.

¹¹⁶ U.S. State Department, "Background Note: Tunisia," October 13, 2010.

¹¹⁷ EIU, *Tunisia: Country Profile*, 2008.

¹¹⁸ *TransArabia*, "Tunisia Continues Fiscal Stimulus in 2010 Budget," November 14, 2009.

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."¹¹⁹

Foreign Relations

Israel and the Palestinians

Tunisians broadly sympathize with the Palestinians; Tunisia hosted the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) headquarters in exile from 1982-1993 and still hosts some PLO offices today. Tunisia had an interests office in Israel until the outbreak of the second Palestinian *intifadah*, or uprising against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, in 2000. Israelis of Tunisian descent are allowed to travel to Tunisia on Israeli passports, and the Israeli and Tunisian foreign ministers sometimes meet. In September 2005, President Ben Ali sent a personal letter to then Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, praising his "courageous" withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. 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.) Tunisia's interim government has criticized Israeli efforts to encourage its tiny Jewish community to emigrate because of economic instability as "an attempt by Israel to tarnish the post-revolutionary image of Tunisia."¹²⁰

Europe

Tunisia and the European Union (EU) have cemented a close relationship by means of an Association Agreement, aid, and loans. More than 60% of Tunisia's trade is conducted with Europe.¹²¹ The Association Agreement, which was signed in 1995 and went into effect on January 1, 2008, eliminates customs tariffs and other trade barriers on manufactured goods, and provides for the establishment of an EU-Tunisia free trade area in goods, but not in agriculture or services. Negotiations on the provision of "advanced status" for Tunisia vis-à-vis the EU, which would provide even greater trade benefits, are ongoing.¹²² 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, an issue that probably is of greater interest to Europe than to Tunisia. At the same time, EU leaders periodically expressed concerns over Tunisia's record on human rights and political freedom under Ben Ali.¹²³

EU officials have focused high-level attention on Tunisia since Ben Ali's departure. The EU has promised new economic and governance assistance while seeking to ensure that Tunisia's

¹¹⁹ Joël Toujas-Bernate and Rina Bhattacharya, International Monetary Fund, "Tunisia Weathers Crisis Well, But Unemployment Persists," September 10, 2010.

¹²⁰ AP, "Tunisia Slams Israeli Efforts to Lure Tunisian Jews to Emigrate," March 28, 2011.

¹²¹ World Trade Organization, *Tunisia Profile*, October 2010.

¹²² See European Commission, EuropeAid Development and Cooperation, *Tunisia*, at http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/where/neighbourhood/country-cooperation/tunisia/tunisia_en.htm.

¹²³ See, e.g., AFP, "EU Calls for Release of Tunisian Protesters," January 10, 2011.

previous commitments, such as the prevention of illegal immigration to Europe, will be maintained under the new government. Relations with Italy were strained in mid-February 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 Europe on stemming illicit population flows. In early April, Tunisia and Italy agreed to increase police cooperation and ease compulsory repatriations. Italy also pledged over 200 million euros in aid and credit lines to help block departures and create jobs to dissuade potential migrants.¹²⁴

Relations with France have recently been strained due to French support for Ben Ali even as his security forces cracked down on pro-democracy protesters. During the last week of Ben Ali's presidency, France's then-Foreign Minister, Michèle Alliot-Marie, publicly suggested that France could help Tunisia control the protests, remarks for which she was widely criticized in both countries. (Alliot-Marie subsequently resigned under pressure related to her alleged ties to the Ben Ali regime.) Press reports additionally revealed that France had authorized shipments of tear-gas to Tunisia in December 2010.¹²⁵ French authorities have since sought to reassure the interim government by refusing to offer Ben Ali exile, replacing the French ambassador to Tunisia, and announcing an asset freeze targeting members of the Ben Ali family. On January 24, French President Nicolas Sarkozy stated that he had "underestimated" the Tunisian crisis. France has since promised new economic and humanitarian aid.

Regional Relations

Tunisia has sought cordial relations with its immediate neighbors, Algeria and Libya, and participates in Algerian-led regional counterterrorism. Relations with Libya were extremely strained in the 1980s, but patched under Ben Ali; they are again in flux amid the popular uprising that is threatening to unseat Libyan leader Muammar Al Qaddafi. Algeria and Morocco have been supportive of Tunisia's post-Ben Ali government, and Algeria has offered financial assistance. Tunisia participates in 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. Tunisia has free-trade agreements with Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Turkey, and Libya.¹²⁶ Tunis is also the temporary headquarters location of the African Development Bank (AfDB), which receives significant financial support from the United States. It was moved to Tunisia in 2005 due to civil unrest in Côte d'Ivoire, its permanent location.

Outlook

The unexpected and rapid turn of events in Tunisia raises a wide range of questions for the future of the country and the region. Recent events also raise potential issues for Congress pertaining to the oversight of U.S.-Tunisian bilateral relations and assistance, and to broader U.S. policy priorities in the Middle East. The latter category of issues has become more salient with the mass protest movement that is currently sweeping the Middle East and which appears to have been partly inspired by Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution.

¹²⁴ *Reuters*, "Italy, Tunisia Sign Deal to Ease Migrant Crisis," April 5, 2011.

¹²⁵ *Le Monde*, "La France a Autorisé, Fin 2010, Quatre Livraisons de Grenades Lacrymogènes à la Tunisie," January 27, 2011.

¹²⁶ EIU, *Tunisia: Country Profile*, 2008.

Questions include:

- Is Tunisia likely to experience political stability in the medium term, or do continued protests and persistent insecurity remain significant threats? Do Ben Ali and/or elements of the former regime continue to influence events in Tunisia?
- What are the prospects for genuine reform under the interim government? What is the potential for free and fair elections? What is the role of the military in steering political developments?
- What will the future Tunisian government and political order look like? What will be the nature and role of previously banned groups, such as Islamist and leftist political parties? Will there be a free and independent press and civil society in Tunisia?
- Which individuals and groups currently enjoy significant popular credibility in Tunisia, and what are their likely courses of action? Has Tunisians' experience of secular authoritarianism made the public more likely to place their trust in extremist groups?
- What is the potential impact of the unrest on foreign investment and economic growth in Tunisia and the region?
- What lessons are neighboring countries drawing from Tunisia's example, and how have these impressions been affected by "counter-examples" in countries such as Libya and Syria? What are the medium- to long-term implications for the region?
- What has been the impact to date of U.S. public statements and actions related to Tunisia, and what are the prospects for future U.S. influence on the evolution of events? How, if at all, should the U.S. government reshape its assistance programs for Tunisia in response to recent and continuing events? What position should the United States take vis-à-vis popular anti-government demonstrations in the region? What course of U.S. action will be most likely to fulfill foreign policy and national security goals?

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