



Political Transition in Tunisia

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Summary

On January 14, 2011, longtime President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali fled the country following weeks of mounting anti-government protests. Tunisia's mass popular uprising, dubbed the "Jasmine Revolution," sparked anti-government and pro-reform movements in other countries across the region, and some policy makers view Tunisia as a potential "test case" for democratic transitions in the Middle East.

Ben Ali's departure was greeted by widespread euphoria within Tunisia. However, disputes over reform priorities, political instability, economic crisis, labor unrest, tensions between the privileged coastal region and relatively impoverished interior, and lingering insecurity are continuing challenges, while the humanitarian impact of refugee flows from Libya presents additional difficulties. National elections are scheduled for October 23 to select a transitional "National Constituent Assembly." The Assembly will, in turn, be charged with promulgating a new constitution ahead of expected presidential and parliamentary elections, which have not yet been scheduled. Over 100 parties, most of them newly created, along with independents are competing for seats in the Assembly. However, the Constituent Assembly's timeline of existence, its mandate, and its decision-making process remain largely undetermined.

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 cultivated strong ties with France and the European Union, its largest trading partner, and with the United States. Despite many political and economic characteristics shared across the region, Tunisia exhibits a number of unique attributes: it has a relatively small territory, a sizable and highly educated middle class, and a long history of encouraging women's socioeconomic freedoms. These factors have led some analysts to state that Tunisia is the best placed country in the region to successfully undergo a democratic transition—and that conversely, if it can't, that this could have dire implications for other countries such as Egypt and Libya.

Tunisia's transition raises a wide range of questions for the future of the country and the region. These pertain to the struggle between reformists and entrenched forces carried over from the former regime; the potential shape of the new political order; the future role of Islamist movements in the government and society; the role of the security forces 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 foreign assistance funding and oversees U.S. foreign policy toward Tunisia and the wider region. U.S.-Tunisian relations were, prior to 2011, highly focused on military assistance and counterterrorism. The Obama Administration has proposed over \$33 million in newly allocated funding for the promotion of democracy, good governance, and economic reforms, in addition to economic support through the Overseas Private Investment Corporation. International financial institutions, which receive significant U.S. financial support, and the G8 have also pledged aid for Tunisia. Some Members of Congress argue that additional aid should be allocated for democracy promotion and economic recovery in Tunisia, while others contend that budgetary cuts take precedence over new aid programs, or that economic stabilization may be best addressed by the private sector or by other donors. Related draft bills include S. 618/ H.R. 2237 and S. 1388.

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Tunisia's "Jasmine Revolution"

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

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

On February 27, a more stable, if weak, interim government took shape under newly appointed Prime Minister Béji Caïd Essebsi, an elder statesman from the administration of founding President Habib Bourguiba. Essebsi replaced Mohamed Ghannouchi, who had served as Ben Ali's prime minister since 1999. Essebsi stated that his priorities would be to address security, reverse the economic crisis, and "to restore the prestige of the state."¹ The former speaker of parliament, Fouad Mebazaa, was named interim president on January 15, in line with constitutional prerogatives, and he remains in that role.² Attention is currently focused on national elections scheduled to take place in October.

Figure 1. Map of Tunisia



Source: Map Resources, adapted by CRS

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

² 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.

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.

Protests were 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. 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."³ Police repeatedly opened fire on crowds and arrested protesters, journalists, opposition party members, lawyers, and rights advocates, some of whom were reportedly abused in detention. Over 200 people were killed in the uprising.⁴

Prior to his exile, Ben Ali offered a widening series of concessions on political and civil rights in an effort to stem the unrest. On January 13, the president gave an address on national television in which he pledged to step down when his term was up in 2014, to allow fresh parliamentary elections before then, and to end state censorship. However, these promises did not placate demonstrators, who continued to press for Ben Ali's immediate resignation and the dissolution of the ruling party.

Background

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

While Tunisia shares many characteristics with neighboring countries, it also has a number of unique attributes: a small territory, a relatively homogenous population (despite tribal and ethnic divisions in some areas), a liberalized economy, a large and educated middle class, and a history of encouraging women's socioeconomic freedoms.⁵ Arabic-speaking Sunni Muslims make up the overwhelming majority of Tunisia's population, but its urban culture and elite reflect a strong European influence. The population is young compared with developed countries, but its youth bulge is declining.⁶ As many as a million Tunisians reside abroad, mainly in Europe.

³ Tunisia 7 Television, "Tunisian Authorities Declare State of Emergency," January 14, 2011, via Open Source Center.

⁴ As of February 1, the United Nations estimated that at least 219 people were killed, including 72 killed in prison fires. Interim government investigators stated in July that they had documented 238 protesters killed and 1,380 wounded, mostly by the security forces. Marie Colvin, "High Noon as Lawyer Closes in on Officials Behind Tunisia Killings," *The Sunday Times*, July 31, 2011.

⁵ Tunisia's spending on education (7.2% of gross domestic product) is high by regional standards. CIA, *The World Factbook*, updated January 3, 2011.

⁶ EIU, *Tunisia: Country Profile*, 2008.

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. Many Tunisians credit the country's relatively liberal personal status code, promulgated under founding President Bourguiba, for these advances.

Despite its apparent relative prosperity, Tunisia has long exhibited a 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.⁷ 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 at a Glance

Population: 10.63 million (July 2011 est.)
Income Level: Lower middle income
Urbanization rate: 67% of the population (2010)
Life Expectancy: 75 years (2011 est.)
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%
Sources: CIA, *The World Factbook*, September 2011; World Bank, *World Development Indicators*

Key Issues in the Transition

Nine months into Tunisia's transition from authoritarian rule, the country faces steep challenges. Interim government officials have embarked on a wide range of reforms, including the release of political prisoners, the authorization of dozens of new political parties, and the lifting of many online and media restrictions. The former ruling party, the RCD, has been dissolved and its funds liquidated, and a number of former party officials and Ben Ali associates and relatives have been arrested. Efforts to dismantle the former regime's security apparatus are ongoing. Authorities have announced their intention to adhere to international human rights treaties, including the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. Government activities are currently focused on preparing for national elections on October 23, which are expected to lead to a transitional government that will draft a new constitution.

Yet the interim government has struggled to maintain public trust, despite its apparent efforts to act in good faith. Many perceive the interim authorities as acting too slowly on reforms, and there is a lack of clarity over who, within the government, is empowered to make key decisions.⁸ These and other factors have contributed to some Tunisians' fears that former regime stalwarts could

⁷ EIU, *Tunisia: Country Profile*, 2008.

⁸ See, e.g., National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), *Imagining the Road Ahead: Citizen Attitudes About Tunisia and the Constituent Assembly Election Period*, July 2011; and Marina Ottaway, "Transitional Failure in Egypt and Tunisia," *National Interest*, August 10, 2011.

reemerge and consolidate power.⁹ Moreover, as one analyst noted, “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.”¹⁰

Despite some progress toward elections and other reforms, reports indicate widespread dissatisfaction and confusion over the transition process.¹¹ Moreover, tensions are burgeoning between representatives of the coastal elite and the disadvantaged interior, between Islamists and secularists, between the activist youth who led the uprising and the technocrats who run the interim government, and among political factions. As one longtime observer recently wrote, “economic stagnation, pent up social demands, and a combination of political and cultural tensions are generating deep suspicion and anxiety across the country.”¹²

At times, resurgent public demonstrations and sporadic riots have appeared to threaten the interim government’s ability to assert its authority, and some observers fear that vast and divided expectations could undermine Tunisia’s ability to make steady progress on institutional reforms.¹³ Since Ben Ali’s departure, the government’s response to protests has been relatively tempered, and the focus of security forces has turned toward containing disorder; however, in some instances, police have reportedly assaulted protesters and journalists. Public unrest has also sparked security concerns. In July, Prime Minister Essebsi accused rioters in Sidi Bouzid—where the protests that overthrew Ben Ali first originated—of trying to destabilize the country and derail elections, and in September, Essebsi stated that the government “will no longer tolerate practices that risk to paralyze the daily situation of Tunisians, such as road-blocks, attacks on police posts and regional sovereign establishments, and attacks on the national security forces and military.”¹⁴

Tunisians have wrestled over how to resolve differences of opinion over reform priorities, the relative legitimacy of various political actors, and the details of implementation. For example, the main Islamist party, Hizb al Nahda (alt: Ennahda/An-Nahda, “Renaissance”), withdrew from the interim government’s High Authority for the Realization of the Goals of the Revolution, Political Reforms, and the Democratic Transition (henceforth, the political reforms commission) in June, citing a lack of “popular legitimacy.”¹⁵ Al Nahda’s withdrawal, which was followed by the

⁹ OSC doc. GMP20110817950023, “Tunisian Politicians Unite Against Ben Ali’s Loyalists Making Comeback,” Al Jazeera, August 16, 2011; OSC doc. GMP20110914950028, “Ousted Tunisian Regime’s Loyalists Said Trying to Regain Media Control,” Al Jazeera, September 13, 2011.

¹⁰ Asma Nouira, “Obstacles on the Path of Tunisia’s Democratic Transformation,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Arab Reform Bulletin*, March 30, 2011.

¹¹ E.g., *Le Monde*, “Tunisie: L’Euphorie Est Partie,” June 15, 2011.

¹² Christopher Alexander, “Suspicion and Strategy in Free Tunisia,” *ForeignPolicy.com*, June 20, 2011.

¹³ E.g., Marina Ottaway, “Tunisia: The Revolution is Over, Can Reform Continue?” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 13, 2011. In May, for example, mass demonstrations erupted amid doubts over the interim government’s capacity and will to complete the next steps toward democracy, leading to violent clashes with the security forces and prompting the temporary reinstatement of a curfew. The unrest was spurred by remarks by former interim Interior Minister Farhat Rajhi—seen as a popular reformer, but relieved of his position in March—in which he accused elites of preparing a military coup should Islamists win the election. Interim authorities rejected Rajhi’s statement, which he subsequently retracted. Rajhi’s remarks, which he did not appear to have intended to be broadcast publicly, indirectly referenced the experience of Algeria, where parliamentary elections were canceled by the military in 1992 after Islamists appeared poised to gain a majority of seats, leading to a decade of civil war.

¹⁴ John Thorne, “Agitators ‘Derailing Elections’ in Tunisia, PM Claims,” *The National*, July 19, 2011; *Le Temps*, “Discours Martial de Béji Caïd Essebsi,” September 7, 2011 (CRS translation).

¹⁵ According to news reports, the party’s objections pertained to disagreements over attempts to limit campaign (continued...)

withdrawal of at least one other prominent political party and similar criticism by other members, underscored the difficulties inherent in attempting to channel reformist sentiment while accommodating disparate groups, and threatened to further undermine the interim government's ability to make decisions in the name of a broad political coalition.

The interim authorities have generally privileged election preparations over addressing profound socioeconomic grievances (beyond appealing for additional external financial support), which were among the motivating factors behind the January uprising. While some Tunisians appear to accept this trade-off, labor strikes and localized demonstrations over wages, quality of life issues, and access to land and jobs are frequent. Interim President Mebazaa has appealed for "patience" from those demanding better living conditions, while Prime Minister Essebsi in April denounced "daily protests and sit-ins that undermine the government's efforts to encourage foreign investment."¹⁶ Further unrest could result if the National Constituent Assembly is seen to defer consideration of socioeconomic issues until a post-transitional government is in place.

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

Elections

The organization of national elections is a key element of the transition process. The elections are expected to select a transitional, 218-seat "National Constituent Assembly," which will, in turn, be charged with drafting a new constitution and preparing for presidential and parliamentary elections.¹⁷ However, the duration, mandate, authorities, and mode of operation of the Assembly, once it is elected, remain undefined.

The potential stakes in the election are high: to determine which political actors may speak in the name of popular legitimacy, and to decide who will shape the new political order through the process of constitution-drafting. Yet reports indicate that the complexity of the transition process, and a lack of public understanding of the Constituent Assembly's role, have led to political apathy—an unanticipated reaction for a country in which pride in the "revolution" still holds considerable sway.¹⁸ Only 52% of estimated eligible voters registered to vote—although others will be able to vote using their national identity cards—and roughly one in three Tunisians

(...continued)

financing and over potential overtures to Israel.

¹⁶ *Reuters*, "Tunisia Struggles to Tame Revolutionary Spirit," February 15, 2011; *Agence France Press (AFP)*, "Tunisie: Le Premier Ministre Dénonce des Excès dans les Manifestations et l'Emigration," April 26, 2011.

¹⁷ The concept of electing a transitional government—instead of holding immediate presidential and/or legislative elections—was announced on March 3 by Interim President Fouad Mebazaa, and was initially greeted as a victory by Tunisia's protest movement. In making this decision, interim authorities appeared to be sincerely attempting to respond to the public's demands for a transformation of the political system based on broad consultations. 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.

¹⁸ U.S. Diplomatic Cable [UNCLASSIFIED], "Voter Registration Deadline Extended, Growing Frustration With Voter Apathy," August 1, 2011; Kaouther Larbi, "Tunisie: défiance ou myopie, la moitié des électeurs boudent l'inscription," *AFP*, August 14, 2011; Richard Valdmanis, "Confusion Reigns Ahead of Tunisia Vote," *Reuters*, September 7, 2011.

reported, two months ahead of election day, that they were undecided about whom to vote for.¹⁹ Nearly a third have indicated they would vote for “none” of the parties.²⁰

The independent electoral commission, known by the French acronym ISIE, is ostensibly the lead electoral management body. However, the ability to make key decisions on dates, logistics, and procurement is divided among the ISIE, several government ministries, and other entities, such as a “liaison committee” that answers to the Prime Minister.²¹ The ISIE is also reportedly internally divided. Some election experts have criticized the ISIE and interim government for a lack of transparency and of clarity on procedures. Furthermore, they note that the potential role of Interior Ministry officials in election management could be controversial.²²

In June, the election date was pushed back from July to October 23 due to logistical hurdles—including delays in passing a new electoral law; establishing an electoral commission; and commencing voter registration, poll worker training, and the procurement of election materials. The delay followed a series of contradictory announcements by Prime Minister Essebsi and ISIE head Kemal Jendoubi. Several prominent political parties initially strongly opposed a delay—including Al Nahda and the largest legal opposition party during the former regime, Nejib el Chebbi’s Progressive Democratic Party (PDP)—but they subsequently largely accepted it.

A new electoral law promulgated in May, which serves as the framework for the October election, sets out a one-round voting system based on proportional representation, and includes a “parity” reservation for women on the lists.²³ Tunisians in the diaspora will be able to vote. Regional governors, judges, and local officials cannot run as candidates unless they first resign their posts. The law also bars from candidacy certain senior officials of the former ruling party.²⁴ Over 100 political parties and a number of independent groupings are fielding candidates in the elections, resulting in nearly 10,000 candidates and over 1,600 party lists—a higher than expected number that could create logistical difficulties regarding ballots and counting.²⁵ The Carter Center, which is observing the election process, stated that “Tunisia’s voter registration process was conducted smoothly, but important operational challenges remain ... particularly the allocation of voters to polling stations and a campaign to disseminate voter information to the public.”²⁶ The formal campaign period begins on October 1. Efforts by the ISIE to ban public opinion surveys and political advertizing, starting on September 12, have been controversial.²⁷

¹⁹ Sigma Conseil, *Baromètre Politique*, Tunis, September 2011.

²⁰ State Department Office of Opinion Research, “Tunisians Up for Elections, But Down on Parties,” August 31, 2011.

²¹ International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), *Elections in Tunisia: The 2011 Constituent Assembly, Frequently Asked Questions*, July 2011.

²² CRS interviews with election experts, September 6-13, 2011.

²³ 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 Al Nahda.

²⁴ Art. 15 of Decree Law N. 35 on Election of the National Constituent Assembly, May 10, 2011; provided by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES). Senior officials are defined as those who occupied a “position of responsibility” in the government over the past ten years or who signed a petition supporting the former president’s 2014 re-election bid.

²⁵ Richard Cochrane, “Election 2011: Candidate Registration Completed as Tunisia Prepares for Election,” *IHS Global Insight*, September 13, 2011; CRS interview with election management expert, September 13, 2011.

²⁶ “The Carter Center Welcomes Completion of Tunisia’s Voter Registration; Highlights Additional Steps Needed to Ensure Successful Polling,” September 1, 2011.

²⁷ TunisieNews.com, “Les Partis Politiques Défient la Décision de l’ISIE et Poursuivent Leurs Compagnes Publicitaires,” September 12, 2011.

The Role of Islam in Politics

The relationships between Islam, Islamic practice, and the Tunisian state are likely to be a core area of disagreement and contestation for members of the National Constituent Assembly as it tries to draft a new constitution. The rapid liberalization of the political sphere since January has led to the legalization of Al Nahda, Tunisia's largest Islamist organization, which operated clandestinely and outside the country over the past two decades. Other Islamist groups have also proliferated (including some splinter factions of Al Nahda), and religiously conservative Salafist groups have expanded their activities and visibility.²⁸ Recent public opinion surveys place the level of support for Al Nahda around 20%, which (if accurate) would make it by far the most popular political party but still presumably reliant on coalition-building.²⁹ (The second most popular party appears to be Najib el Chebbi's PDP.) A significant additional percentage of Tunisians, while they may not plan to vote for Al Nahda, reportedly broadly desire Islam to play a more prominent role in public life.³⁰ However, very few indicate that they prefer an Islamic system of government.³¹

Most analysts argue that Tunisia's secular traditions, educated middle class, and history of promoting women's socioeconomic equality are bulwarks against extremism. Islamists and secularists have nonetheless grown increasingly polarized in recent months, potentially portending gridlock within the Constituent Assembly. Secular elites are particularly concerned with protecting Tunisia's personal status code, which protects some socioeconomic rights for women. Recent demonstrations by radical Islamist groups, including an assault by Salafists on individuals attending the screening of a secularist film in Tunis in late June, have sparked additional concerns.³² Al Nahda leaders, including founder and president Rachid Ghannouchi, have generally portrayed themselves as moderates who seek to participate in a democratic political system, support the separation of mosque and state, and would not scale back women's rights.³³ The movement's detractors, however, suspect it of a "double discourse," i.e., portraying a moderate face to the public and to international audiences in order to enter government and gradually introduce more conservative, restrictive laws and institutions.³⁴ On the other hand,

²⁸ See, e.g., *CTC Sentinel*, "The Rise of Salafists in Tunisia After the Fall of Ben Ali," August 1, 2011.

²⁹ See, e.g., Institut de Sondage et de Traitement de l'Information Statistique (ISTIS), "Sondage d'Opinion sur la Situation Politique et l'Impact de la Révolution sur les Média Presse," April 2011; OSC doc. GMP20110706966178, "Al Jazeera.net: Tunisians Undecided Ahead of October Vote," July 6, 2011; *AFP*, "Tunisie/Elections : 67% des Tunisiens Indécis, Ennahda (Islamistes) en Tête," July 6, 2011; Sigma Conseil, *Baromètre Politique*, September 2011.

³⁰ ISTIS, April 2011, op. cit.

³¹ State Department Office of Opinion Research, August 2011, op. cit.

³² Human Rights Watch, "Tunisia: Police Inaction Allowed Assault on Film Screening; Action Needed to Curb Attacks on Artists Deemed 'Un-Islamic,'" June 30, 2011; see also OSC doc. GMP20110701405002, "'Supporters of Shari'ah' Condemn 'Attacks' on 'Sanctities of Muslims in Tunisia,'" Ansar al-Mujahidin Network, June 30, 2011.

³³ For example, a Nahda spokesman told a journalist in April that "there is no developed country that does not have women's rights, these things go together." *Le Monde*, "En Tunisie, Les Multiples Visages d'Un Islamisme Qui Réapparaît au Grand Jour," April 10, 2011. See also Marc Lynch, "Tunisia's New al-Nahda," *ForeignPolicy.com*, June 29, 2011; and Al Nahda, "Address by the General-Secretary of 'Ennahda' Party : Positions and Dimensions," Sousse Business Forum, June 11, 2011. For a sympathetic background on Ghannouchi's political and philosophical evolution, see Azzam S. Tamimi, *Rachid Ghannouchi: A Democrat within Islamism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

³⁴ See, e.g., remarks by Nabila Hamza at a Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy, "What Kind of Democracy for the New Tunisia: Islamic or Secular," May 9, 2011, in Washington, DC. Some Tunisians point to Ghannouchi's remarks in Egypt in August 2011, in which he stated that the "ultimate objective" of Muslims was the installation of a caliphate, as proof of this phenomenon (see *Le Temps*, "Rached Ghannouchi en Egypte: 'Le califat est notre objectif ultime,'" August 3, 2011). An Al Nahda spokesman told CRS, via email, that the party had "distanced itself from this (continued...)"

many Al Nahda supporters purport to feel threatened by “leftist” actors, whom they accuse of dominating the interim government and of seeking to delay elections in order to restrict Islamists’ participation in politics.³⁵ Ghannouchi has compared Al Nahda to Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). However, he espoused more radical rhetoric during confrontations with the government in the 1980s and early 1990s, and some Al Nahda supporters are also thought to be more conservative in their views.

Al Nahda did not play a significant role in the December-January uprising, but the organization raised its national profile in early 2011 by helping to form the Committee to Defend the Revolution, a loose affiliation of political parties, activists, unionists, and leftist groups that successfully called for the interim government to dismiss senior officials from the former regime. At the same time, Al Nahda is contending with internal divisions and competing with emergent, more radical Islamist groups for public support.³⁶ The party’s leadership has split and been reshuffled over various issues. Ghannouchi is not a candidate in the October elections; he has said that he will step down before the end of the year, following which party members may elect a new leader. When asked by a journalist whether national elections 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.³⁷

Background on Al Nahda

Al Nahda, now presided by Islamic scholar and activist Rachid Ghannouchi, was first formally organized by Ghannouchi and Abdel Fattah Moro in 1981 (soon after multiparty politics were legalized under President Bourguiba) as the Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI). (Moro has since left the party.) Although the MTI was relatively moderate compared to other Islamist groups, it was viewed as the most popular and therefore the most significant threat to the government.³⁸ The MTI organized demonstrations on university campuses, spurring arrests and clashes with the security forces, and with leftist groups. The growing unrest, combined with that orchestrated by trade unions, undermined support for Bourguiba’s presidency and laid the groundwork for Ben Ali’s rise in 1987.³⁹

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

Violent confrontations between the government and Al Nahda activists escalated, culminating in an attack on a ruling party office in 1991 that was blamed on Al Nahda. Al Nahda leaders condemned the attack and denied that those responsible belonged to their movement, an explanation that remains disputed. Ben Ali accused Al Nahda of plotting to overthrow the government and launched a campaign to eradicate the group and all signs of conservative Islam. The government subsequently claimed it had unearthed an Islamist plot to assassinate Ben Ali, and in 1992 Tunisian military courts convicted 265 Al Nahda members on charges of planning a coup. Al Nahda denied the accusations, and some rights advocates criticized the case as biased and lacking due process.⁴⁰ Ghannouchi was sentenced in absentia. Similar tensions between Islamists and government forces drove neighboring Algeria into civil war in the early 1990s.

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statement,” which he portrayed as Ghannouchi’s opinion as a legal scholar, not a political leader.

³⁵ Al Nahda spokesman email to CRS, June 28, 2011; and Marina Ottaway, “The Revolution is Over,” op. cit.

³⁶ See Rajaa Basly, “The Future of al-Nahda in Tunisia,” Carnegie Endowment, April 20, 2011.

³⁷ *Paris Marianne*, “Tunisia’s Essebsi: Libyan Crisis a ‘Domestic Matter’ for Tunisians,” March 23, 2011; via OSC.

³⁸ Henry Munson Jr., “Islamic Revivalism in Morocco and Tunisia,” *The Muslim World*, 76:3-4 (1986).

³⁹ Munson 1986, op. cit.

⁴⁰ Christopher Alexander, *Tunisia: Stability and Reform in the Modern Maghreb*, Routledge: New York, 2010.

The Security Forces

A central challenge facing Tunisia's interim government is how to assert control over the size and mandate of the domestic security services, which formed a vast and secretive network under Ben Ali, without sowing the seeds of future instability. It may also take time before members of the public are willing to trust the police to ensure their security. The security services under Ben Ali were accused of abuses 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 200,000.⁴¹ Several dozen senior security and Interior Ministry officials were fired in February, and in March, the Interior Ministry announced it was dissolving entities "akin to 'political police.'"⁴² However, the number of affected personnel, and whether they will be permitted to retain their employment with the government, has not been made public. For now, it does not appear that a significant number of security officers have been dismissed, and it is unclear to what extent the domestic security services have been restructured. According to some human rights advocates, domestic intelligence services have not been dissolved, and may continue to conduct surveillance activities—although whether they are following orders or merely habit is unclear.⁴³

The interim government has brought charges against Ben Ali (in absentia) for ordering the killing of protesters in January, and against the former head of presidential security, Ali Seriati, who is in custody. However, opinions are divided as to whether to pursue lower- and mid-ranking officials and security officers for abuses committed under the former regime. The U.N. special rapporteur on torture called on Tunisia in May to "promote accountability for past abuses," including by prosecuting perpetrators of torture and other abusive acts; the rapporteur also suggested that torture may have continued, in a small number of cases, since Ben Ali's departure.⁴⁴ Fears among police officers that they could be made to shoulder the blame for the regime's decision to open fire on demonstrators in January escalated into police demonstrations against the interim government in early September.⁴⁵

The Military

There is a notable distinction between the internal security forces, which were closely associated with Ben Ali's repressive security apparatus, and the military, which receives fewer state resources and is viewed as relatively apolitical.⁴⁶ The military comprises roughly 35,000 personnel; military service is compulsory for one year, but many Tunisians reportedly evade it.

⁴¹ Eric Goldstein/Human Rights Watch, "Dismantling the Machinery of Oppression," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 16, 2011.

⁴² *TAP*, "Interior Ministry Decides to Remove State Security Division," March 7, 2011.

⁴³ See Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme (FIDH), *La Tunisie post Ben Ali face aux démons du passé: Transition démocratique et persistance des violations graves des droits de l'homme*, July 2011.

⁴⁴ *AFP*, "UN Torture Rapporteur Visits Tunisia," and *Reuters*, "People Still Tortured in Tunisia—U.N. Rapporteur," May 21, 2011.

⁴⁵ *AFP*, "Tunisia Bans Police from Union Activities," September 6, 2011. Divisions between police commanders and the rank-and-file were exposed in the immediate aftermath of Ben Ali's exit, as thousands of police officers held their own anti-government demonstration to distance themselves from the RCD and call for better working conditions.

⁴⁶ In the late 1970s and mid-1980s, the military led the repression of anti-government protests. However, this role was largely relegated to the civilian security services under Ben Ali. Unlike in neighboring Algeria, the military leadership did not play a major role in the independence movement or in early state formation.

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%).⁴⁷ The armed forces are positioned largely against external threats, and also participate (to a limited extent) in multilateral peacekeeping missions.

The government's initial, heavy-handed response to the December-January protests was led by the police, who opened fire on demonstrators and reportedly conducted other abuses.⁴⁸ The deployment of the military to the streets on January 12 was a turning point, and many analysts contend that military leaders subsequently played a key role in ending Ben Ali's presidency. Notably, General Rachid Ammar, then army chief of staff (since promoted to the equivalent of joint chief of staff) is widely reported to have refused orders to open fire on demonstrators.⁴⁹ On January 23, Ammar publicly addressed protesters and promised to safeguard Tunisia's "revolution." While Ammar's comments were welcomed by many Tunisians, they sparked concern among some observers over whether the armed forces could interfere in domestic politics, particularly if the security situation should worsen.⁵⁰ Following Ben Ali's exit, members of the military led efforts to stabilize the security situation, including by pursuing elements of the domestic security apparatus and unidentified armed elements seen as loyal to the old regime.⁵¹ In August, a mid-ranking officer publicly stated that on January 14, as Ben Ali was fleeing the country, he had personally decided to arrest 28 members of the Ben Ali/Trabelsi family at the airport and declined to follow orders from the head of presidential security to release them.⁵²

Security Concerns

The rapid fall of the Ben Ali regime raised fears that the country could experience a security vacuum. Although the security situation has largely stabilized since the chaotic first few weeks after Ben Ali's departure, incidents of looting, theft, and destruction of property continue to occur. Incidents of religiously motivated violence have been reported, including the murder of a Polish priest on February 18 and harassment directed at Tunisia's tiny Jewish population. There have also reportedly been several large prison escapes, for unclear reasons.⁵³ Authorities are further contending with the influx of refugees from Libya, which has created a humanitarian crisis along the border, while inter-tribal violence has been reported in the southwest. Suspicions remain that elements of the security services are seeking to provoke disorder, including by reportedly infiltrating demonstrations; interim government officials blamed an armed attack on the Interior

⁴⁷ CIA, *The World Factbook*; figures dated 2006.

⁴⁸ Human Rights Watch, "Tunisia: Hold Police Accountable for Shootings," January 29, 2011.

⁴⁹ E.g., Abdelaziz Barrouhi, "Tunisie: L'Homme Qui A Dit Non," *Jeune Afrique*, January 30-February 5, 2011.

⁵⁰ Issandr El Amrani, "Tunisia Diary: Ammar's Move?" *The Arabist.net*, January 24, 2011. In mid-2010, an analysis of Tunisia's political stability concluded that "a coup is a real possibility" should instability affect the transfer of power after Ben Ali. Veritiss, *Tunisia: Outlook 2011-2015* [UNCLASSIFIED], prepared For the Defense Intelligence Agency Defense Intelligence Open Source Program Office, August 2, 2010.

⁵¹ 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. Angelique Chrisafis, "Confusion, Fear and Horror in Tunisia as Old Regime's Militia Carries on the Fight," *The Guardian* (UK), January 17, 2011.

⁵² *La Presse*, "L'Arrestation des Membres de la Famille du Président Déchu et son Epouse S'Est Effectuée Spontanément," August 8, 2011.

⁵³ *Le Monde*, "Incertitudes en Tunisie sur la Tenue des Elections, le 24 Juillet," May 10, 2011.

Ministry, on February 1, on a conspiracy by members of the former regime's security forces.⁵⁴ The interim government has indefinitely extended the "state of emergency" imposed by Ben Ali in January (though its provisions barring the public assembly of more than three persons have not been enforced), and the military is assisting in security operations in the interior.

Some analysts fear that Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), a regional affiliate of Al Qaeda, could take advantage of the uprising and related insecurity, particularly when combined with upheaval in neighboring Libya. AQIM released a statement in January hailing the departure of Ben Ali and warning against supposed U.S. and French efforts to subvert the revolution.⁵⁵ Al Qaeda's second-in-command, Ayman Al Zawahri, has released at least two statements seeking to portray uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt as motivated by Islamist sentiment and warning that the United States would seek to manipulate the outcomes.⁵⁶

In mid-May, Tunisian authorities announced they had arrested two suspected AQIM members in the southeastern town of Nekrif, near the Libyan border. The two suspects were described as an Algerian and a Libyan national, and were said to be in possession of an "explosive belt," an automatic weapon, a homemade bomb, and GPS equipment.⁵⁷ According to Tunisian officials, this was the first arrest of AQIM militants within Tunisia. Several days later, four Tunisian soldiers were killed in a shoot-out in the northern town of Rouhia with a group described as affiliated with Al Qaeda. Two militants were also reported killed. In July, Tunisian authorities claimed to have halted AQIM militants from entering Tunisia from Algeria, and in August security forces engaged in skirmishes with "terrorists" at the Algerian border.⁵⁸ Armed groups have also reportedly been stopped at the Libyan border.⁵⁹

Terrorism in Tunisia: Background

While Tunisia has not been subject to many significant attacks, terrorism is a potential domestic threat and Tunisians have participated in plots abroad. The two most significant recent incidents of terrorism on Tunisian soil were the 2002 bombing of a synagogue on the Tunisian island of Djerba (noted for its tiny Jewish population) and a series of 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

⁵⁴ Tara Bahrapour, "In Tunisia, First Steps Toward Democracy," *The Washington Post*, March 21, 2011; *Jeune Afrique*, "Tunisie: l'Ex-RCD Soupçonné d'Avoir Commandité des Attaques de Postes de Police," July 18, 2011.

⁵⁵ OSC doc. GMP20110128836001, "AQLIM Warns Tunisians Against Western 'Plots' To 'Abort' Tunisian Revolution," Al-Mujahidin Electronic Network, January 28, 2011. For background on AQIM, see CRS Report R41070, *Al Qaeda and Affiliates: Historical Perspective, Global Presence, and Implications for U.S. Policy*, coordinated by John Rollins.

⁵⁶ Maamoun Youssef, "Al-Qaida's No. 2 Incites Tunisians, Egyptians," *AP*, February 28, 2011; OSC doc. GMP20110913836004, "Al-Fajr Releases Al-Zawahiri Audio, Bin Ladin Video on 10th Anniversary of 9/11," Ana Al Muslim Network, September 13, 2011.

⁵⁷ Radio Tunisienne, "Tunisian Interior Ministry Provides More Information on 'Terrorists' Arrest," May 16, 2011, via U.S. government Open Source Center (OSC).

⁵⁸ BBC Monitoring, "Militants From Al-Qa'idah Try to Sneak into Tunisia, Official," July 2, 2011; OSC doc. GMP20110822280003, "Tunisian Sources Report Several Dead in Army Clashes with Terrorists Near Border," *Le Temps d'Algerie*, August 20, 2011.

⁵⁹ *Le Temps*, "Menace Terroriste sur la Tunisie," September 10, 2011.

the attack.⁶⁰ 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 more opaque.

In 2002, the U.S. State Department placed the Tunisian Combatant Group (TCG), which operated outside Tunisia, on a list of specially designated global terrorists and froze its assets.⁶¹ The TCG sought to establish an Islamic state in Tunisia and was considered to be a radical offshoot of Al Nahda. The TCG was suspected of plotting, but not carrying out, attacks on U.S., Algerian, and Tunisian embassies in Rome in December 2001. One founder, Tarek Maaroufi, was arrested in Belgium the same month. The group appears to have since been inactive.

AQIM, an Algerian-led group formerly known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), actively recruits Tunisians and reportedly had ties with the TCG.⁶² In January 2007, following the aforementioned 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. 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.

Tunisian expatriates suspected of ties to Al Qaeda have been arrested in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Western Europe, Mauritania, 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 controversial.⁶³ In April 2009, General David Petraeus, then-Commander of U.S. Central Command, told a House Appropriations Committee subcommittee that the perpetrators of suicide bombings in Iraq that month may have been part of a network based in Tunisia.⁶⁴

Under Ben Ali, as many as 2,000 Tunisians were detained, charged, and/or convicted on terrorism-related charges, including a sweeping anti-terrorism law passed in 2003.⁶⁵ Critics claimed that the law “makes the exercise of fundamental freedoms ... an expression of terrorism.”⁶⁶ 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.”⁶⁷ Rights advocates also accused anti-terror trials of relying on excessive pretrial detention, denial of due process, and weak evidence. The current interim government has

⁶⁰ *Financial Times*, “Al-Qaeda Deputy Leader Signals Involvement in Attacks,” October 10, 2002.

⁶¹ U.S. State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism, 2006*, released April 30, 2007.

⁶² 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.

⁶³ According to recent news reports, 12 out of the total number of those detained at Guantanamo at one time are Tunisian, but only five currently remain in U.S. custody. Five were repatriated to third countries, partly due to concerns over their possible torture if returned to Tunisia, while two others were returned to Tunisia and imprisoned. Bouazza Ben Bouazza, “Tunisia to Send Mission to US for Release of its Remaining Gitmo Detainees,” September 14, 2011.

⁶⁴ *House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies Holds Hearing on the US Central Command*, April 24, 2009, transcript via *CQ*.

⁶⁵ U.S. State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism, 2009*, released August 5, 2010.

⁶⁶ Jeremy Landor, “Washington’s Partner,” *Middle East International*, March 5, 2004, pp. 23-24.

⁶⁷ U.N. Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur*, December 28, 2010, op. cit.

promised to release all political prisoners, and there is ongoing debate about whether all individuals convicted under the anti-terrorism law fall into this category.

Prosecuting Ben Ali and Associates

Tunisian authorities have brought dozens of criminal charges against Ben Ali and his wife, Leila Trabelsi, both of whom remain outside the country. The decision to carry out multiple and rapid trials of the former first couple in absentia, after Tunisian authorities unsuccessfully sought the former president's extradition from Saudi Arabia, has been controversial.⁶⁸ The former president, through his lawyers, denied the charges and criticized his first conviction (on charges of embezzlement and misuse of state funds), in June, as a "parody of justice."⁶⁹ He was subsequently convicted again, in July, on charges of illegal possession of drugs and weapons. He reportedly faces nearly 200 additional charges in the civilian courts. A separate trial before a military court, on charges related to killing and abusing protesters, is also anticipated. Dozens of family members, along with former senior government and security officials, have also either been tried or face charges. However, the ability of at least one suspect to flee the country in July after an investigation had been opened and the courts' decision in August to free a former Justice Minister from custody (he was subsequently rearrested) led to widespread public criticism of the interim authorities.⁷⁰ The judicial system was inherited from the Ben Ali regime, and although it has been ostensibly freed from executive branch interference, some observers view it as inept.⁷¹

Recovery of State Assets

Further investigations into the financial and real estate holdings of the Ben Ali and Trabelsi families are ongoing. Family members reportedly owned or controlled many of the country's biggest companies, with shares sometimes allegedly obtained through political pressure, and are thought to have stashed away significant resources overseas.⁷² Tunisian authorities have seized domestic assets belonging to the former president and his associates, and have identified at least 12 countries overseas where these individuals stored money, which could total billions of dollars. Western governments have cooperated with Tunisian efforts to freeze these assets.⁷³ However, the process for recovering frozen assets on behalf of the state is complex and challenging.⁷⁴ Interim

⁶⁸ See *AFP*, "Ben Ali Critics Oppose His Trial in Absentia in Tunisia," June 14, 2011; "Tunisians Dissatisfied with Quick Ben Ali Verdict," June 21, 2011; and *Le Monde*, "En Tunisie, la Difficile Justice Contre le Clan de l'Ancien Président Ben Ali," July 9, 2011. The interim government had also issued an international arrest warrant through Interpol for Ben Ali, Leila Trabelsi, and several close relatives who have fled the country. Amnesty International called the trial "unfair" and stated, "The current Tunisian government must follow due process and fair trial standards, otherwise it risks replicating the unfair justice system that was a hallmark of Tunisia under Ben Ali." "Accountability in Tunisia and Egypt," August 3, 2011.

⁶⁹ Philippe Sauvagnargues, "Ben Ali Slams Fast-Track Corruption Conviction as 'Insane,'" *AFP*, June 21, 2011.

⁷⁰ Tarek Amara, "Tunisia Pledges Tougher Line on Ex-Leader's Allies," *Reuters*, August 18, 2011.

⁷¹ Hamadi Redissi, "The Revolution Is Not Over Yet [op-ed]," *The New York Times*, July 15, 2011.

⁷² Colin Freeman, "Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and His Family's 'Mafia Rule,'" *The Telegraph* (UK), January 16, 2011.

⁷³ The *Wall Street Journal* reported in February that U.S. investigators had opened a preliminary probe into assets controlled by Ben Ali and family members. Joseph Palazzolo, "FBI Probe to Target Tunisia's Ex-Leader," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 9, 2011.

⁷⁴ Deborah Ball and Cassell Bryan-Low, "Arab Spring Regimes Face Long Slog to Recoup Assets," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 25, 2011.

authorities have also moved to expropriate shares of companies controlled by certain Ben Ali family members and associates accused of financial manipulation, but have allowed such companies to continue operating (in most cases) under appointed managers.⁷⁵

Key Actors

As political uncertainty continues to characterize the situation in Tunisia, it remains difficult to distinguish which groups and individuals have the ability and popular credibility to decisively influence events. Contenders for influence include Tunisia's trade union federation; the security forces; Islamist movements; the three older, secularist opposition political parties that were legal, albeit highly restricted, under the former regime; and a vast array of newer political parties that have proliferated since January, some reportedly headed by former RCD officials. The ideological cohesion and mass appeal of these new parties are untested. While trade unionists and the Islamist movement have, at different times, constituted the main vehicles for the mass expression of anti-government dissent, the potential for either to present a cohesive political vision is unclear. Both groups, along with leftist movements, which also draw significant support from some segments of the population, have long been subject to government repression, harassment, and co-option.

Influential political groups include the main trade union, known as the UGTT; the main Islamist party, Al Nahda; the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), a secular left-leaning party founded by Ahmed Nejib el Chebbi; the Democratic Forum of Labor and Liberties (FDTL), a centrist party led by Mustafa Ben Jaafar that is now heading a coalition known as Ettakatol; Ettajdid, a leftist party led by Ahmed Brahim; the Tunisian Communist Workers' Party (PCOT), founded by Hamma Hammami, which operated clandestinely under Ben Ali; the Congress for the People, headed by human rights activist Moncef Marzouki; and potentially the Patriotic Free Union (UPL), an emergent party headed by businessman Slim Riahi.⁷⁶

Tunisia's 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, played a key role in sustaining the December-January protests, which its leadership framed as rooted in economic grievances.⁷⁷ At the same time, the UGTT is highly fragmented, with a relatively conservative, pro-government leadership frequently diverging from its more activist middle-tier and grass-roots membership. 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,

⁷⁵ *Le Monde*, "Orange Tunisie Passe Sous la Tutelle de l'Etat Tunisien," March 30, 2011; David Gauthier-Villars, "How 'The Family' Controlled Tunisia," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 20, 2011.

⁷⁶ The UPL, previously little-known, garnered widespread attention when it was listed in a September public opinion survey as the party that garnered the seventh highest number of supporters. Sigma Conseil, *Baromètre Politique*, Tunis, September 2011.

⁷⁷ UGTT, *Déclaration de la Commission Administrative Nationale*, January 4, 2011; on membership, see the UGTT's website, at [www.ugtt.org.tn].

⁷⁸ Global Security, "Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens (UGTT)," at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/tunisia/ugtt.htm>.

⁷⁹ See Niger Disney, "The Working-Class Revolt in Tunisia," Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP) Reports, 67 (May 1978).

it positioned itself as pro-Western (non-Communist) and formed links with the American labor movement.⁷⁸ Tunisia's first president, Habib Bourguiba, strove to keep the unions under the government's wing; during the 1960s, former UGTT leader Ahmed Ben Salah led a decade-long period of socialist-oriented economic policy as minister for finance and planning. By the late 1970s, 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 inflation.⁷⁹ 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 arguably a precursor to the December-January uprising.

Selected Profiles

- **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 appointed by Ben Ali in 1999; 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 served in parliament from 1989 to 1991.
- **Habib Essid, Minister of the Interior.** Interim President Mebazaa appointed Essid in March, replacing Farhat Rajhi, 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 at the Interior Ministry from 1997 to 2000.
- **Yadh Ben Achour, Head of the High Authority for the Realization of the Goals of the Revolution, Political Reforms, and the Democratic Transition.** Ben Achour is a Tunisian lawyer and well known legal scholar who was formerly head of the law faculty at the University of Tunis. In January, he was appointed to head a political reforms commission charged with changing Tunisia's laws ahead of national elections. In late March, Ben Achour roughly doubled the commission's membership, to about 130, in response to criticism that it was insufficiently representative. Its authority continues to be challenged by some, including Al Nahda, which briefly participated in the commission but has since claimed that it pursued wide-ranging reforms without a sufficiently popular mandate and that it represents an overly leftist, secularist, viewpoint.
- **Ahmed Nejib el Chebbi, Founder of the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP).** Chebbi formally stepped down from the leadership of the PDP, one of three "dissident" opposition parties that were legally recognized during Ben Ali's presidency, in 2006, but continues to represent the party. He has portrayed himself as the most prominent secular alternative to Islamist parties. Although Chebbi and the PDP boycotted the 2009 presidential and parliamentary elections, he is widely viewed as the most popular of the previously tolerated opposition figures, and potentially more credible than members of the opposition who left

Tunisia for exile abroad. A former student activist for leftist and pan-Arabist causes, and a lawyer by training, Chebbi was imprisoned for several years in the 1960s. Chebbi directs a Tunis-based newspaper, *El Mawkif*, and provided legal defense for several journalists targeted by the Ben Ali government.

- **General Rachid Ammar, Armed Forces Chief of Staff.** 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. He consequently enjoys a high level of popularity. He has been chief of staff of the 27,000-person army since 2002, when his predecessor was killed in a helicopter crash. In April 2011, Ammar was promoted to chief of staff of the military. On January 24, Ammar publicly addressed protesters, promising to uphold Tunisia's "revolution" and guarantee stability until elections are held. His comments, which were welcomed by demonstrators, 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, President and Co-Founder of Hizb al Nahda (Renaissance).** An Islamic scholar, teacher, and activist, Ghannouchi, 70, has led Tunisia's main Islamist movement for three decades. Ghannouchi's early focus was on religious and moral issues, but he grew more politically involved by the late 1970s. He spent two decades in exile, largely in London, after his party, Al Nahda, was banned in 1991, but returned to Tunisia in January 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, however, and Tunisian secularists and some international observers view him with suspicion. He has stated he will not run for president and that he will soon step down from the leadership of the party.
- **Hamadi Jebali, Secretary-General of Al Nahda.** Born 1949 in Sousse, Jebali is a longtime activist in Al Nahda, having become a member of the group's political bureau in 1981 and served as its president from 1981 until 1984. He also served as director of Al Nahda's newspaper, *Al Fajr*. Previously, Jebali lived for 10 years in France, where he completed an engineering degree and was one of the founders of the French Muslim Association. In 1990, he was sentenced to over 16 years in prison due to his association with Al Nahda, and spent 10 years in solitary confinement while in jail. After being freed in 2006, he rejoined Al Nahda and subsequently became the party's secretary-general.
- **Moncef Marzouki, Advocate and Leader of the Congress for the Republic (CPR).** Born in 1945, Marzouki is a medical doctor, author, and longtime human rights activist who was in exile in France for a decade before returning to Tunisia in January and announcing his intention to run for president. 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.

The Economy

Damage from the December-January unrest, political uncertainty, turmoil in neighboring Libya (which caused the return of tens of thousands of migrant Tunisian workers and the related loss of remittance revenues), and economic stagnation in Europe have caused Tunisia's estimated economic growth to plummet. Tunisia experienced a 3% economic contraction in the first quarter of 2011, and its central bank predicts an economic recession in 2011, compared to 3.7% growth in 2010.⁸⁰ Credit rating agencies have severely lowered Tunisia's ratings due to political uncertainty. The protests themselves reportedly caused hundreds of millions of dollars in damages, and officials estimate that the political transition has cost at least \$2 billion in lost revenues; tourism receipts were reportedly down by 40% and foreign direct investment by 60% in the first six months of 2011.⁸¹ Ongoing labor unrest, particularly in regions of the interior, including phosphate mining areas, represents an additional potential economic obstacle, as do rising food and fuel prices. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) nonetheless suggested in April that improved economic growth was possible if reforms provide "greater access to opportunity and more competition."⁸²

Officials have sought to restart tourism, garner donor support for economic stabilization, and reassure investors by pledging greater economic transparency, with mixed effects. The interim government is also reportedly considering plans for greater economic decentralization. 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 has also appealed for \$4 billion in immediate foreign loans, while Prime Minister Essebi stated in May that Tunisia would need at least \$5 billion in aid per year over the next five years to finance infrastructure and job creation.⁸³ Officials have suggested they will not seek to restructure Tunisia's outside debt. Some commentators view donor perceptions of a weak interim government whose decision-making authorities are fragmented as an impediment to greater outside financial support.⁸⁴ Authorities announced in June that they expect a strong domestic wheat crop in 2011, and that they plan to open up some land, particularly in the interior, to foreign investment.

During Ben Ali's presidency, many analysts contended that there was an implicit social contract between the government and its citizens, which promoted economic stability and middle-class standards of living at the expense of political freedom. Until the December-January protests, this strategy appeared to have contained latent dissatisfaction from disrupting the political status quo. Tunisia is considered a middle-income country, and one of the best-performing non-oil exporting Arab countries. Home and car ownership are widespread. Despite the impact of the global

⁸⁰ Bouazza ben Bouazza, "Tunisie: L'Economie a dépassé le cap dangereux, selon le gouverneur de la Banque centrale," *AP*, July 9, 2011.

⁸¹ *AFP*, "Tunisie: Après le Retour au Calme, Place au Grand Chantier Economique," March 9, 2011; *Le Temps*, "Appel des 17 Pour Soutenir la Transition Démocratique en Tunisie," May 19, 2011; Mark Tran, "Tunisia Offers Wake-Up Call for Development," *The Guardian*, June 9, 2011.

⁸² IMF, *Regional Economic Outlook: Middle East and Central Asia*, April 2011.

⁸³ *AP*, "Tunisie: Adoption d'un Plan de Relance Economique," April 1, 2011; *Reuters*, "Tunisia Will Need \$4 Bln in Loans in 2011—FinMin," April 1, 2011; *Reuters*, "Tunisia Economy Needs Foreign Help to Recover—Minister," May 20, 2011; David Gauthier-Villars, "Tunisia to Seek Backing for Aid," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 21, 2011.

⁸⁴ OSC doc. GMP20110705966151, "Tunisia's Economic Fallout," July 5, 2011.

economic crisis in 2009—which produced a decrease in exports, a contraction in the industrial sector, and a lower expansion in services, largely due to a decrease in market demand in Europe—the economy quickly rebounded with the government’s fiscal stimulus programs.

Textile exports and tourism have driven much of Tunisia’s economic growth in recent years. The tourism sector is a major employer and provided some 11% of the country’s hard currency receipts, and an estimated 400,000 jobs, prior to recent unrest. Tunisia has also attempted to attract foreign investment in its nascent oil and gas sector. Phosphate ore reserves are significant and are the basis of a chemicals industry, but their value is reduced by their low grade. In 2009, the World Bank cited Tunisia as a “top regional reformer,” citing progress in the areas of starting a business, getting credit, protecting investors, paying taxes, and border defense.⁸⁵ In September 2010, the IMF predicted that Tunisia’s growth could continue to increase gradually, “provided that policies and reforms planned by the authorities aimed at enhancing Tunisia’s competitiveness, developing new markets, and supporting new sources of growth in sectors with high added value bear fruit.”⁸⁶ In 2009, public debt stood at roughly \$22 billion, or about 47% of gross domestic product (GDP), according to the World Bank.

At the same time, Tunisia’s strong economic record has long masked significant disparities. Wealth has long been concentrated in the capital and along the tourist-friendly eastern coast, while the interior has suffered from poverty and government neglect. Unemployment and underemployment are major problems, notably for recent college graduates: the official unemployment rate is high (over 13%) and the actual rate is believed to be even higher, particularly among young people. According to the African Development Bank (AfDB), the unemployment rate among university graduates was over 20% in 2010 and “increased by a factor of ten over the last two decades” due to “the youth bulge, high throughput in universities, mismatch in the demand and supply of skilled workers, and the relatively low quality of training received by many graduates.” Moreover, unemployment is over 22%, on average, in interior regions such as Kasserine and Gafsa, which were epicenters of the December-January unrest.⁸⁷ Blatant official corruption under Ben Ali reinforced perceptions among many Tunisians that the economic deck was stacked against them, even if they enjoyed high living standards relative to others in the region.

In light of these issues, analysts have debated the role that economic factors played in the Tunisian uprising. While most agree that a desire for greater democracy and individual freedoms was a driving force in the popular protests that drove Ben Ali from office, socioeconomic grievances doubtless spurred demands for change. In the aftermath of the uprising, numerous segments of the society have expressed economic demands, notably union organizers and residents in the interior. Indeed, demands for improvements in jobs and wages have soared even as political unrest has contributed to severe economic contractions. Some observers fear that a failure to address such grievances could lead an impatient public to lose faith in the transition process, while others contend that many Tunisians are willing to endure prolonged economic hardship in order to prioritize deep political reforms.

⁸⁵ See World Bank, “Tunisia: A Top Regional Reformer According to Doing Business 2009,” September 2008.

⁸⁶ Joël Toujas-Bernate and Rina Bhattacharya, International Monetary Fund, “Tunisia Weathers Crisis Well, But Unemployment Persists,” September 10, 2010.

⁸⁷ African Development Bank, *The Revolution in Tunisia: Economic Challenges and Prospects*, March 2011.

U.S.-Tunisian Relations

Obama Administration officials have emphasized Tunisia's role as an "important test case" of democratic transitions in the Middle East and North Africa, a process for which the Administration has expressed strong support.⁸⁸ In a televised speech in May laying out a new framework for U.S. policy toward the region, President Obama cited Tunisia as the place where the "story of self-determination began" and called on the United States "to show that America values the dignity of the street vendor in Tunisia more than the raw power of the dictator." The President argued that "the stakes are high" in Tunisia and Egypt, but that "both nations can set a strong example through free and fair elections, a vibrant civil society, accountable and effective democratic institutions, and responsible regional leadership."⁸⁹ In congressional testimony in May, Assistant Secretary of State Michael H. Posner stated, "The United States is committed to helping secure a democratic transition that delivers results and sustainable economic development for all the people of Tunisia."⁹⁰ U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice stated in an interview that "it matters enormously to American national security and our national interests" that democratic transitions in Tunisia and Egypt "succeed."⁹¹

A number of senior U.S. officials have visited Tunisia since mid-January, including Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs William Joseph Burns and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.⁹² In May, President Obama met with Prime Minister Essebsi on the sidelines of the Group of Eight (G8) summit, where they discussed "the importance of moving forward with democratic reforms."⁹³

The United States and Tunisia have enjoyed continuous relations since 1797. Tunisia was the site of significant battles during World War II, and was liberated by Allied forces in 1943 in Operation Torch. A U.S. cemetery and memorial near the ancient city of Carthage (outside Tunis) holds 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.⁹⁴

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

⁸⁸ House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing, "Developments in Egypt and Lebanon," February 10, 2011, Statement of James B. Steinberg, Deputy Secretary, Department of State.

⁸⁹ The White House, "Remarks by the President on the Middle East and Africa," May 19, 2011.

⁹⁰ Michael H. Posner, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, statement before the House Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia for a hearing on "Political Transitions in the Middle East," May 5, 2011.

⁹¹ "U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Rice Interviewed on CNN," May 19, 2011, transcript via *CQ*.

⁹² 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.

⁹³ "Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes and National Security Council Senior Director for European Affairs Liz Sherwood-Randall Hold Media Availability," May 27, 2011, via *CQ*.

⁹⁴ 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.

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 2004.⁹⁵ However, Tunisia did not support the 1991 Gulf War or the 2003 Iraq war and, when the latter war began, Ben Ali expressed regret and fear that the conflict might destabilize the Middle East.⁹⁶ 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 voiced public criticism of 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."⁹⁷ 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."⁹⁸ 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 prison.⁹⁹ In parallel with these criticisms, 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 the protests that eventually unseated Ben Ali.¹⁰⁰

U.S.-Tunisian trade is relatively low in volume because Tunisia is a small country and conducts most of its trade with Europe. In 2010, U.S. exports to Tunisia totaled \$571 million and imports totaled \$405 million; in 2009, exports totaled \$502 million and imports \$326 million. While Tunisian imports of U.S. goods did not fluctuate significantly during the global economic recession, U.S. imports from Tunisia have yet to rebound to 2008 levels, when they totaled \$644 million.¹⁰¹ Tunisia is eligible for special trade preferences, i.e., 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).

⁹⁵ 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.

⁹⁶ *Tunis Infotunisie*, "Ben Ali Expresses 'Deep Regret' at Start of War Against Iraq," March 20, 2003, Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) Document AFP20030320000266.

⁹⁷ U.S. State Department Daily News Briefing, October 26, 2009; U.S. State Department, "Tunisia," *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 2004*, released February 28, 2005.

⁹⁸ U.S. State Department, "Secretary of State Clinton Delivers Remarks on Internet Freedom," January 21, 2010.

⁹⁹ 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.

¹⁰⁰ Christopher Alexander, "Tunisia's Protest Wave: Where It Comes From and What It Means," *ForeignPolicy.com*, January 3, 2011.

¹⁰¹ U.S. International Trade Commission data, accessed at <http://dataweb.usitc.gov/scripts/query.asp>.

U.S. Reactions to the January 2011 Uprising

U.S. criticism of the government's response to the December-January demonstrations, although initially muted, grew increasingly critical of Ben Ali as the protests escalated. 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."¹⁰² At the same time, Clinton stressed that "we are not taking sides," and indicated that 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 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."¹⁰³ 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."¹⁰⁴ 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."

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.¹⁰⁵

U.S. Assistance

U.S. bilateral aid is modest by regional standards and was, until recently, highly focused on military assistance and counterterrorism cooperation (**Table 1**, below).¹⁰⁶ 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 subsequently identified a range of potential funding sources for providing support for Tunisia's transition. The State Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) is currently leading related assistance efforts, with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and others also administering new programs. MEPI has a regional office in Tunis, responsible for programming to enhance political, economic, and educational reforms in the region, but prior to 2011 implemented limited programs within Tunisia. The Administration also supports draft legislation that would authorize the President to establish a Tunisian-American Enterprise Fund (see "Congress and Aid to Tunisia," below).¹⁰⁷ In early September, the Administration named William B. Taylor to coordinate U.S. development and other civilian aid to transitional countries in the Middle East and North Africa.

¹⁰² *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)*.

¹⁰³ The White House, "Statement by the President on Events in Tunisia," January 14, 2011.

¹⁰⁴ U.S. State Department, "Recent Events in Tunisia," January 14, 2011.

¹⁰⁵ Testimony of Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, House Select Intelligence Committee Hearing on Worldwide Threats, February 10, 2011, via *CQ*.

¹⁰⁶ U.S. State Department, *Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations*, FY2011 and FY2012.

¹⁰⁷ 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.

Administration assistance initiatives include the following:

- Approximately \$23.3 million in “transition support” assistance administered by MEPI. This aid is aimed at helping Tunisia establish independent media, civil society, political parties, and a new electoral framework, and implement economic reforms.¹⁰⁸
- USAID-administered funding in support of Tunisia’s political transition totals approximately \$10 million.¹⁰⁹ This includes \$5 million in FY2010 Complex Crises Fund (CCF) funding, which is intended to support planned community development projects and political reforms in the interior and southeast.¹¹⁰ It also includes \$2 million for USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives and \$3 million in support of the electoral process.¹¹¹
- 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 focused on small and medium-size businesses. OPIC will also support visits by American business investors.¹¹²
- The Administration has also provided humanitarian aid in response to the massive influx of refugees from neighboring Libya.

Security Assistance

In late May, General Carter Ham, commander of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), visited Tunisia on his first trip to North Africa since taking command in March. 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.”¹¹³ According to private sector analysis, the United States is Tunisia’s primary supplier of military equipment, largely purchased through

¹⁰⁸ State Department Congressional Notification Transmittal Sheets, March 11, 2011 and July 25, 2011. The MEPI funding, which is drawn from the Economic Support Fund (ESF) account, has partly come from funding appropriated in FY2010 for other purposes and reallocated for programs in Tunisia, subject to congressional notification (\$18.3 million). MEPI also plans to support partnerships between Tunisian civil society groups and U.S. technology companies to enhance information and communications capacity.

¹⁰⁹ Statement by Assistant Secretary of State Michael H. Posner, May 5, 2011, *op. cit.* This figure appears to refer to FY2010 and FY2011 Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance (DCHA) funding that has been allocated toward Tunisia democracy and governance programming in 2011 (see Tunisia aid table, below). DCHA is generally not appropriated bilaterally.

¹¹⁰ CN#56, “United States Agency for International Development Advice of Program Change,” June 3, 2011. The notification referred to “an unanticipated opportunity to advance the Arab world’s first, and historic, democratic transition.”

¹¹¹ Figures communicated to CRS by the State Department’s Office of the Director of U.S. Foreign Assistance, September 2011.

¹¹² U.S. State Department, “Secretary of State Clinton Delivers Remarks with Tunisia Foreign Minister Mouldi Kefi,” March 17, 2011, via *CQ*. In congressional testimony, Assistant Secretary of State Michael H. Posner said OPIC would provide “up to \$2 billion in financial support for private-sector investments in the Middle East and North Africa.” Statement before the House Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia, “Political Transitions in the Middle East,” May 5, 2011.

¹¹³ Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), “Tunisia Summary,” updated January 13, 2011.

Foreign Military Sales (FMS) agreements.¹¹⁴ FMF and Defense Department-administered “Section 1206”¹¹⁵ 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).¹¹⁶ Tunisia has also been one of the top 20 recipients of International Military Education and Training (IMET) since FY1994.¹¹⁷

In August 2011, the Department of Defense notified Congress of its plans to provide three new Section 1206 packages for Tunisia, which are intended to “build the capacity of Tunisia’s national military forces to conduct CT [counterterrorism] operations by providing equipment and training.” The assistance, totaling \$20.9 million, is intended to provide maritime equipment and related operational training, land vehicles, and helicopter surveillance equipment.¹¹⁸

In July 2011 the State Department notified Congress of its intention to provide Tunisia with \$1.43 million in FY2010 International Counter-Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INCLE) funds that were originally notified for Jordan. The Department plans to use the funds “to strengthen the criminal justice sector’s ability to combat corruption, implement judicial reforms and promote prison reforms.”¹¹⁹ Prior to 2011, Tunisia had not benefitted from significant INCLE funding.

Tunisia is one of 10 countries participating in the U.S. Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP), an interagency regional program aimed at helping North and West African countries better control their territory 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.¹²⁰ Defense Department funds have also been allocated for programs designed to counter violent extremist messages.

¹¹⁴ Forecast International, *International Military Markets—Middle East & Africa*, “Tunisia: Section 3—Market Overview,” May 2009.

¹¹⁵ 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.

¹¹⁶ This assistance is described as supporting the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP).

¹¹⁷ DSCA, op. cit.

¹¹⁸ Deputy Secretary of Defense, Congressional Notification, August 25, 2011.

¹¹⁹ State Department Congressional Notification Transmittal Sheet, July 25, 2011.

¹²⁰ Funding figures provided to CRS by the State Department, 2010.

Table I. Foreign Assistance to Tunisia, Selected Accounts

(appropriations, thousands of current dollars)

	FY2009	FY2010	FY2011 Est.	FY2012 Request
FMF	12,000	18,000	17,124	4,900
ESF (Bilateral)	800	2,000	5,000	0
ESF (MEPI)	-	<i>18,324</i>	5,000	Not available
ESF (USAID non-bilateral)	-	830	0	Not available
IMET	1,700	1,945	1,950	1,675
INCLE	0	<i>1,427</i>	1,500	0
NADR	100	1,200	175	0
DCHA	-	<i>8,000</i>	2,000	Not available
IDA	-	-	100	Not available
Section 1206	8,800	0	20,900	Not available
Total, above allocations	23,400	51,726	53,749	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; DCHA= Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance; IDA=International Disaster Assistance; Section 1206=Defense Department funds authorized for use in training and equipping foreign military forces for certain purposes.

Items in italics refer to funding appropriated in FY2010 for other countries and purposes, then reallocated for Tunisia in 2011. This chart does not reflect funding allocated under TSCTP.

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

Multilateral Assistance

Several multilateral institutions that receive significant U.S. financial support have pledged economic aid for Tunisia during its transition process. The World Bank and African Development Bank (AfDB) have each pledged \$500 million in budget support to Tunisia, which is aimed at providing emergency financial reserves while addressing regional disparities, reducing youth unemployment, and improving civil liberties and economic governance.¹²¹ AfDB President Donald Kaberuka indicated in early June that there is an additional \$500 million in Tunisia aid "in the pipeline," which he hoped would be disbursed by year's end, while the World Bank said in May that it envisaged an additional \$1 billion.¹²² The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), which also receives U.S. financial support, is considering extending aid to North African countries, potentially including Tunisia. In May, G8 countries pledged \$20 billion

¹²¹ African Development Bank, "AfDB Supports Accountability in Tunisia," May 20, 2011.

¹²² African Development Bank, "AfDB and Tunisia Formally Sign USD 500M Budget Support Accord at Annual Meetings," June 10, 2011; World Bank, "World Bank Group Announces Up to \$6 Billion for Egypt and Tunisia," May 30, 2011.

in aid for Tunisia and Egypt over three years, to be disbursed via multilateral banks such as the European Investment Bank.¹²³ French President Nicolas Sarkozy indicated that an additional \$10 billion would be provided for the two countries by Gulf states, and another \$10 billion by the IMF.¹²⁴ In September, the G8 pledged an additional \$38 billion in new aid to transitional countries in the region, although reports indicated that little of the previously promised funding had materialized.¹²⁵ Prime Minister Essebsi attended part of the G8 summit, where he appealed for “economic support for our march towards democracy.”¹²⁶

Congress and Aid to Tunisia

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. For example, S. 618 (Kerry) and H.R. 2237 (Schiff) would authorize the President to establish a Tunisian-American Enterprise Fund to promote private sector investment and improve corporate governance, among other aims. S. 1388 (Kerry) would express support for certain types of multilateral aid to North African countries undergoing political transitions that meet certain criteria, among other provisions. Other Members contend that budgetary cuts take precedence over new assistance programs, or that economic stability in Tunisia and elsewhere is best addressed via private sector engagement and/or support from other donors. Some have additionally pointed to uncertainties over the current and prospective nature of Tunisia’s government. The discussion regarding potential new assistance has proceeded amid larger federal budget debates and disagreements over funding priorities.

The Senate report accompanying S. 1253, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2012, states that “expanded military assistance and cooperation with the Tunisian Armed Forces is an important component of a comprehensive U.S. policy to support the people and Government of Tunisia in its transition to democracy” and “urges the Secretary of Defense, in consultation with the Secretary of State, to enhance and expand U.S. security assistance to Tunisia in order to strengthen the capacity of the Tunisian Armed Forces, in particular with regard to securing Tunisia’s land and maritime borders.”¹²⁷

Congress was supportive of U.S. military assistance to Tunisia during the latter years of Ben Ali’s presidency. In an explanatory statement accompanying P.L. 111-8, the Omnibus Appropriations Act, 2009 (enacted on March 11, 2009), appropriators directed the State Department to allocate \$12 million in FMF assistance for Tunisia, far more than the State Department’s budget request for \$2.6 million. At the same time, appropriators wrote in the explanatory statement that “restrictions on political freedom, the use of torture, imprisonment of dissidents, and persecution of journalists and human rights defenders are of concern and progress on these issues is necessary for the partnership between the United States and Tunisia to further strengthen.”¹²⁸ In the

¹²³ Declaration of the G8 on the Arab Springs, Deauville, May 26-27, 2011 (released on May 27, 2011).

¹²⁴ Liz Alderman, “Group of 8 Pledges \$20 Billion Aid to Egypt and Tunisia,” *The New York Times*, May 27, 2011.

¹²⁵ Liz Alderman, “G-8 Nations Pledge New Aid to Arab Spring Economies,” *The New York Times*, September 11, 2011.

¹²⁶ Sebastian Moffett and William Horobin, “Tunisia’s Leaders Call for Aid to Maintain Momentum of ‘Arab Spring,’” May 27, 2011.

¹²⁷ S.Rept. 112-26 (Title XII, Subtitle C, “United States-Tunisia Military-to-Military Cooperation,” June 22, 2011).

¹²⁸ *Congressional Record*, February 23, 2009, p. H2417.

conference report accompanying P.L. 111-117, the FY2010 Consolidated Appropriations Act (enacted on December 16, 2009), appropriators directed the State Department to allocate \$18 million in FMF for Tunisia, \$3 million more than the requested amount. The conference report also allocated \$2 million in Economic Support Fund (ESF)—the amount requested—for “programs and activities in southern Tunisia and to promote respect for human rights.”¹²⁹

Foreign Relations

Israel and the Palestinians

Tunisians broadly sympathize with the Palestinians; Tunisia hosted the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) headquarters in exile from 1982 to 1993. Tunisia’s foreign ministry announced in September that it would support the Palestinians’ bid for a U.N. recognition of statehood.¹³⁰ 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.)

Europe

Tunisia and the European Union (EU) have cemented a close relationship by means of an Association Agreement, aid, and loans. At the same time, EU leaders periodically expressed concerns over Tunisia’s record on human rights and political freedom under Ben Ali.¹³¹ More than 60% of Tunisia’s trade is conducted with Europe.¹³² 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 greater trade benefits, are expected to be taken up again after elections.¹³³ 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.

¹²⁹ *Congressional Record*, December 8, 2009, p. H14350.

¹³⁰ UMCI News, “Tunisia Strongly Supports The Palestinian-UN Bid,” September 12, 2011.

¹³¹ See, e.g., *AFP*, “EU Calls for Release of Tunisian Protesters,” January 10, 2011.

¹³² World Trade Organization, *Tunisia Profile*, October 2010.

¹³³ Haykel Tlili, “Chômage: L’Union Européenne Prépare une Task Force pour la Tunisie,” *Le Temps*, August 23, 2011. See European Commission, EuropeAid Development and Cooperation, *Tunisia*, at http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/where/neighbourhood/country-cooperation/tunisia/tunisia_en.htm.

EU officials have focused high-level attention on Tunisia since Ben Ali's departure. The EU has imposed targeted sanctions against 48 individuals associated with the former regime (many of them members of the extended Ben Ali and Trabelsi families)¹³⁴ and has promised new economic, trade, and governance assistance while seeking to ensure that Tunisia's previous commitments, such as the prevention of illegal emigration, will be maintained in the post-Ben Ali era.¹³⁵

Relations with Italy were strained in 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; Italy has also provided Tunisia with maritime patrol equipment.¹³⁶ The EU, meanwhile, in April approved agreements relaxing tariffs on imports from certain North African countries, including Tunisia.

Relations between the interim government and France were strained over French support for Ben Ali, which was extended even as his security forces cracked down on pro-democracy protesters. French authorities have sought to reassure the interim government by refusing to offer Ben Ali exile, replacing the French ambassador to Tunisia, announcing an asset freeze targeting members of the Ben Ali family, dispatching senior officials on state visits, and pledging €425 million (over \$600 million) in bilateral aid, in addition to French support for multilateral assistance.¹³⁷

Regional Relations

Tunisia has generally sought cordial relations with its immediate neighbors, although Ben Ali's entente with neighboring Libya's Muammar al Qadhafi was strained. Although it declined to participate militarily in U.S. and NATO military operations in Libya, Tunisia's interim government has been supportive of the transition there. Tunisia reportedly froze assets belonging to Qadhafi's family, and the interim government recognized Libya's Transitional National Council (TNC) on August 21.¹³⁸ Tunisian authorities appear to hope that an end to turmoil in Libya will stabilize border areas (which were shelled by Qadhafi's forces during the conflict, and which are the site of massive refugee flows) and, eventually, produce an economic rebound that would allow Libya to reabsorb some of Tunisia's low-skilled labor surplus.¹³⁹

Algeria and Morocco have been supportive of Tunisia's post-Ben Ali government: Algeria has offered financial assistance, while Morocco and Tunisia signed a bilateral military cooperation agreement in May 2011. Tunisia is a member of the Arab Maghreb Union, established in 1989 by

¹³⁴ See Council Regulation (EU) No. 101/2011 of 4 February 2011 Concerning Restrictive Measures Directed Against Certain Persons, Entities and Bodies in View of the Situation in Tunisia."

¹³⁵ While some migrants are Tunisian, many are Sub-Saharan Africans who traverse Tunisia in search of passage to Europe. Concerns over immigration have heightened with the flow of Libyans across the border and to southern Italy.

¹³⁶ *Reuters*, "Italy, Tunisia Sign Deal to Ease Migrant Crisis," April 5, 2011.

¹³⁷ On French bilateral aid, see G8 Summit, "The Deauville Partnership: Helping the Arab Countries in Their Transition to Free and Democratic Societies," Deauville, May 27, 2011.

¹³⁸ The previous week, Tunisia reportedly hosted Libyan rebel-government talks. U.S. State Department Daily Press Briefing, August 15, 2011. The main political parties in Tunisia supported the government's decision to recognize the CNT. *AFP*, "Tunisie: Des Partis Politiques Saluent la 'Nouvelle Libye,'" August 22, 2011.

¹³⁹ Marie-Christine Corbier, "En Tunisie, le Patronat Voit la Libye Nouvelle comme une 'Bouffée d'Oxygène,'" *Les Echos*, August 30, 2011.

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.¹⁴⁰ In September, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan visited Tunisia as the first stop on a tour of countries affected by democratic uprisings. 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

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

Questions include

- To what extent is Tunisia a “test-case” for democratic transitions in the Middle East? To what extent is Tunisia a priority for U.S. policy in the region?
- What is the potential for free, fair, and well-managed elections? What is to be the mandate, mode of operation, and duration of the National Constituent Assembly, which is expected to be elected on October 24?
- Is Tunisia likely to experience political stability in the medium term, or do continued protests and insecurity remain significant threats? Do Ben Ali and/or elements of the former regime continue to influence events in Tunisia? What is the role of the military in steering political developments?
- What will the future Tunisian government and political order look like? Is a consensus among Islamist and secularist political factions possible? Will there be a free and independent press and civil society in Tunisia?
- Which individuals and groups currently enjoy significant popular credibility in Tunisia, and what are their likely courses of action? What steps are various groups doing to position themselves in the public eye ahead of elections? What coalitions among political and interest groups are likely?
- What is the potential medium-term impact of recent events on foreign investment and economic growth in Tunisia and the region? Are the interim government's economic policies appropriate and effective? What steps are being taken to address regional economic disparities within Tunisia?
- What has been the impact 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 course of U.S. action is most likely to fulfill foreign policy and national security goals?

¹⁴⁰ EIU, *Tunisia: Country Profile*, 2008.

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