

Tunisia: In Brief

Updated June 3, 2025

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

RS21666

Summary

Once considered the lone democratic success story of the 2011 “Arab Spring” uprisings, Tunisia has seen a reversion to authoritarian rule under President Kais Saïed. First elected in 2019 as a populist anti-system candidate, Saïed was reelected to a second five-year term in 2024, with nearly all of his would-be opponents in jail, in exile, or barred from running. He came to power by leveraging widespread public anger at alleged corruption, partisan dysfunction, and declining living standards during the decade that followed Tunisia’s 2011 political transition. Some of Tunisia’s economic challenges have worsened under Saïed, who has blamed his predecessors and entrenched interests that he claims to be fighting. He has rejected a proposed International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan agreement, which would have required unpopular fiscal tightening.

Developments in Tunisia, a U.S.-designated Major Non-NATO Ally, have posed challenges for U.S. policymakers. Alongside his domestic policies, President Saïed has expressed greater skepticism of Western partners and pursued closer ties with the People’s Republic of China (PRC, or China), Russia, and Iran. Officials, including Members of Congress, may weigh potential goals that could be in tension with one another, such as supporting democratic principles, promoting economic stability, pursuing global strategic competition, and maintaining security cooperation to counter regional terrorism and maritime security threats. Other countries’ reactions to President Saïed’s actions have varied, complicating coordination.

The Trump Administration’s trade and foreign assistance policies have potential implications for U.S.-Tunisia ties. President Trump has ordered increased tariffs on U.S. imports from Tunisia. The United States is one of Tunisia’s top trade partners and runs a trade deficit with the country, while Tunisia is a minor trade partner for the United States. The Administration has also reportedly terminated many U.S. economic and development assistance programs in Tunisia as part of a larger review and restructuring of U.S. foreign assistance and related staffing. In FY2023 (latest public data), the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) together allocated \$78 million in bilateral aid for Tunisia, comprising \$55 million in security assistance and \$23 million in economic and development assistance. These levels decreased after 2021, when President Saïed first suspended parliament and much of the constitution. The Department of Defense has provided additional training and equipment for Tunisia’s military and has continued to conduct military exercises and senior visits in the country.

Annual appropriations and defense authorization bills provide opportunities for Congress to shape U.S. engagement with Tunisia, in addition to other legislative options and oversight activities. During the 118th Congress, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee reported the Safeguarding Tunisian Democracy Act of 2023 (S. 2006), which would have established a “Tunisia Democracy Support Fund” while limiting certain foreign assistance to Tunisia absent progress toward greater democracy. Two Resolutions introduced in the 118th Congress, S.Res. 260 and H.Res. 613, would have recognized Tunisia’s leadership in the Arab Spring and expressed support for democratic principles and norms in the country. The 118th Congress also enacted provisions regarding aid to Tunisia in annual appropriations measures. Congress held hearings on Tunisia and U.S. policy in 2021 and 2023.

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Introduction

Developments in Tunisia—a U.S.-designated Major Non-NATO Ally and onetime regional democratic leader—have posed challenges for U.S. policymakers. President Kaïs Saïed, first elected in 2019, has dismantled institutional checks and balances, overseen the arrest and prosecution of political adversaries and other critics, and assailed sub-Saharan migrants. Saïed also has pursued closer ties with the People’s Republic of China (PRC, or China), Russia, and Iran. Unemployment and food prices, which have sparked unrest in Tunisia in the past, have increased due to a combination of domestic and international factors.

The Trump Administration has stated an interest in “exploring commercial opportunities between the United States and Tunisia and continuing to eliminate threats to both our countries’ borders.”¹ The Administration’s trade and foreign assistance policies have potential implications for these goals and for U.S.-Tunisia relations more broadly. President Trump has increased tariffs on U.S. imports from Tunisia; the United States is one of Tunisia’s top trade partners and runs a trade deficit with the country. The Administration also has reportedly ended many U.S. economic and development assistance programs in Tunisia as part of a larger review and restructuring. President Saïed’s government has hindered U.S. diplomats’ ability to provide consular services to American citizen prisoners in the country, and U.S. officials in Tunisia have faced heightened “anti-American sentiment” in the context of Israel’s military operations in Gaza and Lebanon.²

Table I. Tunisia at a Glance



Comparative Size: slightly larger than the U.S. state of Georgia

Population: 12 million, 71% urban

Religions: Muslim (official; Sunni) 99%, other (includes Christian, Jewish, Shia Muslim, and Baha'i) <1%

Languages: Arabic (official), French, Tamazight

Median Age: 34.4 years

Life Expectancy: 77.3 years

Literacy: 83%; male 89% / female 83% (2021)

GDP Growth / Per Capita: 1.4% / \$4,301

Unemployment: 16.2%; ages 15-24, 40.1%

Inflation: 7.0%

Government Gross Debt (% GDP): 83%

Military Expenditures: 2.5% of GDP (2023)

Internet Users: 74% of population (2022)

Top Exports / Partners: garments, insulated wire, olive oil, refined petroleum, crude petroleum / France 22%, Italy 17%, Germany 13%, United States 4%, Libya 4% (2023)

Top Imports / Partners: refined petroleum, natural gas, plastic products, cars, plastics / Italy 13%, France 12%, China 10%, Russia 8%, Germany 7% (2023)

Sources: CRS graphic. Map information from U.S. Department of State, ESRI. Figures from CIA *World Factbook* and International Monetary Fund (IMF, April 2025); 2024 estimates unless noted.

¹ Department of State, “Tunisia National Day,” March 20, 2025.

² Office of Inspector General, Department of State, “Inspection of Embassy Tunis, Tunisia,” April 2025.

President Saïed was reelected in 2024 to a second term, with nearly all would-be challengers in jail, in exile, or barred from running. Polls leading up to the election suggested a “growing disaffection with politics” among the public.³ Over the past decade, Tunisians have generally cited economic concerns as a top priority.⁴ Sluggish growth and increased food insecurity in recent years have led some observers to warn of the potential for a financial crisis and public unrest.⁵ The World Bank, for its part, cited signs of economic resilience and recovery as of early 2025, albeit accompanied by ongoing risks and uncertainty.⁶

Other countries’ reactions to President Saïed’s actions have varied. The European Union, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia have offered financial support, albeit not at the same scale as a potential International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan, which President Saïed rejected in 2023.⁷

President Saïed Reshapes Tunisia’s Political System

Tunisia was the only country affected by the 2011 “Arab Spring” to establish a constitutional democracy, having previously been ruled by authoritarian regimes. Following the 2011 uprising, Tunisia held several competitive elections resulting in peaceful transfers of power. A series of coalition governments included secularist parties alongside Tunisia’s main Islamist (later self-described “Muslim Democrat”) party. An elected national assembly drafted and, in 2014, adopted a new constitution that enshrined institutional checks and balances and recognized many individual rights. Media outlets and civil society groups proliferated. Elections for new municipal-level posts in 2018 marked a step toward long-sought political decentralization.

A critic of the 2014 constitution, President Saïed capitalized on popular discontent with post-2011 leaders to win election in 2019 (see “Prelude to a Power Grab,” below). A political independent, Saïed had never previously held public office. In mid-2021, asserting a national “emergency,” he suspended parliament, the cabinet, and parts of the constitution.⁸ Saïed went on to fully dissolve parliament and asserted greater control over the judiciary, electoral commission, independent watchdog agencies, and the internal security apparatus.⁹ Critics, including opposition politicians, denounced Saïed’s actions as a “coup.”¹⁰ Many Tunisians expressed support for Saïed’s actions, however, criticizing the dissolved cabinet and parliament for alleged corruption, dysfunction, and mishandling of the response to COVID-19.¹¹

³ Arab Barometer, “Tunisian political views: splintered and confused,” April 16, 2024.

⁴ Arab Barometer, “Arab Barometer reveal findings from major Tunisia survey,” March 4, 2024.

⁵ See, e.g., Hamed al-Ghwell, “Bread and power: North Africa’s looming food crisis,” Arab News, May 10, 2025; and Ishac Diwan et al, “Tunisia’s Economy in the Eye of the Storm,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 9, 2024.

⁶ See, e.g., World Bank, “Tunisia Economic Monitor: Better Connectivity to Grow,” Spring 2025, May 14, 2025.

⁷ European Commission, “The European Union continues to implement the Memorandum of Understanding with Tunisia with the disbursement of EUR 150 million in financial support,” March 4, 2024; Reuters, “Saudi Arabia to give Tunisia \$500 million as soft loan and grant,” July 20, 2023, “Tunisia president rejects IMF ‘diktats’, casting doubt on bailout,” April 6, 2023, and “Algeria provides \$300 mln loan to Tunisia,” December 14, 2021.

⁸ AP, “Tunisia on edge as president suspends parliament, fires PM,” July 26, 2021; Presidential Decree No. 2021-117, September 22, 2021.

⁹ See Sarah Yerkes and Maha Alhomoud, “One Year Later, Tunisia’s President Has Reversed Nearly a Decade of Democratic Gains,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 22, 2022.

¹⁰ Rached Ghannouchi, “My Country Has Been a Dictatorship Before. We Can’t Go Back.” *New York Times* op-ed, July 30, 2021; Anadolu Agency, “Thousands protest in Tunisia to call for ending ‘coup,’” October 15, 2022.

¹¹ Francesca Ebel, “Tunisia’s Popular Coup?” *New Lines*, July 28, 2021.

President Saïed has since reshaped Tunisia’s political system. In 2022, he convened a referendum on a new constitution drafted by a handpicked committee, which passed amid an opposition boycott. The new constitution, adopted with 94% of the vote and 31% turnout, centralized presidential control over policymaking and the judiciary, weakening the legislature and the courts’ authority to challenge presidential powers.¹² A 2022 electoral law, issued by presidential decree, weakened the role of political parties in the political system, while another decree granted Saïed greater control over the national electoral commission.¹³ Members of a new National Assembly were elected and sworn in in 2023, followed by elections for new local-level councils with “considerably less financial and administrative autonomy” than their predecessors.¹⁴ A second legislative chamber, akin to a Senate, was established in mid-2024, with members selected through indirect elections.¹⁵ This completed the process of standing up new government institutions under the 2022 constitution.

In October 2024, President Saïed was reelected to a second five-year term with over 90% of the vote, and less than 30% turnout, per official data. Nearly all would-be opposition candidates were in jail or otherwise barred from competing, including politicians from across the ideological spectrum.¹⁶ Most opposition parties called for a boycott.¹⁷ The electoral commission denied two Tunisian civil society groups accreditation to observe the election. Saïed’s closest challenger, businessman Ayachi Zammel, won 7% while in jail for falsifying documents; he was sentenced five days before the election.¹⁸

Closing Political Space

Under President Saïed, the government has increasingly suppressed political competition and civil liberties—among the most concrete dividends of Tunisia’s decade of democratic governance. Starting in 2021, human rights groups described a pattern of prosecutions, “secret detentions,” and harassment targeting critics of the president.¹⁹ Since 2023, authorities have launched a sweeping crackdown on dissent, detaining and prosecuting dozens of people deemed critical of the government, including prominent opposition politicians, lawyers, judges, activists, human rights defenders, journalists, social media critics, and business owners. As of January 2025, over 50 people were “being held on political grounds or for exercising their rights” in Tunisia, according to Human Rights Watch.²⁰ Human rights groups have warned of additional efforts to restrict nongovernmental organizations, which Saïed has accused of serving “foreign agendas.”²¹

In April 2025, a Tunisian court sentenced 37 politically prominent defendants—including opposition politicians and activists—to prison terms of up to 66 years for allegedly conspiring to

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

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

¹⁴ Freedom House, “Tunisia,” *Freedom in the World* 2024, February 2024.

¹⁵ International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), “Tunisia: 2023 Local Elections,” December 19, 2023; and *Jeune Afrique*, “En Tunisie, le CNRD – le nouveau Sénat voulu par Kaïs Saïed – prend ses marques,” April 24, 2024.

¹⁶ Human Rights Watch (HRW), “Tunisia: Prospective Presidential Candidates Barred,” August 20, 2024.

¹⁷ AP, “Tunisia’s President Saïed wins second term after cracking down on the opposition,” October 7, 2024.

¹⁸ BBC, “Tunisian president wins second term with landslide,” October 8, 2024.

¹⁹ HRW, “Tunisia: Secret Detentions Under Cover of State of Emergency,” February 9, 2022.

²⁰ HRW, “‘All Conspirators’: How Tunisia Uses Arbitrary Detention to Crush Dissent,” April 16, 2025.

²¹ France24, “Tunisian civil society fears plan to limit foreign funding,” March 4, 2024.

threaten state security. Several defendants had been in pretrial detention since early 2023; others were outside the country and tried in absentia. Critics asserted that the case was politically motivated and that the trial was not fair.²² Several of those convicted were involved in efforts to unify opposition across ideological lines. Saïed characterized the defendants as “traitors” and “terrorists,” asserting in early 2023 that “whoever dares to exonerate them is their accomplice,” statements that underscored threats to judicial independence.²³

Prominent critics have also been jailed in other cases, including Rached Ghannouchi, the former speaker of parliament, and Sihem Bensedrine, who headed a post-2011 Truth and Dignity Commission.²⁴ State prosecutions and restrictions have effectively quashed Ghannouchi’s political party, Ennahda (“Renaissance,” the self-described “Muslim Democrat” party), which participated in coalition governments after 2011 and led the opposition to Saïed in 2019-2021.²⁵ Much of the party’s leadership has been jailed since 2023. The party was banned prior to 2011.

President Saïed has also assailed sub-Saharan African migrants in starkly racial terms, describing them as agents of a conspiracy to destabilize Tunisia and alter its demography.²⁶ His claims have sparked violence and abuse targeting migrants, refugees, and activists defending migrant rights.²⁷ Tunisian authorities have reportedly forcibly removed thousands of alleged migrants since 2023, including to inhospitable desert areas along Tunisia’s borders with Libya and Algeria.²⁸

The Ministry of Interior—a pillar of Tunisia’s authoritarian pre-2011 regime—appears to be playing a central role in political repression, via the police and internal security apparatus.²⁹ The military has not played as prominent a role, although troops initially deployed on President Saïed’s orders to bar entry to the National Assembly in July 2021, and military courts have prosecuted civilians on seemingly politically motivated charges.³⁰ (Tunisian law permits military trials of civilian defendants, despite post-2011 reform efforts.) Some observers assess that President Saïed has leveraged tacit acceptance among military leaders, and some assert that he has attempted to coopt military officers via state appointments, promotions, and other benefits.³¹

Background: Prelude to a Power Grab

Tunisia’s 2010-2011 popular uprising sparked a wave of unrest and political change across the Arab world. While other countries affected by the Arab Spring quickly faced brutal conflicts and

²² AFP, “Tunisia Mass Conspiracy Trial ‘Marred by Violations’: UN Rights Chief,” April 24, 2025, and “Tunisia opposition figures get jail terms in mass trial,” April 19, 2025.

²³ HRW, “Tunisia: Wave of Arrests Targets Critics and Opposition Figures,” February 24, 2023.

²⁴ Department of State, “2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Tunisia”; and UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNOHCHR), “Tunisia: UN experts demand immediate release of former Truth Commission President Sihem Bensedrine,” February 5, 2025.

²⁵ HRW, “Tunisia Doubles Down on Democratic Rollback,” May 2, 2023.

²⁶ Reuters, “Tunisian president says migration to Tunisia aimed at changing demography,” February 21, 2023.

²⁷ Amnesty International (AI), “Tunisia: Repressive crackdown on civil society organizations following months of escalating violence against migrants and refugees,” May 16, 2024; UNOHCHR, “Tunisia must immediately stop hate speech and violence against migrants from south of Sahara,” April 4, 2023.

²⁸ Reuters, “Tunisia dismantles sub-Saharan migrant camps and forcibly deports some,” April 5, 2025; Deutsche-Welle, “Tunisia: Thousands of migrants ‘dumped’ in the desert,” May 25, 2024.

²⁹ See, e.g., Aaron Zelin, “Saïed’s Tunisia Is Politicizing Counterterrorism Again,” The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 9, 2023.

³⁰ AI, “Tunisia: Alarming increase in number of civilians facing military courts,” November 10, 2021.

³¹ See, e.g., Sharan Grewal, “Why Militaries Support Presidential Coups,” *Journal of Democracy*, May 7, 2024; and Pierre Boussel, “Tunisia: The Shadow of the Army,” TRENDS Research & Advisory, September 2, 2022.

resurgent authoritarianism, four Tunisian civil society groups shared the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize for mediating political talks that paved the way for adoption of the 2014 constitution. Many Tunisians, however, characterized the promise of the 2011 uprising as unfulfilled. In one 2019 poll, 87% of respondents said their country was headed in the wrong direction.³² Key institutional reforms stalled, while perceptions of corruption rose, according to surveys.³³ Average incomes and living standards also fell, eroding a once robust middle class. Political alliances among Islamist and secularist rivals may have quieted conflicts over identity and religion in public life, but arguably at the expense of clear policy direction or accountability to voters.³⁴

Ahead of general elections in late 2019, Tunisia saw a wave of protests, labor unrest, and voter backlash against politicians who had led Tunisia since the 2011 transition. President Béji Caïd Essebsi, elected in 2014, died in office in mid-2019, leaving his secularist coalition rudderless amid divisive internal disputes over policy and party leadership. These developments fueled the rise of Kaïs Saïed as an anti-system candidate who campaigned against elite corruption.³⁵ A constitutional law professor, Saïed initially rose to public prominence as a critic of the 2014 constitution and of directly-elected legislatures; he also voiced socially conservative views, opposing proposals to make inheritance laws more gender-equal, calling for reinstatement of the death penalty (suspended in 1994), and referring to homosexuality as a foreign plot.³⁶

After narrowly besting a crowded field of candidates in a first round of voting in 2019, Saïed won a landslide run-off against a media mogul with ties to the pre-2011 authoritarian regime, who spent much of the campaign in jail on financial crimes charges. The newly elected parliament was fractured, with leading parties bleeding support to smaller groups and independents. Once in office, Saïed chafed against the constitution's division of executive powers, tussling with his own prime minister over control of the interior ministry.³⁷ Parliamentary debates were bogged down by partisan paralysis, personal insults, and occasional physical violence. In 2021, street protests over police brutality and a deadly surge in COVID-19 cases placed new pressures on state institutions. It was in this tense context that many Tunisians celebrated President Saïed's announcement on July 25, 2021, that he was dismissing the cabinet, suspending parliament, and lifting parliamentary immunity.³⁸

Tunisia's 2011 "Jasmine Revolution"

Prior to 2011, Tunisia was widely viewed as maintaining a stable and authoritarian regime that prioritized economic growth while staving off political liberalization. The country had had only two leaders since independence from France in 1956: Habib Bourguiba, a secular nationalist and former independence activist, and Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, a former interior minister and prime minister who became president in 1987. Ben Ali cultivated the internal security services and his Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) party as power bases, and harshly repressed political opposition, freedom of expression, and religious activism. Apparent corruption and nepotism, along with repression, reportedly undermined the regime's popular legitimacy, despite relatively effective state services. Another factor was an enduring socioeconomic divide between the developed, tourist-friendly coast and the poorer interior. Anti-government unrest rooted in labor and economic grievances

³² International Republican Institute, *Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Tunisia, January 25-February 11, 2019*.

³³ See, e.g., Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED), "Expert Q&A – Tunisians Reflect on the Tenth Anniversary of the Dignity Revolution," December 17, 2020; and Arab Barometer V, *Tunisia Country Report*, 2019.

³⁴ Sharan Grewal and Shadi Hamid, "The dark side of consensus in Tunisia: Lessons from 2015-2019," Brookings, January 2020.

³⁵ See Zied Boussen and Malek Lakhal, "The Political Usage of Anti-Corruption in Tunisia," EuroMeSCo, June 2023.

³⁶ POMED, *A Guide to Tunisia's 2019 Presidential Election*, September 2019. See also Mohamed-Dhia Hammami, "Past as Prologue: Kaïs Saïed's Prior Statements Point to Upcoming Political Moves," POMED, August 10, 2021.

³⁷ Reuters, "Tunisian president draws security powers into dispute with PM," April 18, 2021.

³⁸ See, e.g., *Financial Times*, "Weary Tunisians welcome president's power grab," August 2, 2021.

occasionally surged in dispossessed areas of the interior, as in the Gafsa region in 2008.³⁹ The country's pre-2011 economic model later came under greater scrutiny; for example, the World Bank documented in 2014 that government regulations had apparently been manipulated to favor firms closely tied to the Ben Ali family.⁴⁰

In December 2010, protests broke out in the interior city of Sidi Bouzid after a street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire to protest police harassment and restrictions on his economic livelihood. Protests quickly spread to neighboring towns and eventually to the capital, Tunis, and wealthy coastal communities associated with the ruling elite. Police opened fire on protesters and made mass arrests; an estimated 338 people were killed.⁴¹ State security force defections reportedly helped turn the tide against Ben Ali, who fled the country for Saudi Arabia on January 14, 2011. Tunisian courts later brought criminal charges against him in absentia. Ben Ali died of natural causes in Saudi Arabia on September 19, 2019.

The Economy

Tunisia has a diverse economy. Textiles, agriculture, tourism, and phosphate mining are key sectors; Tunisia also produces some oil but is a net energy importer. The European Union (EU) is Tunisia's top trading partner, accounting for over half of its trade.⁴² Despite a historically robust middle class and well-educated population, wealth has long been concentrated along the urban, tourist-friendly coast, in contrast to the relatively poor and underdeveloped interior. The economy has generally created low-skilled and low-paid jobs, fueling unemployment and underemployment, particularly among young college graduates. Under former leader Ben Ali, state regulations were reportedly tailored to enable corruption and cronyism.⁴³

Economic grievances helped fuel the 2011 uprising, but the transition to democracy did not deliver greater prosperity. Tunisia experienced a decline in per-capita GDP, falling from upper-middle-income to lower-middle-income status in 2015, where it has since remained. Successive coalition governments failed to address structural economic impediments, while instability in neighboring Libya and a downturn in the European Union further constrained economic growth. Shocks continued to buffet Tunisia, including the COVID-19 pandemic (which led the economy to contract by 8% in 2020), the ripple effects of the Russia-Ukraine war (particularly severe for grain and fuel importers such as Tunisia), and years of drought that have devastated agriculture.⁴⁴ Government debt rose from 67% of GDP in 2019 to 83% in 2024.⁴⁵

After 2011, Tunisia's elected policymakers responded to public pressures by increasing state employment and wages, expanding consumer and producer subsidies, and maintaining extensive regulation and protectionist measures. The U.S. International Trade Administration (ITA) refers to Tunisia's economy as "marked by heavy government control," adding that government and state-owned institutions "dominate" key sectors such as finance, energy, pharmaceuticals, and utilities.⁴⁶ The IMF stated concerns during a \$2.9 billion, 2016-2020 lending program that Tunisia was not making sufficient progress in reducing subsidies, public sector wages, and pensions.⁴⁷ Some IMF-

³⁹ AI, "Tunisia: Behind Tunisia's 'Economic Miracle': Inequality and criminalization of protest," June 17, 2009.

⁴⁰ World Bank, *The Unfinished Revolution*, May 2014.

⁴¹ Associated Press, "Report Raises Number of Killed During Tunisia's Revolution to 338," May 5, 2012.

⁴² European Union, "EU Trade Relations with Tunisia," accessed April 23, 2025.

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

⁴⁴ World Bank, "Tunisia's Economic Recovery Slows Down amid the Drought," November 6, 2023.

⁴⁵ IMF, World Economic Outlook (WEO) database, April 2025.

⁴⁶ Department of Commerce, ITA, "Tunisia Country Commercial Guide," April 15, 2024.

⁴⁷ IMF press release, June 12, 2019.

backed measures during that period—such as a currency devaluation and tax increases—sparked public backlash, including from powerful trade unions.⁴⁸

Over the past two years, Tunisia has seen high inflation (topping 9% in 2023, with an estimated decrease to 7% in 2024), reported shortages of basic goods and medicines, growing food insecurity, and over 16% unemployment.⁴⁹ Growth was effectively flat in 2023 and registered an anemic 1.4% in 2024, according to the IMF. President Saïed has blamed elites and entrenched interests for economic challenges, and rejected an IMF loan agreement that would have required unpopular fiscal tightening measures.⁵⁰

In opinion polls, many Tunisian respondents have expressed a demand for the government to deliver economic improvements, raising questions about whether the public could turn against Saïed if the economy continues to founder.⁵¹ Some analysts have noted the potential for food price inflation or shortages to spark unrest in Tunisia, as has happened in the past.⁵² Some analysts assess, however, that Saïed has effectively deflected blame for the economy onto his predecessors and various other targets whom he is claiming to fight.⁵³

Security Challenges

As of late 2024, the State Department warned of enduring terrorist threats in Tunisia, “exacerbated by Libyan political uncertainty and fragmented governance and regional events such as the ongoing instability in the Sahel and the Israel-Hamas conflict.”⁵⁴ The State Department has instructed U.S. citizens to avoid travel to Tunisian border regions adjacent to Algeria and Libya, and to certain mountainous areas, citing terrorist threats.⁵⁵ Tunisia’s southernmost desert is a military zone where the government restricts all travel. President Saïed has also maintained a years-long national state of emergency granting security forces increased authorities to counter terrorism and instill order.

In 2023, a Tunisian soldier opened fire on a Jewish pilgrimage on the island of Djerba, killing three Tunisian servicemembers and two civilians (one Tunisian-Israeli and one French).⁵⁶ The attack appeared isolated and was rapidly subdued by Tunisian security forces. Home to Africa’s oldest synagogue, Djerba was previously the target of a large Al Qaeda-linked attack in 2002. Internal security has generally improved since a string of large terrorist attacks in 2015-2016, attributable in part to the reduced footprint of transnational terrorist groups in neighboring Libya, along with improvements in Tunisian security forces’ internal coordination and capacity.

Despite its small population, Tunisia was reportedly a top source of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria at the height of Islamic State territorial influence there (ca 2014-2015).⁵⁷ Youth

⁴⁸ *New York Times*, “Belt-Tightening Demands Put Tunisia’s Democracy at Risk,” May 3, 2018.

⁴⁹ IMF, World Economic Outlook database, April 2025; World Food Program, “Tunisia Country Brief,” October 2024.

⁵⁰ Reuters, “Tunisia president rejects IMF ‘diktats’, casting doubt on bailout,” April 6, 2023.

⁵¹ See, e.g., Arab Barometer, “Arab Barometer reveal findings from major Tunisia survey,” March 4, 2024.

⁵² See, e.g., Hamed al-Ghwell, “Bread and power: North Africa’s looming food crisis,” *Arab News*, May 10, 2025.

⁵³ See, e.g., Youssef Cherif, Columbia Global Centers-Tunis, quoted in *Christian Science Monitor*, “Why populist president retains support amid Tunisia’s enduring poverty,” January 24, 2024.

⁵⁴ Department of State, “Country Reports on Terrorism 2023: Tunisia,” December 12, 2024.

⁵⁵ Department of State, “Tunisia Travel Advisory,” October 23, 2024 (current).

⁵⁶ BBC, “Djerba Tunisia: Worshippers killed near Africa’s oldest synagogue,” May 10, 2023.

⁵⁷ UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (UNOHCHR), “Foreign fighters: Urgent measures needed to stop flow from Tunisia – UN expert group warns,” July 10, 2015. In the mid-2000s, Tunisia had reportedly been a prominent source of foreign fighters in the Iraq-based group that evolved into the Islamic State.

marginalization, police brutality, and the mass release of terrorism suspects under a general amnesty in 2011 reportedly fueled domestic Islamist extremist groups and foreign fighter flows.⁵⁸

Foreign Relations

Tunisian foreign policy has generally prioritized close ties with Europe—its largest trading partner and home to a sizable Tunisian diaspora—and cordial relations with its larger, energy-rich neighbors, Algeria and Libya. Tunisia is a member of the African Union and the Arab League. The United States has been Tunisia’s top cumulative source of arms transfers over the past decade, followed by Turkey (Türkiye) and the Netherlands.⁵⁹ Economic ties with the People’s Republic of China (PRC, China) were growing prior to Saïed’s presidency and have continued to expand. Some European leaders have pursued increased cooperation with President Saïed’s government to counter migration from Africa, although a European Union migration pact came under criticism within Europe and Saïed returned some budget support under the deal in 2023.⁶⁰

Compared to previous Tunisian leaders, President Saïed has expressed greater skepticism of Western partners and deepened ties with China, Russia, and Iran.⁶¹ Saïed undertook a state visit to China in May 2024 and met with PRC President Xi Jinping, and the two leaders announced the establishment of a “strategic partnership.”⁶² Saïed previously met with Xi during the first China-Arab States Summit in 2022. PRC firms and financial institutions play less of a prominent role in Tunisia’s economy than in some neighboring states, but Tunisia-China trade has grown in recent years, dominated by China’s exports to Tunisia.⁶³ PRC firms have reportedly sought a role in developing Tunisia’s deep-water ports, though such projects appear to have been delayed.⁶⁴

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited Tunisia and met with President Saïed in 2023, as part of a regional tour focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Lavrov praised Saïed’s “efforts to reform the political system” and pledged to expand bilateral cooperation in sectors including agriculture, public health, high-tech industries, and energy.⁶⁵ Since then, Tunisian imports of Russian wheat have reportedly grown significantly, Russian cargo and naval ships have reportedly visited Tunisian ports, and the two countries’ electoral commissions signed a cooperation agreement.⁶⁶ In early 2025, Moscow added Tunisia to a list of countries whose credit organizations and brokers are eligible to trade currency on the Russian foreign exchange market.⁶⁷

⁵⁸ See Aaron Zelin, *Your Sons Are at Your Service: Tunisia’s Missionaries of Jihad*, Columbia University Press: 2020.

⁵⁹ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), arms transfers database, consulted May 28, 2025. SIPRI’s database collects information from public sources and may not be comprehensive.

⁶⁰ *Politico Europe*, “Tunisia hands back €60M of EU funding as migrant deal tensions soar, October 11, 2023.

⁶¹ See, e.g., Sharan Grewal, “Tunisia Abandons Two-State Solution; Courts Iran, China, and Russia,” Brookings Institution, June 5, 2024; and Ghazi Ben Ahmed, “Tunisia at the Crossroads: What Role for the United States in a Multipolar World?” *Fikra Forum*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 20, 2024.

⁶² PRC State Council, “China, Tunisia establish strategic partnership,” May 30, 2024.

⁶³ PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “China and Tunisia,” consulted May 29, 2025; see also Jonathan Fulton, “Beijing is making inroads in North Africa,” *Atlantic Council*, October 15, 2024.

⁶⁴ Kawthar Zantour, “Frustrated by the West, Tunisia looks East to help its economy,” *Al Majalla*, June 7, 2024; *Ports Europe*, “No funding for delayed Enfidha deepwater port in Tunisia,” February 11, 2024.

⁶⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks following a meeting with President of the Republic of Tunisia Kais Saied, Tunis,” December 21, 2023.

⁶⁶ *Le Monde*, “La Tunisie resserre ses liens avec la Russie,” May 23, 2024; *Military Africa*, “Russian Frigate Visits Tunisia,” October 31, 2024.

⁶⁷ Ministry of Finance of the Russian Federation, “The government expands the list of countries whose banks will be eligible to participate in foreign exchange trading in Russia,” February 2, 2025.

President Saïed characterized the October 7, 2023 Hamas attacks on Israel as “legitimate resistance,” and he has moved away from Tunisia’s historic support for a two-state solution.⁶⁸ Saïed nonetheless blocked a 2023 bill that would have criminalized relations with Israel.⁶⁹ There is historical context and apparent popular support for Tunisian backing of the Palestinian cause. Tunisia hosted the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) headquarters in exile from 1982 to 1993, which was the target of an Israeli air strike in 1985.⁷⁰ Previous Tunisian leaders nonetheless supported negotiations and a two-state solution, and Tunisia helped facilitate talks between the PLO and Israel that evolved into the Oslo peace process.⁷¹

In 2024, President Saïed became the first Tunisian head of state to visit Iran since the Iranian revolution, attending the funeral of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi.⁷² One analyst posited in early 2025 that the rapprochement reflected a “shared anti-Western posture” but that overall ties remained “largely superficial.”⁷³ Tunisia has also pursued financial support from Arab Gulf states. Saudi Arabia pledged \$500 million in soft loans and grants in 2023, but has reportedly made further financial assistance contingent on Tunisia reaching a loan agreement with the IMF.⁷⁴

Algeria has emerged as a vital partner within North Africa, providing loans, diplomatic support, and continued security cooperation.⁷⁵ At a 2022 summit, President Saïed welcomed the leader of the Polisario Front, an Algerian-backed movement that seeks independence for Moroccan-administered Western Sahara, although Tunisian officials asserted that their country maintained “neutrality” on the issue.⁷⁶ Morocco-Tunisia relations suffered as a result.⁷⁷ Tunisia’s relations with sub-Saharan African countries have been strained due to Saïed’s anti-migrant policies.⁷⁸

U.S. Relations

On Tunisia’s national day on March 20, 2025, Secretary of State Marco Rubio stated, “I look forward to exploring commercial opportunities between the United States and Tunisia and continuing to eliminate threats to both our countries’ borders.”⁷⁹ Trump Administration cabinet-level officials do not appear to have made other statements on Tunisia or met with Tunisian counterparts to date.

⁶⁸ In response to the October 7 attacks, Saïed asserted Palestinian rights to “all of the land of Palestine” (Grewal, “Tunisia Abandons Two-State Solution”). In 2024, Tunisia registered reservations regarding the Arab Summit’s use of the terms “June 4, 1967 borders,” “two-state solution,” and “East al-Quds [Jerusalem].” TAP, “33rd Arab Summit: Tunisia expresses reservations over resolutions on Palestinian cause,” May 16, 2024.

⁶⁹ Meshkel, “Pressure Grows to Criminalize Tunisia-Israel Ties, but Government Pushes Back,” November 4, 2023.

⁷⁰ *Washington Post*, “Israeli Air Raid Destroys Arafat’s Base in Tunisia,” October 2, 1985.

⁷¹ The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch 128, “Tunisian Foreign Minister Habib ben Yahia,” October 6, 1994. Tunisia maintained an interests office in Israel from 1996 until 2000, and Israeli tourists have generally participated in the annual pilgrimage to Djerba Island.

⁷² *Tehran Times*, “Tunisian President makes historic visit to Iran to honor late Iranian President,” May 22, 2024. See also Frédéric Bobin, “Tunisia: Kais Saïed’s inclination to turn to Iran,” *Le Monde*, May 25, 2024.

⁷³ Sabina Henneberg, “Are Tunisia and Iran Really Growing Closer?” The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 17, 2025.

⁷⁴ Reuters, “Saudi Arabia to give Tunisia \$500 million as soft loan and grant,” July 20, 2023.

⁷⁵ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, “Tunisian Foreign Policy Under Kais Saïed.”

⁷⁶ Middle East Eye, “Morocco recalls Tunisia ambassador over Polisario Front invite,” August 27, 2022.

⁷⁷ Morocco World News, “Morocco-Tunisia Relations: Is the Ice Finally Melting?” August 16, 2024.

⁷⁸ AU, “The Chairperson of the African Union Commission strongly condemns the racial statements on fellow Africans in Tunisia,” February 24, 2023.

⁷⁹ Department of State, “Tunisia National Day,” March 20, 2025.

The United States and Tunisia cultivated warm ties after 2011, underpinned by U.S. support for Tunisian democracy and increased security cooperation to counter regional terrorist threats. President Obama initiated a Bilateral Strategic Dialogue in 2014 and designated Tunisia a Major Non-NATO Ally in 2015, after Tunisia adopted a new constitution and held multiparty elections.

President Saïed's authoritarian turn strained relations with the United States under the Biden Administration, which criticized government repression of opposition figures and stated alarm at reports that some political detainees' case files cited contacts with U.S. diplomats.⁸⁰ Tunisian officials rejected some Biden Administration human rights criticism as "interference."⁸¹ The Biden Administration supported continued military cooperation, characterizing Tunisia's armed forces as "apolitical," "an important institution in Tunisian society," and "on the front lines" of the fight against terrorism and instability emanating from Libya.⁸² General Michael Langley, Commander of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), visited Tunisia in mid-2024.⁸³ The Biden Administration also urged Tunisia to reach a loan agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which President Saïed rejected.⁸⁴

U.S.-Tunisia Relations: Background

U.S.-Tunisian relations date back to a 1797 Treaty of Peace and Friendship. Tunisia was the site of significant World War II battles, and a U.S. cemetery and memorial in Carthage (outside Tunis) holds nearly 3,000 U.S. military dead. During the Cold War, Tunisia pursued a pro-Western foreign policy, despite an experiment with leftist economic policies in the 1960s. Still, U.S.-Tunisian ties were strained by Israel's 1985 bombing of the PLO headquarters in Tunis, which some Tunisians viewed as having been carried out with U.S. approval.⁸⁵ A 2012 assault on the U.S. embassy and American school, days after the militant attacks on U.S. facilities in Benghazi, Libya, temporarily cooled relations as U.S. officials criticized the then-government's handling of the investigation.⁸⁶

Economic Relations and Trade

Successive U.S. Administrations have encouraged foreign investment and private sector growth in Tunisia.⁸⁷ The United States and Tunisia signed a Customs Mutual Assistance Agreement and agreement to implement the Foreign Accounts Tax Compliance Act in 2019, a Science and Technology Agreement in 2014, a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement in 2002, a Bilateral Investment Treaty in 1990, and a Tax Convention in 1989.⁸⁸ The two countries launched a Joint Economic Commission (JEC) in 2016.

President Trump issued an executive order (EO) on April 2, 2025, that would increase tariffs on U.S. imports from Tunisia to 28%.⁸⁹ On April 9, the President suspended application of most

⁸⁰ White House, "Readout from NSC Spokesperson Emily Horne on Senior Administration Officials Travel to Tunisia," August 13, 2021; and State Department press briefing, March 2, 2023, and "Statement on Arrests of Political Opponents in Tunisia," April 19, 2023.

⁸¹ AfricaNews, "Tunisie: Ghannouchi maintenu en détention, Saïed se justifie," April 21, 2023.

⁸² Department of State, FY2025 Congressional Budget Justification, March 2024, p. 171.

⁸³ AFRICOM Public Affairs, "AFRICOM Commander Visits Tunisia," August 30, 2024.

⁸⁴ Secretary of State Antony Blinken, testimony before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee, "Review of the Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Request for the U.S. Department of State," hearing, March 22, 2023.

⁸⁵ Jonathan C. Randal, "Raid Left Scars on U.S.-Tunisia Ties," *Washington Post*, March 5, 1987.

⁸⁶ See, e.g., U.S. Embassy Tunis statement, May 29, 2013.

⁸⁷ See Department of State, "Tunisia Integrated Country Strategy," updated November 30, 2023.

⁸⁸ Department of State, "U.S. Relations with Tunisia," June 6, 2022 (latest).

⁸⁹ EO 14257 of April 2, 2025, "Regulating Imports with a Reciprocal Tariff to Rectify Trade Practices that Contribute to Large and Persistent Annual United States Goods Trade Deficits," 90 *Federal Register* 15041, April 7 2025.

country-specific increases for 90 days, instead imposing a baseline tariff increase of 10% for all countries.⁹⁰ The United States, one of Tunisia's top trade partners (**Figure 1**), ran a \$620 million trade deficit with Tunisia in 2024, more than double the 2023 gap.⁹¹ Top U.S. exports to Tunisia have included soybeans, aircraft, other transportation equipment, machine parts, petroleum gas, and chemicals; top U.S. imports have included olive oil, fertilizers, crude oil, apparel, and electronics and electrical components.⁹² Tunisian diplomats have reportedly pursued trade negotiations with the United States to avert the U.S. tariff increases—which, under the April 2 EO, would be higher than on other olive oil exporters such as Turkey and Morocco.⁹³ The American Chamber of Commerce in Tunisia has expressed concern about the tariffs' potential impact on U.S.-Tunisia "economic partnership."⁹⁴

Foreign Assistance and Security Cooperation

The Trump Administration has terminated many U.S. aid programs in Tunisia as part of its broader review of U.S. foreign assistance, including support for social services for vulnerable children, community-based and tourism-related development, renewable energy, economic reforms, food security, civil society strengthening, and elections and political processes.⁹⁵ The Administration's dismissal of most U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) staff and planned reorganization of certain USAID functions under the State Department may affect future U.S. capacity to engage in certain programs in Tunisia and elsewhere.

The State Department and USAID allocated \$78 million in bilateral aid for Tunisia in FY2023 (latest public data), of which \$55 million was security assistance and the remainder economic assistance.⁹⁶ These totals represented a decrease in U.S. assistance after President Saïed suspended parliament and parts of the constitution in 2021. The Biden Administration subsequently proposed to decrease aid for Tunisia, while Congress stopped enacting a minimum floor of aid for the country in annual appropriations acts (as it had from FY2016 to FY2021). Starting in FY2022, Congress also introduced new directives, notifications, and reporting requirements regarding aid for Tunisia.⁹⁷ The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) approved, but never signed, a \$499 million development aid compact in mid-2021.⁹⁸ Appropriations provisions regarding FY2024 aid funding for Tunisia were carried into FY2025 via continuing resolutions.

⁹⁰ EO 14266 of April 9, 2025, "Modifying Reciprocal Tariff Rates to Reflect Trading Partner Retaliation and Alignment," 90 *Federal Register* 15625, April 15, 2025.

⁹¹ Office of the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR), "Tunisia Trade Summary," accessed April 23, 2025.

⁹² Observatory of Economic Complexity, data for 2023 (latest), accessed April 23, 2025.

⁹³ *Olive Oil Times*, "Tunisia Seeks Trade Deal to Avert 28 Percent Export Tariff," April 14, 2025.

⁹⁴ *Business News*, "Nouvelles mesures tarifaires américaines : Amcham Tunisia plaide pour un dialogue constructif," April 4, 2025.

⁹⁵ See *Politico*, "Documents reveal scope of Trump's foreign aid cuts," March 26, 2025.

⁹⁶ Department of State, FY2025 Congressional Budget Justification.

⁹⁷ The Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2024, provided that funds "shall be made available for assistance for Tunisia for programs to support democratic governance and civil society, protect due process of law, and maintain regional stability and security" (P.L. 118-47, §7041[j] of Div. F). The act also required State and USAID to submit a spend plan for Tunisia, and to notify Congress of planned aid obligations or expenditures for the country. The explanatory statement accompanying the act tasked the Secretary of State to submit a report on economic reforms, steps to restore democratic governance, and the behavior of state security forces in Tunisia.

⁹⁸ The MCC's FY2025 budget justification stated that compact funding for Tunisia had been "paused" since FY2023. The MCC's authorizing legislation sets specific governance criteria for countries to receive a compact; see CRS Report RL32427, *Millennium Challenge Corporation: Overview and Issues*, by Nick M. Brown.

U.S.-Tunisia security cooperation grew significantly after Tunisia's 2011 political transition, amid a rise in growing transnational threats and strategic competition in North Africa. Tunisia has regularly hosted U.S.-led military exercises, including parts of African Lion, AFRICOM's largest annual exercise, in April 2025, and a North Africa maritime exercise, Phoenix Express, in 2024. The U.S. 6th Fleet flagship USS *Mt. Whitney* visited in April 2025 and transferred two patrol craft to Tunisia.⁹⁹ The Wyoming National Guard has a State Partnership Program with Tunisia.

The Biden Administration decreased State Department-administered security assistance for Tunisia after 2021, although cooperation with Tunisia's armed forces continued. Foreign Military Financing (FMF) allocated for Tunisia dropped from \$85 million in FY2021 to \$45 million in FY2024, although the latter remained the highest bilateral allocation in Africa outside Egypt. The State Department continued to approve arms sales, subject to congressional review, with an apparent shift toward maritime security equipment as counterterrorism concerns emanating from Libya decreased.¹⁰⁰ The Department of Defense (DOD) also continued to support Tunisia's military using its global train-and-equip authority (10 U.S.C. §333), of which Tunisia has been a leading beneficiary in Africa. DOD has provided additional border security support under other legal authorities, such as §1226(f) of the FY2016 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 114-92), as amended and extended ("Support to Certain Governments for Border Security").

Selected Congressional Actions

As discussed above ("Foreign Assistance and Security Cooperation"), Congress enacted provisions regarding Tunisia in annual appropriations measures both before and after President Saïed's 2021 expansion of executive powers. Congress held oversight hearings on Tunisia and U.S. policy in 2021 and 2023.¹⁰¹ In the 119th Congress, Representative Joe Wilson, who serves on the House Committees on Foreign Affairs and Armed Services, has called for the United States to cut aid and impose sanctions "until democracy is restored in Tunisia."¹⁰²

In the 118th Congress, the Safeguarding Tunisian Democracy Act of 2023 (S. 2006), as reported by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, would have limited certain aid obligations for Tunisia (excepting funds for civil society), unless the Secretary of State certified that the government had ceased its use of military courts to try civilians, was making progress in releasing political prisoners, and had "terminated all states of emergency." The bill would also have authorized appropriations for a Tunisia Democracy Support Fund to encourage reforms. Also in the 118th Congress, S.Res. 260 and H.Res. 613, as introduced, would have commended the Tunisian people for democratic achievements following the 2011 uprising, criticized democratic backsliding under President Saïed, and urged the government of Tunisia to release all political prisoners, respect civil liberties, and support a free election in 2024.

⁹⁹ U.S. Navy, "U.S. Transfers Two 34m Patrol Boats to Tunisia During Visit of USS Mount Whitney to Celebrate 220 Years of U.S.-Tunisian Maritime Partnership," April 18, 2025.

¹⁰⁰ See, e.g., Defense Security Cooperation Agency, "Tunisia – 65' Safe Archangel Boats," August 20, 2024.

¹⁰¹ Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia and Counterterrorism, "U.S. Policy on Tunisia," April 26, 2023; and House Foreign Affairs Committee, "Tunisia: Examining the State of Democracy and Next Steps for U.S. Policy," October 14, 2021.

¹⁰² Post on X by Representative Joe Wilson, 2:46pm on February 6, 2025.

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