



Political Transition in Tunisia

Alexis Arieff

Analyst in African Affairs

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Summary

Tunisia has undergone a major political upheaval in recent weeks, dubbed the “Jasmine Revolution.” On January 14, 2011, Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fled the country after several weeks of increasingly audacious anti-government protests. The speaker of parliament, Fouad Mebazaa, has since assumed the role of interim president, and an interim government has been formed ahead of elections expected in six months. However, the stability of the government and the broader impact of recent developments is difficult to predict. The Tunisia uprising appears to have added momentum to latent anti-government and pro-reform sentiment in Egypt, Yemen, Algeria, Jordan, and other countries, and has sparked international concern over stability in a region long associated with seemingly secure, autocratic, pro-U.S. regimes.

Prior to the December-January protests, Tunisia had been seen as a stable, albeit autocratic country since its independence from France in 1956. Ben Ali, in power since 1987, was elected for a fifth term in October 2009 in an election widely seen as flawed and boycotted by leading opposition parties. His Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) party exerted near-total control over parliament, state and local governments, and most political activity. The government cultivated strong ties with France and the European Union, its largest trading partner, as well as with the United States. Despite many political and economic characteristics shared across the region, Tunisia exhibits a number of unique attributes: it has a relatively small territory, a large and highly educated middle class, and a long history of encouraging women’s socio-economic freedoms. Tunisia’s Islamist movement has not played a leading role in the expression of domestic dissent in recent years, although it did in the 1980s before it was banned by Ben Ali.

The unexpected and rapid transition in Tunisia 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 potential future role of Islamist and/or radical movements in the government and society; the role of the military as an emerging political power-broker; 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 may play a role in developments through its foreign assistance policies and oversight of U.S.-Tunisia relations, and of broader U.S. policy toward the Middle East.

U.S. officials, who grew increasingly critical of the government in the days prior to Ben Ali’s departure, have since stated their support for political transition and called for free and fair elections. U.S.-Tunisian relations largely emphasize military and counterterrorism cooperation, although Tunisia has pushed for a greater focus on trade. The United States is Tunisia’s primary supplier of military equipment, which is provided through both direct sales and grants, and a large number of Tunisian military officers have received U.S. training. Congress has been supportive of security assistance programs in Tunisia, directing the State Department in FY2009 and FY2010 to allocate levels of Foreign Military Financing (FMF) that surpassed budget requests by the executive branch.

For analysis of the potential impact of Tunisia’s uprising on Egypt, see CRS Report RL33003, *Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jeremy M. Sharp.

Contents

Recent Developments.....	1
Tunisia’s “Jasmine Revolution”.....	1
Reforms Pledged.....	4
Relations with the United States.....	5
The U.S. Response to Recent Events.....	6
U.S. Assistance.....	7
Congress and Bilateral Aid.....	8
Emerging Actors.....	9
The Trade Unions.....	10
The Security Forces.....	10
The “Legal” Opposition Parties.....	12
The Islamist Movement.....	12
Background on Tunisia.....	16
The Ben Ali Government (1987-January 2011).....	17
Human Rights.....	17
Emergence of Discontent.....	18
Terrorism.....	18
The Economy.....	20
Foreign Relations.....	21
Israel and the Palestinians.....	21
Europe.....	21
Regional Relations.....	22
Outlook.....	22

Figures

Figure 1. Map of Tunisia.....	1
-------------------------------	---

Tables

Table 1. U.S. Aid to Tunisia.....	9
-----------------------------------	---

Contacts

Author Contact Information.....	23
Acknowledgments.....	23

Recent Developments

Tunisia's "Jasmine Revolution"

Tunisia has experienced continuing political uncertainty since longtime President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fled the country on January 14, 2011 following several weeks of increasingly audacious anti-government protests.¹ Since the start of the upheaval, dubbed the "Jasmine Revolution," protesters have appeared to lack a central leader and are not necessarily aligned with an identifiable political or ideological movement. Tunisia's future course remains uncertain. The uprising nonetheless appears to have inspired reform and opposition movements in Egypt, Yemen, Jordan, Algeria, and other countries. It has also sparked international concern over stability in a region associated with secure, autocratic, pro-Western regimes.

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

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

Figure 1. Map of Tunisia



Source: Map Resources, adapted by CRS

¹ Ben Ali went to Saudi Arabia. France, which had been seen as a strong backer of the former president, signaled he was not welcome there, according to news reports. See Catherine Bremer, "Analysis-French Race to Adapt to New Maghreb Mood," *Reuters*, January 17, 2011.

On January 27, Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi announced a new interim cabinet, the second in ten days. The new cabinet includes only three members of the former ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) party, all in minor roles, compared to ten in the first interim cabinet. Key ministerial positions, including those of foreign minister, defense minister, and interior minister, which had been held by RCD members under Ben Ali and in the first interim cabinet, were transferred to independent figures. Two leaders of officially recognized opposition parties who had been appointed to the first post-Ben Ali government retained their positions. However, Ghannouchi—a close ally of the former president—remains prime minister, and former ruling party members continue to control the legislature and, presumably, much of the government’s institutional administration. The announcement of a new government has quieted anti-government unrest, and many residents of the capital, Tunis, have returned to work. However, small numbers of demonstrators continue to challenge Ghannouchi’s continuation as prime minister.

Members of formerly banned political parties have not been invited to participate in the interim government, although authorities have announced a general amnesty. Two figures viewed as potentially influential are Rachid Ghannouchi (no relation to the prime minister), leader of the Islamist movement Hizb Al Nahda (Renaissance); and Moncef Marzouki, a human rights activist and leader of the activist Congress for the Republic (CPR) party. Both were in exile under Ben Ali, and have recently returned to Tunisia. (See “Profiles” text-box, below.)

The rapid and unexpected transition in Tunisia has led many analysts to examine the roles and views of Tunisia’s security forces, some of whom led the crackdown on demonstrators while others appear to have influenced Ben Ali’s decision to resign. Speculation has centered, in particular, around General Rachid Ammar, the army chief of staff, who is widely reported to have refused orders to open fire on demonstrators and to have pushed for Ben Ali’s departure. On January 24, Ammar publicly promised to uphold Tunisia’s “revolution” and promised that the military would guarantee stability until elections are held. Ammar’s comments sparked concern among some observers over whether the armed forces, which were seen as relatively apolitical under Ben Ali, could become an arbiter of domestic politics, particularly if the security situation fails to stabilize.² Concerns over stability remain amid recent reports of activities by unidentified armed gangs, including an attack on the Interior Ministry on February 1.³

Prime Minister Ghannouchi has been in office since 1999, and initially assumed power in Ben Ali’s absence. On January 15, Ghannouchi turned over the role of acting president to the speaker of parliament, Fouad Mebazaa, in line with constitutional prerogatives.⁴ The stability of the first interim cabinet, which was announced on January 17, appeared immediately to be threatened by discontent among members of the public who accused opposition leaders and civil society members of being overly conciliatory to elements of the former regime.

A day after being appointed, the trade union members of the interim government withdrew, along with an opposition party leader, as demonstrators called for the complete dissolution of the RCD.

² Steven A. Cook, “The Calculations of Tunisia’s Military,” *ForeignPolicy.com*, January 20, 2011.

³ *Reuters*, “Tunisian Minister Talks of ‘Conspiracy’ After Attacks,” February 1, 2011.

⁴ 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.

Mebazaa, Ghannouchi, and other RCD members in the cabinet formally resigned from the party, but this did not bring an end to demonstrations. During the week of January 24, new waves of protesters streamed into the capital from poorer, rural areas—including the town of Sidi Bouzid, where demonstrations first began—and organized a sit-in around the prime minister’s office.

Since Ben Ali’s departure, the government’s response to protests has been tempered, with security forces largely relying on nonlethal crowd-control tactics. At present, the focus of security forces has turned toward containing disorder. As the original demonstrations mounted in early January, police repeatedly opened fire on crowds and arrested protesters, journalists, opposition party members, lawyers, and rights advocates. Some detainees were reportedly tortured.⁵ According to official statistics, 78 people were killed in clashes with security forces, though the United Nations has given a much higher toll.⁶ On January 18, Prime Minister Ghannouchi said in a television interview that he had instructed the security forces not to open fire on demonstrators, and promised that “all those who initiated this massacre, this carnage, will be brought to justice.”⁷ Mebazaa has referred to those who died in the uprising as “the martyrs of dignity and freedom,” and three days of national mourning were held in their honor.⁸ The government has also pledged to compensate the families of those killed in the uprising.

The December-January Protests

Anti-government protests began in Tunisia 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. Unrest was first reported on December 24 in the interior region of Sidi Bouzid, where thousands of demonstrators rioted and attacked a government building after a 26-year-old street vendor set himself on fire to protest police interference and a lack of economic opportunities for young people. The protests 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 feel toward members of the ruling elite. Authorities imposed a state of emergency on January 14, prohibiting any gathering of over three people and authorizing the use of force against “any suspect person who does not obey orders to stop.”⁹

Prior to his exile, Ben Ali offered a widening series of concessions on political and civil rights in an effort to stem the anti-government uprising. The president reshuffled his cabinet, replaced the governor of the Sidi Bouzid region and the interior minister, and promised 300,000 new jobs. At the same time, he initially maintained that police had used their weapons only in “legitimate defense” against attacks by demonstrators, and accused protest leaders of being foreign-influenced “extremists” and terrorists.¹⁰ On January 13, Ben Ali gave an address on national television in which he pledged to step down when his term was up in 2014, to allow fresh parliamentary elections before then, and to end state censorship. However, these promises did not placate demonstrators, who continued to call for Ben Ali’s immediate resignation and the dissolution of the RCD.

⁵ *Reuters*, “Interview-UN Rights Boss Urges Tunisia to Probe Killings,” January 13, 2011.

⁶ As of February 1, the United Nations estimated that at least 219 people were killed, including 72 killed in prison fires.

⁷ David D. Kirkpatrick, “Tunisia Unity Government Fractures,” *The New York Times*, January 18, 2011.

⁸ National Tunisian TV (Tunis), “Tunisian Acting President Promises to ‘Protect Will of the People,’” January 19, 2011, via Open Source Center.

⁹ Tunisia 7 Television, “Tunisian Authorities Declare State of Emergency,” via Open Source Center.

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

Reforms Pledged

Authorities have stressed the “interim” nature of the post-Ben Ali government and emphasize that its main tasks are to stabilize the country and prepare for presidential elections. The government has pledged to hold these elections within six months—an extension from the 60 days originally promised—in response to protester demands that the pre-election period be lengthened in order to dislodge elements of the former regime.¹¹ Government officials also have promised a range of political reforms, including freedom of expression, the lifting of controls on the Internet, the recognition of formerly banned political movements, a general amnesty for their members, the release of political prisoners, and the lifting of restrictions on the Tunisian League for Human Rights.

The interim government has formed working committees to:

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

In connection with the latter, the public prosecutor has announced an investigation into the financial and real estate holdings of Ben Ali; his wife, Leila Trabelsi; and selected family members. Members of the Ben Ali and Trabelsi families reportedly own or control many of the country’s biggest companies, and are thought to have stashed away significant resources overseas.¹² On January 26, the interim government issued an international arrest warrant through Interpol for Ben Ali and several close relatives who have fled the country. At least thirty-three members of the extended family have reportedly been arrested inside Tunisia.¹³ These efforts are perceived to be widely popular among ordinary Tunisians; in the days before Ben Ali’s exit, protesters trashed and looted luxury homes belonging to members of the ruling elite. Western governments are cooperating with Tunisian efforts to pursue members of the former president’s family: France, Switzerland, and the European Union have initiated asset freezes, while Canada has revoked the citizenship of Ben Ali’s brother-in-law. It is unclear what position Saudi Arabia will take: Saudi authorities granted sanctuary to Ben Ali and some members of his family and reportedly he remains in the western Saudi city of Jeddah.

Reports indicate several cautious signs of progress in implementing domestic reforms. Nearly 2,000 individuals identified as political prisoners reportedly have been released from jail.¹⁴ Many online restrictions have been lifted. At the same time, much of the old regime’s internal security apparatus remains intact, despite the appointment of a non-RCD figure to head the Interior Ministry and the replacement of a number of senior security officials. Some activists continue to

¹¹ While the constitution stipulates that elections should be held within 60 days of vacancy of the presidency, it also allows this interim period to be extended.

¹² Colin Freeman, “Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and His Family’s ‘Mafia Rule,’” *The Telegraph* (UK), January 16, 2011.

¹³ *Reuters*, “Factbox—Tunisia’s Ex-First Family and Its Vast Riches,” January 19, 2011.

¹⁴ Analysts have pointed to the difficulty in distinguishing prisoners of conscience from suspects who may have been sentenced without due process, including under Tunisia’s heavy-handed terrorism laws; many of the latter have yet to be released.

report evidence of government surveillance.¹⁵ Occasional police violence against demonstrators, as well as journalists covering the unrest, continues to be reported. A leading private television station that had been praised for its relatively independent coverage of demonstrations was temporarily shuttered on January 23, and its owner briefly arrested for “treason,” accusations that were later dropped. Observers have questioned whether those in charge of reform committees and official investigations will be able to work independently and whether their conclusions will be implemented.¹⁶ Many analysts believe that Tunisia’s restrictive constitution and electoral code preclude the possibility of free and fair elections, although prospects for their revision under the interim government are unclear.

Relations with the United States

The United States and Tunisia have enjoyed continuous relations since 1797, prior to French colonization. Tunisia was the site of major battles during World War II, and was liberated by Allied forces in 1943 as part of the Allied campaign known as 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.¹⁷

U.S.-Tunisian relations during Ben Ali’s presidency largely emphasized security cooperation, although the Tunisian government pressed for a greater focus on increasing trade. The United States considered Ben Ali to be an ally, a moderate Arab ruler, and a partner in international counterterrorism efforts. Tunisia cooperates in NATO’s Operation Active Endeavor, which provides counterterrorism surveillance in the Mediterranean; participates in NATO’s Mediterranean Dialogue; and allows NATO ships to make port calls at Tunis. However, Tunisia did not support the 1991 Gulf War or the 2003 war against Iraq and, when the 2003 war in Iraq began, Ben Ali expressed regret and fear that the conflict might destabilize the Middle East.¹⁸ Tunisian officials’ criticism was not voiced directly at the United States, and their stance did not harm bilateral relations.

Despite generally positive bilateral ties, U.S. officials occasionally expressed public concern over 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.”¹⁹ 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.”²⁰ In July, the State Department expressed “deep” concern over “the decline in

¹⁵ *Reuters*, “Tunisia’s Police State Still In Place—Activists,” January 24, 2011.

¹⁶ Lin Noueihed, “Une Commission Enquête sur les Forces de Sécurité en Tunisie,” *Reuters*, January 22, 2011.

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ *Tunis Infotunisie*, “Ben Ali Expresses ‘Deep Regret’ at Start of War Against Iraq,” March 20, 2003, Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) Document AFP20030320000266.

¹⁹ U.S. State Department Daily News Briefing, October 26, 2009, via *CQ*; U.S. State Department, “Tunisia,” *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 2004*, released February 28, 2005.

²⁰ U.S. State Department, “Secretary of State Clinton Delivers Remarks on Internet Freedom,” January 21, 2010; via (continued...)

political freedoms, notably severe restrictions on freedom of expression in Tunisia,” particularly with regard to the sentencing of an independent journalist, Fahem Boukadous, to four years in prison, reportedly in connection with his coverage of protests in Gafsa in 2008.²¹ In parallel with these expressions of concern, the United States continued to provide military and economic assistance to the Tunisian government (see “U.S. Assistance,” below).

The United States criticized Tunisia’s reaction to anti-government demonstrations in January 2011, and since Ben Ali’s departure has conveyed support for the uprising and new interim government (see “The U.S. Response,” 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 anti-government protests.²²

The U.S. State Department’s Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) has a regional office in Tunis, responsible for programming to enhance political, economic, and educational reforms in Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, and Morocco as well as Tunisia, which opened in August 2004. MEPI has implemented very few bilateral programs in Tunisia. Critics suggested that the United States sent mixed signals to Ben Ali by aiding the military while not strongly supporting democratizing elements, despite expressing a desire for reform in the Middle East.

U.S.-Tunisian trade is relatively low in volume because Tunisia is a small country and conducts most of its trade with Europe. In 2009, the United States imported \$325.8 million in goods from Tunisia and exported \$502.1 million in goods to Tunisia. While Tunisian imports of U.S. goods did not fluctuate significantly during the economic recession, U.S. imports from Tunisia nearly halved between 2008 and 2009.²³ Tunisia is eligible for special trade preferences, that is, duty-free entry for listed products, under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) Program. The United States and Tunisia have a trade investment framework agreement (TIFA) and a bilateral investment treaty. TIFAs can be the first step toward a free-trade agreement (FTA).

The U.S. Response to Recent Events

U.S. criticism of the government’s response to the December-January demonstrations, although initially muted, mounted as the protests grew. On January 7, the State Department released a statement relaying concern about the demonstrations and related government Internet surveillance. The statement called on “all parties to show restraint as citizens exercise their right of public assembly” and noted that U.S. officials had “conveyed our views directly to the Tunisian government.”²⁴ In response, the Tunisian government summoned U.S. Ambassador Gordon Gray to protest the United States’ characterization of events.

(...continued)

CQ.

²¹ 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.

²² Christopher Alexander, “Tunisia’s Protest Wave: Where It Comes From and What It Means,” *ForeignPolicy.com*, January 3, 2011.

²³ U.S. International Trade Commission data.

²⁴ U.S. State Department, “Recent Protests and Website Hackings in Tunisia,” January 7, 2011.

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.”²⁵ 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 facing instability and extremism. Events in Tunisia provided a vivid backdrop to her remarks.

On January 14, after Ben Ali’s departure, 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.”²⁶ Secretary Clinton echoed the president’s call for free and fair elections and also called for the Tunisian government to “build a stronger foundation for Tunisia’s future with economic, social, and political reforms.” She added, “On my trip to the Middle East this week, I heard people everywhere yearning for economic opportunity, political participation and the chance to build a better future. Young people especially need to have a meaningful role in the decisions that shape their lives. Addressing these concerns will be challenging, but the United States stands ready to help.”²⁷ 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.

The State Department has maintained close contact with the interim government since Ben Ali’s departure. On January 22, Secretary of State Clinton called Prime Minister Ghannouchi to express support for reforms.²⁸ From January 24 through January 26, the State Department’s Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs, Jeffrey Feltman, traveled to Tunisia to meet with government officials, political party leaders, and civil society members. On January 22, the State Department announced it had revoked the diplomatic visas of former Tunisian government officials and their family members, who were no longer entitled to them.²⁹

U.S. Assistance

U.S. aid is modest by regional standards and focuses on military assistance, arms sales, and counterterrorism cooperation. Congress reviews appropriation and authorization requests and arms sale proposals regularly in support of U.S. assistance programs. A U.S.-Tunisian Joint Military Commission meets annually and joint exercises are held regularly. The Defense Security

²⁵ *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)*.

²⁶ The White House, “Statement by the President on Events in Tunisia,” January 14, 2011.

²⁷ U.S. State Department, “Recent Events in Tunisia,” January 14, 2011.

²⁸ U.S. State Department, “Secretary Clinton’s Call to Tunisian Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi,” January 23, 2011.

²⁹ U.S. Embassy, Tunisia, “Revocation of Diplomatic Visas,” January 22, 2011.

Cooperation Agency (DSCA) reports that Tunisia relies on U.S. Foreign Military Financing (FMF) assistance to “maintain its aging 80’s and early 90’s era inventory of U.S.-origin equipment, which comprises nearly 70% of Tunisia’s total inventory.”³⁰ According to private sector analysis, the United States is Tunisia’s primary supplier of military equipment, largely purchased through Foreign Military Sales (FMS) agreements.³¹ FMF and “Section 1206”³² 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).³³ Tunisia has also been one of the top twenty recipients of International Military Education and Training (IMET) since FY1994.³⁴

Tunisia is one of ten countries participating in the U.S. Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), a State Department-led regional program aimed at helping North African and Sahelian countries better control their territory and strengthen their counterterrorism capabilities. The Defense Department allocated over \$13 million between FY2007 and FY2009 on 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.³⁵ This is in addition to nearly \$19 million in Section 1206 funds allocated in FY2008 and FY2009, which have supported the provision of equipment (as discussed above) and training related to counterterrorism. Under P.L. 111-322 (Continuing Appropriations and Surface Transportation Extensions Act, 2011, signed into law on December 22, 2010), the Obama Administration can provide Tunisia aid at FY2010 levels until March 4, 2011, or the passage of superseding FY2011 appropriations legislation.

Congress and Bilateral Aid

Congress has been supportive of U.S. military assistance in Tunisia in recent years. In an explanatory statement accompanying P.L. 111-8, the Omnibus Appropriations Act, 2009 (enacted on March 11, 2009), appropriators allocated \$12 million for FMF assistance for Tunisia, far more than the State Department’s budget request for \$2.62 million. At the same time, appropriators wrote in the explanatory statement that “restrictions on political freedom, the use of torture, imprisonment of dissidents, and persecution of journalists and human rights defenders are of concern and progress on these issues is necessary for the partnership between the United States and Tunisia to further strengthen.”³⁶ In the conference report accompanying P.L. 111-117, the

³⁰ Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), “Tunisia Summary,” updated January 13, 2011.

³¹ Forecast International, *International Military Markets—Middle East & Africa*, “Tunisia: Section 3—Market Overview,” May 2009.

³² 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.

³³ This assistance is described as supporting the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP).

³⁴ DSCA, *op. cit.*

³⁵ Funding figures provided to CRS by the State Department, 2010.

³⁶ *Congressional Record*, February 23, 2009, p. H2417.

Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2010 (enacted on December 16, 2009), appropriators directed the State Department to allocate \$18 million in FMF for Tunisia, \$3 million above the requested amount. The conference report also allocated \$2 million in Economic Support Fund (ESF)—the amount requested—for “programs and activities in southern Tunisia and to promote respect for human rights, as proposed by the Senate.”³⁷

Table I. U.S. Aid to Tunisia
Annual and Supplemental Appropriations, \$ Thousands

	FY2008 Actual	FY2009 Actual	FY2010 Estimate	FY2011 Request
FMF	\$8,300	\$12,000	\$15,000	\$4,900
ESF	\$1,200	\$800	\$2,000	-
IMET	\$1,700	\$1,700	\$1,950	\$2,300
INCLE	\$198	-	-	-
NADR	\$100	\$425	\$200	-
1206 (Defense Department)	\$10,000	\$8,800	-	unavailable

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.

Source: State Department Congressional Budget Justifications, FY2009-FY2011.

Emerging Actors

As political uncertainty continues to characterize the situation in Tunisia, it is difficult to distinguish which groups and individuals have the ability and popular credibility to decisively influence events. Although the former ruling RCD party has dissolved its central committee and no longer dominates the cabinet, its members remain in control of the legislature and many administrative institutions. Emerging contenders for influence include Tunisia’s trade union federation; the security forces; the “legal” opposition parties; and the formerly banned Islamist movement, which appears poised to re-enter the political sphere. Background on these entities is provided below.

Other formerly banned groups include the Tunisian Workers’ Communist Party (PCOT), which was founded in the 1980s and operated clandestinely under Ben Ali, and the Congress for the Republic (CPR), led by Moncef Marzouki, who recently returned to Tunisia from exile and announced his intention to run for president. Further background on selected individuals is given in the “Profiles” text-box, below.

While Tunisia’s trade union federation and the banned Islamist movement have, at different times, constituted the main vehicles for the mass expression of anti-government dissent, the potential for either group to present a cohesive political vision is unclear. Both, along with registered political parties and formerly banned leftist movements, have long been subject to

³⁷ *Congressional Record*, December 8, 2009, p. H14350.

government repression, harassment, and co-option. Although they have at times collaborated in organizing protests, as during a series of general strikes in the mid-1980s, their leaders reportedly view each other with suspicion.³⁸

The Trade Unions

The influence of Tunisia's main union federation, the Tunisian General Union of Labor (UGTT), extends far beyond its formal role of representing Tunisia's workers through an institutionalized system of collective bargaining. Since Tunisia's independence, the UGTT has served as a rare legal conduit for public opposition to the government, and analysts view it as an important political force. The UGTT, which claims over half a million members, reportedly played a key role in sustaining the December-January protests, which its leadership framed as rooted in economic and labor grievances.³⁹ At the same time, the union movement is reportedly highly fragmented, with a relatively conservative, pro-government leadership frequently diverging from its more radical middle-tier and grass-roots membership. This tension may explain the decision by three UGTT representatives to accept, then immediately resign from, cabinet positions in the post-Ben Ali interim government. Union leaders have since called for wage increases in certain sectors and threatened strikes, reportedly provoking fears among some business interests that they are exploiting current instability for political gain.⁴⁰

The UGTT was formed in the mid-1940s and was a force in Tunisia's independence movement. During the Cold War, it positioned itself as pro-Western (non-Communist) and formed links with the American labor movement.⁴¹ Tunisia's first president, Habib Bourguiba (in power from 1956 through 1987), strove to keep the unions under the government's wing; during the 1960s, former UGTT leader Ahmed Ben Salah led a decade-long period of socialist-oriented economic policy as Minister for Finance and Planning. By the late 1970s, however, amid growing economic unease, the union's leadership turned to overt confrontation with the government, particularly over grievances related to low wages and food price hikes.⁴² 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 through influencing its leadership selection process. The UGTT resurged as a key instigator of anti-government unrest in recent years, organizing protests in the mining region of Gafsa in 2008 and 2010 that were the nearest precursor to the December-January uprising.

The Security Forces

Ben Ali's unexpected departure has led analysts to examine the role and cohesion of Tunisia's security forces, amid recent indications of internal divisions. These appear to stem from a divide

³⁸ Christopher Alexander, "Opportunities, Organizations, and Ideas: Islamists and Workers in Tunisia and Algeria," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 32 (2000).

³⁹ UGTT, *Déclaration de la Commission Administrative Nationale*, January 4, 2011; on membership, see the UGTT's website, at [www.ugtt.org.tn].

⁴⁰ *The Economist*, "No One Is Really in Charge," January 29, 2011.

⁴¹ Global Security, "Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens (UGTT)," at [http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/tunisia/ugtt.htm].

⁴² See Niger Disney, "The Working-Class Revolt in Tunisia," Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP) Reports, 67 (May 1978).

between the internal security forces—such as the police, the national security service (*sûreté nationale*), and the national guard—which fall under the purview of the Interior Ministry and were closely associated with Ben Ali, and the military, which receives fewer state resources and is seen as relatively apolitical.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ The deployment of the military to the streets on January 12 turned out to be a turning point, and many analysts contend that the military leadership subsequently played a key role in ending Ben Ali’s presidency. Such speculation has centered, in particular, around General Rachid Ammar, the army chief of staff, who is widely reported to have refused orders to open fire on demonstrators. On January 23, Ammar publicly addressed protesters and promised to safeguard Tunisia’s “revolution,” which has raised his public profile and popularity while sparking concerns among some analysts that he could be pursuing a role as a political power-broker.⁴⁵

The military comprises roughly 35,000 personnel; military service is compulsory for one year, but many Tunisians reportedly evade it. Government spending on the military constitutes only 1.4% of GDP—a low proportion compared to other countries in the region, such as Algeria (3.3%), Egypt (3.4%), Libya (3.9%), and Morocco (5%).⁴⁶ The armed forces are positioned largely against external threats, and also participate (to a limited extent) in multilateral peacekeeping missions. Civilian-led services are primarily responsible for domestic security and have been accused of a wide range of abuses, including extrajudicial arrests, denial of due process, torture, and the mistreatment of detainees. While the exact number of domestic security agents is unknown, it is thought by some analysts to far exceed the number of military personnel. Divisions between police commanders and the rank-and-file were exposed in the aftermath of Ben Ali’s exit, as thousands of police officers held their own anti-government demonstration to distance themselves from the RCD and call for better working conditions.⁴⁷

Members of the military have led efforts to stabilize the security situation in recent weeks, including by pursuing members of the domestic security services seen as loyal to the old regime. On January 16, the government announced arrest warrants for the former head of presidential security, Ali Seriati, and several of his “accomplices,” for allegedly plotting against the state.⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹ Efforts to assert control over the security situation appear to continue.

⁴³ In the late 1970s and mid-1980s, the military led the repression of anti-government protests. However, this role was largely relegated to the civilian security services under Ben Ali. Unlike in neighboring Algeria, the military leadership did not play a role in the independence movement or in early state formation.

⁴⁴ Human Rights Watch, “Tunisia: Hold Police Accountable for Shootings,” January 29, 2011.

⁴⁵ Issandr El Amrani, “Tunisia Diary: Ammar’s Move?” *TheArabist.net*, January 24, 2011. As recently as mid-2010, an analysis of Tunisia’s political stability concluded that “a coup is a real possibility” should instability affect the transfer of power after Ben Ali. Veritiss, *Tunisia: Outlook 2011-2015* [UNCLASSIFIED], prepared For the Defense Intelligence Agency Defense Intelligence Open Source Program Office, August 2, 2010.

⁴⁶ CIA World Factbook; figures dated 2006.

⁴⁷ Hadeel Al-Shalchi, “Tunisia’s Police Also Protest,” *AP*, January 23, 2011.

⁴⁸ David D. Kirkpatrick, “Military Backs New Leaders in Tunisia,” *The New York Times*, January 16, 2011.

⁴⁹ Angelique Chrisafis, “Confusion, Fear and Horror in Tunisia as Old Regime’s Militia Carries on the Fight,” *The Guardian* (UK), January 17, 2011.

The “Legal” Opposition Parties

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

- the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), founded by Ahmed Nejib El Chebbi;
- Ettajdid (a leftist, former Communist party), led by Ahmed Brahim; and,
- the Democratic Forum of Labor and Liberties (FDTL), led by Mustafa Ben Jaafar.

Brahim, Chebbi, and Jaafar were offered positions in the first post-Ben Ali “unity” cabinet on January 17: Chebbi was named minister of regional development, Brahim minister of higher education and scientific research, and Ben Jaafar minister of health. Ben Jaafar resigned almost immediately, while the other two have retained their positions, including in the January 27 cabinet reshuffle.

The PDP is thought to be the largest of the three parties, but the degree of popular support for any of them is difficult to gauge. Only Brahim’s Ettajdid competed in the most recent presidential and parliamentary elections, in 2009; Ettajdid won three parliamentary seats but Brahim garnered less than 2% of the presidential vote. In the run-up to the 2009 election, Chebbi decided not to compete in order not to give the authorities what he termed “fake legitimacy”; his candidacy may not have been accepted, anyway, under Tunisia’s restrictive electoral code.⁵⁰ The Constitutional Council rejected Ben Jaafar’s candidacy because he allegedly had not been selected at least two years before the date of submission of his candidacy as required by a 2008 law. The FDTL was also barred from participating in the 2009 parliamentary campaign.

The Islamist Movement

Tunisia’s main Islamist group is the formerly banned Hizb Al Nahda (Awakening or Renaissance; alternate spellings include Ennahda, An-Nahda, and An Nahdah) party, which is led by Rachid Ghannouchi. Ghannouchi, who was in exile in London for the past two decades, returned to Tunisia on January 30 following the announcement of a general amnesty. He has generally portrayed himself as a moderate who would participate in the political system and not seek to scale back women’s rights, and has compared Al Nahda to Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP).⁵¹ However, he espoused more radical rhetoric during confrontations with the government in the 1980s and early 1990s, and his return is reportedly viewed with some trepidation by Tunisian secularists. Ghannouchi has said he will not run for president, although he has left open the possibility that younger party activists may do so.

⁵⁰ Chebbi’s candidacy reportedly did not fulfill Article 66 of Tunisia’s electoral code, as amended, which stipulates that presidential candidates must be supported by at least thirty members of the legislature or municipal council chairs.

⁵¹ David D. Kirkpatrick, “Opposition in Tunisia Finds Chance for Rebirth,” January 21, 2011; Lin Noueihed, “Analysis—What Role for the Islamists in the New Tunisia?” *Reuters*, January 22, 2011. For a sympathetic background on Ghannouchi’s political and philosophical evolution, see Azzam S. Tamimi, *Rachid Ghannouchi: A Democrat within Islamism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Ben Ali routinely emphasized the threat of Islamist extremism in order to justify his authoritarian rule, and hundreds—perhaps thousands—of suspected Islamists were convicted under Ben Ali’s 2003 anti-terrorism law (see “Terrorism,” below). Despite these numbers (which may have been amplified through questionable trial procedures), and apparent signs of growing personal religiosity among some segments of the population, the full extent of popular support for Islamist political platforms is unknown. Islamists did not play a prominent role in the protests that unseated Ben Ali, and some analysts believe Tunisia’s relative prosperity, effective social services, and well-educated population weigh against the potential influence of radical Islamist movements. At the same time, movements that were repressed under the former regime may enjoy greater credibility in the post-Ben Ali era.

Al Nahda was first formally organized as the Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI) in 1981—soon after multiparty politics were legalized by then-President Bourguiba—by Ghannouchi and Abdel Fattah Moro, who became the party’s secretary-general. Although the MTI was relatively moderate compared to other Islamist groups in operation, it emerged as the most popular and was therefore seen as posing the most significant threat to the government. Soon after the MTI applied for legal recognition as a political party, over 100 of its most prominent activists were arrested.⁵² Clashes with the government (and with leftist groups) mounted, as the MTI organized mass demonstrations and protests on university campuses. In an effort to appease the movement, the government had its leaders released from jail in 1984, and in 1985 permitted the MTI to form a “cultural society,” while continuing to reject its attempts to gain legal recognition.⁵³ MTI-orchestrated demonstrations nonetheless escalated and Ghannouchi was again arrested in early 1987 along with dozens of other party members. The unrest, combined with that orchestrated by trade unions, undermined popular support for Bourguiba’s presidency and laid the groundwork for Ben Ali’s palace coup in November 1987.⁵⁴

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

Violent confrontations between the government and Al Nahda activists escalated, culminating in an alleged Islamist attack on a ruling party office in 1991. Al Nahda leaders condemned the attack and denied that those responsible belonged to their movement. Whether or not this was true, Ben Ali accused Al Nahda of plotting to violently overthrow the government and launched a campaign to eradicate the group and all signs of fundamentalist Islam. The government subsequently claimed it had unearthed an Islamist plot to assassinate Ben Ali and topple the government, and in 1992 Tunisian military courts convicted 265 Al Nahda members on charges of plotting a coup. Al Nahda denied the accusations, and human rights organizations criticized the case as biased and insufficiently protective of due process.⁵⁵ Ghannouchi, already in exile, was sentenced in absentia.

⁵² Henry Munson Jr., “Islamic Revivalism in Morocco and Tunisia,” *The Muslim World*, 76:3-4 (1986).

⁵³ Munson 1986, op. cit.

⁵⁴ Jonathan Randal, “Tunisia at the Brink,” *The Washington Post*, May 31, 1987.

⁵⁵ Christopher Alexander, *Tunisia: Stability and Reform in the Modern Maghreb*, Routledge: New York, 2010.

Selected Profiles of Key Figures⁵⁶

Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Former President (See also “Background: Tunisia Since Independence,” below.)

Ben Ali, who left the country on January 14, 2011, and is now living in exile in Saudi Arabia, spent much of his career in intelligence and security. He assumed the presidency in November 1987 by sidelining ailing former President Habib Bourguiba, in what many observers viewed as a palace coup. Bourguiba had named Ben Ali interior minister in 1986 and promoted him to prime minister in October 1987, placing him in line for the presidential succession. Previously, Ben Ali had served as director of military security and head of the national security service. He reportedly played a key role in coordinating military and police crackdowns on trade union and Islamist unrest in the late 1970s and mid-1980s.⁵⁷ A military general, Ben Ali trained at France’s elite St. Cyr military academy and reportedly received intelligence and security training in the United States.⁵⁸

Mohamed Ghannouchi, Prime Minister

Ghannouchi was born in 1941 in the coastal town of Sousse and studied economics and finance. He entered government when Ben Ali was appointed prime minister in 1987, and was appointed to the cabinet when Ben Ali ascended to the presidency later that year. Ben Ali appointed Ghannouchi prime minister in 1999. As prime minister, and previously minister of international co-operation and foreign investment, Ghannouchi was credited with many of the country’s economic reforms.⁵⁹ He was also widely seen as the president’s right-hand man, reportedly earning the nickname “Monsieur Oui-Oui.”⁶⁰ Initially upon Ben Ali’s departure from Tunisia, Ghannouchi announced he was taking over as interim president, before ceding the position to the parliament speaker. Ghannouchi has since taken a high-profile stance, initiating talks with the opposition on the formation of a unity government and regularly making statements on the government’s behalf.

General Rachid Ammar, Army Chief of Staff

Ammar, 63, has been chief of staff of the 27,000-person army since 2002, when his predecessor was killed in a helicopter crash. French press reports indicate that he received at least a year of training in France.⁶¹ Ammar is widely reported to have refused to open fire on protesters during the December-January uprising, and to have subsequently influenced Ben Ali’s decision to step down. Due to these reports, he currently enjoys a high level of popularity. On January 24, Ammar publicly addressed protesters, promising to uphold Tunisia’s “revolution” and guarantee stability until elections are held. His comments sparked concern among some analysts over whether the armed forces, which were seen as relatively apolitical under Ben Ali, could become an arbiter of domestic politics.

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

Jrad has been involved in Tunisia’s labor movement since the 1960s, and was imprisoned in 1978 amid a government crackdown on massive UGTT strikes. He became secretary-general of the UGTT, Tunisia’s main union federation, in 2000 when the union’s former leader—who had been seen as close to the ruling party—was forced out over accusations of mismanagement. Jrad was re-elected to his position during the UGTT convention of February 2002.

Ahmed Nejib El Chebbi, Minister of Regional Development and Founder of the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP)

Chebbi, who was appointed to the interim cabinet on January 17 (albeit in a minor role), is a founding member of the PDP, one of three “dissident” opposition parties that were legally registered during Ben Ali’s presidency. (Chebbi formally stepped down as PDP leader in 2006, but continues to represent the party.) Although Chebbi and the PDP boycotted the 2009 presidential and parliamentary elections, and his current popularity is untested, he is viewed by many observers as the most credible of the “legal” opposition figures, and potentially more credible than members of the opposition who left Tunisia for exile abroad.⁶² A former student activist for leftist and pan-Arabist causes, Chebbi

⁵⁶ Drawn from international news articles, profiles compiled by BBC Monitoring and the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), political party websites, and other open-source documents.

⁵⁷ William G. Blair, “Strong Hand for Tunisia: Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali,” *The New York Times*, November 8, 1987.

⁵⁸ Edward Cody, “Tunisian President, ‘Senile,’ Is Removed by His Deputy; Habib Bourguiba’s 30-Year Rule Ends,” *The Washington Post*, November 8, 1987.

⁵⁹ EIU, *Tunisia: Country Profile*, 2008.

⁶⁰ Blake Hounshell, “Mr. Oui Oui Takes Charge,” *ForeignPolicy.com*, January 14, 2011.

⁶¹ *Le Point*, “Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, un Saint-Cyrien Très Discret,” January 18, 2011.

⁶² Al Jazeera English, “Ben Ali’s Possible Successors,” January 15, 2011.

was imprisoned for several years in the 1960s. He founded the Socialist Progressive Rally (RSP) in the 1980s, renaming it the PDP in 2001. A lawyer by training, Chebbi directs a Tunis-based newspaper, *El Mawkif*, and provided legal defense for several journalists targeted by the Ben Ali government.⁶³

Rachid Ghannouchi, Leader of Hizb Al Nahda (Renaissance)

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

Ghannouchi's early focus was on religious and moral issues, but he became increasingly politically radical by the late 1970s.⁶⁴ He was imprisoned several times in the 1980s after he co-founded Al Nahda's predecessor movement, the Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI), which clashed with the government of then-President Bourguiba. When Ben Ali came to power, he initially appeared to seek reconciliation with the Islamist movement; however, the president cracked down on Al Nahda after claiming to unearth an Islamist anti-government plot.

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

Born in 1945, Marzouki is a medical doctor, author, and human rights advocate who has been living in exile in France.⁶⁵ He returned to Tunisia on January 18 and announced his intention to run for president. Marzouki trained as a doctor in France and taught at the medical school of Sousse before rising through the ranks the Tunisian League for Human Rights (LTDH), which was among the first independent human rights organizations in the Middle East. Marzouki was elected president of the LTDH in 1989. During the height of confrontation between the Ben Ali regime and Al Nahda, he criticized Islamist political thought as insufficiently protective of human rights, while also advocating on behalf of Islamists' civil liberties. He also criticized Iraq's 1991 invasion of Kuwait, which provoked a public backlash in Tunisia and elsewhere in the region. Marzouki was arrested several times during the 1990s, and the LTDH leadership was somewhat co-opted by the regime.⁶⁶ In 2001, Marzouki founded the CPR party on a platform of establishing the rule of law and the promotion of human rights. It was banned the following year.

(...continued)

⁶³ *France24.com*, "Ahmed Néjib Chebbi, l'Homme Qui Cherche à Rassembler l'Opposition," January 15, 2011.

⁶⁴ Munson 1986, op. cit.

⁶⁵ This profile is drawn from Marzouki's official biography, at [www.moncefmarzouki.com].

⁶⁶ Abdelaziz Barrouhi, "LTDH : Ça Passe ou Ça Casse...", *Jeune Afrique*, October 6, 2010.

Background on Tunisia

Prior to the December-January demonstrations, Tunisia was seen as having a stable, authoritarian government that placed a higher priority on economic growth than on political liberalization. It had only two leaders since gaining independence from France in 1956: the late Habib Bourguiba, a secular nationalist whose political rise was tied to Tunisia's independence movement, and Ben Ali, a former Minister of the Interior and Prime Minister, who became president in 1987.

While Tunisia shares many political and economic characteristics with neighboring countries, it also exhibits a number of unique attributes: a small territory, an ethnically homogenous population, a liberalized economy, a large and highly educated middle class, and a long history of encouraging women's socio-economic freedoms.⁶⁷

Tunisia's spending on education (7.2% of gross domestic product) is high by regional standards.⁶⁸ Arabic-speaking, Sunni Muslims make up the overwhelming majority of Tunisia's population, but its urban culture and economic elite reflect a strong European influence.⁶⁹ The population is young compared with developing countries, but its youth bulge is declining: 26% of the population was under 15 in 2007, compared to 37% in 1990.⁷⁰ Some 700,000 Tunisians (nearly 7% of the population) reside abroad, mainly in Europe.

Despite its apparent prosperity, Tunisia has long exhibited a vast socio-economic 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.⁷¹ 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: 10.6 million (2010 est.)

GDP Growth Rate: 3% (2009 est.)

Income Level: Lower Middle Income

Unemployment rate: 13.3% (2009 est.)

Urbanization rate: 67% of the population (2008)

Life Expectancy: 76 years

Religion: Muslim 98%, Christian 1%, Jewish and other 1%

Literacy: 78% (2008)

Key Exports: clothing, semi-finished goods and textiles, agricultural products

Key Imports: textiles, machinery and equipment, hydrocarbons

Major Trading Partners: France, Italy, Germany, Libya, China, Spain

Female Labor Participation Rate (% of female population): 26%

Source: CIA, *The World Factbook*, January 3, 2011; World Bank, *World Development Indicators*

⁶⁷ Tunisia is the only Arab Muslim country that bans polygamy. Women serve in the military and in many professions, and constitute more than 50% of university students; the first woman governor was appointed in May 2004. In 2006, the government banned the headscarf from public places, claiming that it was protecting women's rights and preventing religious extremism. Critics charged that it was violating individual rights.

⁶⁸ CIA, *The World Factbook*, updated January 3, 2011.

⁶⁹ Christopher Alexander, *Tunisia: Stability and Reform*, op. cit.

⁷⁰ EIU, *Tunisia: Country Profile*, 2008.

⁷¹ EIU, *Tunisia: Country Profile*, 2008.

Tunisia's first president, Habib Bourguiba, was a stringently secularist and nationalist independence leader who has been compared to Turkey's Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in terms of his modernizing influence. He is credited with passing significant reforms in favor of women's rights and with starting a tradition of providing effective government services. He attempted to moderate the influence of Islam on daily life, and famously tried to convince Tunisians not to practice the Ramadan fast by drinking a glass of orange juice live on national television.⁷² However, he also stifled political liberalization: he maintained a monolithic political system controlled by his Socialist Destourian Party (the successor to his pro-independence, nationalist Neo-Destour Party; *destour* means constitution in Arabic) and proclaimed himself president-for-life. Confrontations with trade unions and the budding Islamist movement grew increasingly violent in the 1980s, leading to widespread civil unrest.

The Ben Ali Government (1987-January 2011)

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

Ben Ali cultivated the domestic security services and the RCD as his power-base. The government banned some potential challengers and restricted or co-opted others, including a handful of opposition parties, human rights organizations, unions, and other civil society entities. Ben Ali maintained that he was ushering in democratic reforms in a "measured way" so that religious extremists could not exploit freedoms.⁷³ Still, most observers saw no evidence of even a gradual reform program. Constitutional amendments approved in May 2002 lifted term limits for the presidency and raised the age allowed for a candidate to 75. Ben Ali easily won a fourth five-year term on October 24, 2004, with 94.49% of the vote and a 91% voter turnout. He won yet another term on October 25, 2009, with 89.62% of the vote and an 89.4% voter turnout. Even under the revised age limits, Ben Ali was not eligible to run again unless the constitution were revised once more.

Human Rights

Ben Ali effectively used the fear of an Islamist threat and the example of civil conflict in neighboring Algeria to systematically suppress human rights and fail to carry out political

⁷² On early interactions between Bourguiba and the Islamist movement, see Norma Salem, *Habib Bourguiba, Islam and the Creation of Tunisia*, Croom Helm: UK, 1984.

⁷³ AP, "Tunisian President Says He Wants to Share Experience in Handling Islamic Extremism with Bush," February 13, 2004.

reforms. The government routinely infringed on citizens' privacy rights and imposed severe restrictions on freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and association. It was intolerant of public criticism and used intimidation, criminal investigations, the court system, arbitrary arrests, residential restrictions, and travel controls to discourage human rights and opposition activists.⁷⁴ In a 2010 report, Amnesty International accused Tunisian authorities of "subverting" human rights organizations and other dissenting groups "by infiltrating them and provoking turmoil."⁷⁵

International media advocacy groups routinely cited Ben Ali's government as one of the world's most repressive toward freedom of expression.⁷⁶ Journalists, bloggers, and dissidents were subject to surveillance, harassment, physical assault, and prison. All Internet cafes were state-controlled; authorities aggressively filtered Internet websites and reportedly conducted surveillance at Internet cafes. The current status of this censorship regime is in flux.

Emergence of Discontent

Although Ben Ali's government was widely viewed as stable, signs of increasing public discontent emerged in recent years. These were often portrayed as economically motivated, although this may have been because the regime tolerated the limited vocalization of economic, but not political, grievances. In 2008, social unrest broke out in the impoverished mining region of Gafsa, where unemployment is particularly high. The government sent in the army to aid the police, who were unable to contain the demonstrations. Some 38 people were imprisoned in connection with the protests on charges of forming a criminal group with the aim of destroying public and private property, armed rebellion, and assault on officials during the exercise of their duties. Unrest was again reported in Gafsa in early 2010.

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

Terrorism

Tunisian authorities have emphasized terrorism as a potential domestic threat. The two most recent incidents were the 2002 bombing of a synagogue on the Tunisian island of Djerba, noted for its Jewish minority, and a somewhat mysterious eruption of gun battles between alleged militants and security forces in Tunis in December 2006-January 2007. Al Qaeda deputy leader Ayman al Zawahiri appeared to claim responsibility for the Djerba bombing in a taped message broadcast in October 2002. In all, 14 German tourists, five Tunisians, and two French citizens were killed in the attack.⁷⁷ France, Spain, Italy, and Germany arrested expatriate Tunisians for

⁷⁴ U.S. State Department, "Tunisia," *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 2009*, released March 11, 2010.

⁷⁵ Amnesty International, "Tunisia Urged to End Subversion of Groups Critical of the Authorities," July 12, 2010.

⁷⁶ See, e.g., Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Press Freedom "Predators," updated May 3, 2010, at [<http://en.rsf.org/predators,21.html>]; Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), "10 Most Censored Countries," May 2, 2006.

⁷⁷ *Financial Times*, "Al-Qaeda Deputy Leader Signals Involvement in Attacks," October 10, 2002.

alleged involvement in the attack. In January 2009, French authorities put two alleged culprits on trial. The roots of the 2006-2007 violence, in which 14 militants were reported killed, are much less clear.

In 2002, the U.S. State Department placed the Tunisian Combatant Group (TCG), which operated outside Tunisia, on a list of specially designated global terrorists and froze its assets.⁷⁸ TCG sought to establish an Islamic state in Tunisia and was considered to be a radical offshoot of Al Nahda. The TCG was suspected of plotting, but not carrying out, attacks on U.S., Algerian, and Tunisian embassies in Rome in December 2001. One founder, Tarek Maaroufi, was arrested in Belgium the same month. The group appears to have since been inactive.

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), formerly known as the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), actively recruits Tunisians and reportedly had ties with the TCG.⁷⁹ In January 2007, following the previously mentioned gun battles, Tunisian security forces claimed that they had discovered terrorists linked to the GSPC who had infiltrated from Algeria and possessed homemade explosives, satellite maps of foreign embassies, and documents identifying foreign envoys. Eastern Algeria is an AQIM/GSPC stronghold. Some 30 Tunisians were subsequently convicted of plotting to target U.S. and British interests in Tunisia. AQIM later claimed responsibility for kidnapping two Austrian tourists in Tunisia in February 2008. Algerian and Tunisian authorities have arrested Tunisians along their border, going in both directions.

Tunisian expatriates suspected of ties to Al Qaeda have been arrested in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Western Europe, and the United States. Some are detained at the U.S. Naval Base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and their possible return to Tunisia has proven to be somewhat controversial.⁸⁰ On April 24, 2009, General David Petraeus, then-Commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), told a House Appropriations Committee subcommittee that the perpetrators of suicide bombings in Iraq that month may have been part of a network based in Tunisia.⁸¹

In December 2003, the Tunisian parliament passed a sweeping anti-terrorism law. The U.S. State Department called it “a comprehensive law to ‘support the international effort to combat terrorism and money laundering.’”⁸² Since passage of the law, as many as 2,000 Tunisians have been detained, charged, and/or convicted on terrorism-related charges.⁸³ Critics claim that the law

⁷⁸ U.S. State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism, 2006*, released April 30, 2007.

⁷⁹ Craig S. Smith, “Tunisia is Feared as New Islamist Base...,” *International Herald Tribune*, February 20, 2007. Note, GSPC renamed itself Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in January 2007. For further background on AQIM, see CRS Report R41070, *Al Qaeda and Affiliates: Historical Perspective, Global Presence, and Implications for U.S. Policy*, coordinated by John Rollins.

⁸⁰ An editorial in the *Orange Country Register* on November 16, 2008 stated, “In 2006, the U.S. sent two prisoners (from Guantanamo) to Tunisia with the explicit understanding that they would not be tortured or mistreated. The Tunisian government broke its promise and inflicted cruel treatment and kangaroo-court trials.” In May 2009, the United States asked Italy to receive two Tunisian detainees who objected to their return to Tunisia for fear that they would be subjected to torture. On May 26, 2009, the Tunisian Minister of Justice said that his government was prepared to receive another 10 Guantanamo detainees. Al Jazeera TV, “Tunisia asks US to Hand Over two Guantanamo Detainees,” May 29, 2009.

⁸¹ House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies Holds Hearing on the US Central Command, April 24, 2009, via *CQ*.

⁸² U.S. State Department, *Patterns of Global Terrorism, 2003*, released April 29, 2004.

⁸³ U.S. State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism, 2009*, released August 5, 2010.

“makes the exercise of fundamental freedoms ... an expression of terrorism.”⁸⁴ Rights advocates have also accused anti-terror trials of relying on excessive pretrial detention, denial of due process, and weak evidence. In June 2008, an Amnesty International report, *In the Name of Security: Routine Abuses in Tunisia*, detailed concerns “regarding serious human rights violations being committed in connection with the government’s security and counterterrorism policies.” While the current interim government has promised to release all political prisoners, there is an ongoing debate about whether individuals convicted under the anti-terrorism law fall under this category, and many such detainees have not been released.

The Economy

During the presidency of Ben Ali, many analysts contended that there was an implicit social contract between the government and its citizens, which promoted economic stability and middle-class standards of living at the expense of political freedom. Until the December-January protests, this strategy appeared to have contained latent disaffection from disrupting the political status quo. Tunisia is considered a middle-income country, and one of the best-performing non-oil exporting Arab countries. Home and car ownership are widespread. Unemployment and underemployment remain a major problem, however; the official unemployment rate is high (over 13%) and the unofficial rate is believed to be even higher, particularly among young people.

Ben Ali’s 2004 election manifesto called for diversification, that is, ending reliance on textiles (which have been a primary engine of economic growth), due to increased competition from China; modernization by providing investment incentives to foreign businesses and passing legal reforms; liberalization with an anticipated free-trade zone with the EU; and greater privatization. The textile sector has since shifted to higher quality goods. The tourism sector also has been emphasized; it is a major employer and earns some 11% of the country’s hard currency receipts.⁸⁵ 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.⁸⁶

The European recession in 2009 affected the Tunisian economy, producing a decrease in exports, a contraction in the industrial sector, and a lower expansion in services. Tunisia’s economy nevertheless fared relatively well given the severity of the global economic crisis, and the country did not experience a recession. The government responded to the economic setback with fiscal stimulus emphasizing development projects, the creation of more state jobs, and increases in state payrolls.⁸⁷ In September 2010, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) projected that economic growth would reach 3.8% in 2010, after having slowed to 3% in 2009; the Fund predicted that Tunisia’s growth could continue to increase gradually, “provided that policies and reforms 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.”⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Jeremy Landor, “Washington’s Partner,” *Middle East International*, March 5, 2004, pp. 23-24.

⁸⁵ U.S. State Department, “Background Note: Tunisia,” October 13, 2010.

⁸⁶ EIU, *Tunisia: Country Profile*, 2008.

⁸⁷ *TransArabia*, “Tunisia Continues Fiscal Stimulus in 2010 Budget,” November 14, 2009.

⁸⁸ Joël Toujas-Bernate and Rina Bhattacharya, International Monetary Fund, “Tunisia Weathers Crisis Well, But Unemployment Persists,” September 10, 2010.

The economic impact of the December-January protests is still being determined, as is the potential impact of perceived political instability. News reports indicate that the protests caused hundreds of millions of dollars in damages, and credit rating agencies have lowered Tunisia's score due to political uncertainty.⁸⁹ The interim government sent a delegation to Davos on January 29 to urge world leaders and investors to retain confidence; the delegation also pledged greater economic transparency.⁹⁰

Foreign Relations

Israel and the Palestinians

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

Europe

Tunisia and the EU have cemented a close relationship by means of an Association Agreement, aid, and loans. More than 60% of Tunisia's trade is conducted with Europe.⁹¹ The Association Agreement, which was signed in 1995 and went into effect on January 1, 2008, eliminates customs tariffs and other trade barriers on manufactured goods, and provides for the establishment of an EU-Tunisia free trade area in goods, but not in agriculture or services. Negotiations on the provision of "advanced status" for Tunisia vis-à-vis the EU, which would provide even greater trade benefits, are ongoing.⁹² Tunisia receives aid from the EU's Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (MEDA) program and soft loans from the European Investment Bank, the financing arm of the EU. The Europeans hope that their aid will help Tunisia to progress economically, and thereby eliminate some causes of illegal immigration and Islamic fundamentalism. The EU and Tunisia have discussed additional cooperation to control illegal immigration and manage legal immigration flows, a subject that probably is of greater interest to

⁸⁹ *Reuters*, "Moody's Cuts Tunisia Credit Rating, Could Lower it Further," January 19, 2011; Alyssa Rallis, "S&P Puts Tunisia on Credit Watch Negative Following Continued Unrest," *Global Insight*, January 19, 2011; Maher Chmaytelli, "Tunisia Revolt Caused \$637 Million of Damage, Assabah Reports," *Bloomberg*, February 1, 2011.

⁹⁰ Paul Taylor, "Davos—Stay in Our Economy and Out of Our Politics—Tunisia," *Reuters*, January 29, 2011.

⁹¹ World Trade Organization, *Tunisia Profile*, October 2010.

⁹² See European Commission, EuropeAid Development and Cooperation, *Tunisia*, at [http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/where/neighbourhood/country-cooperation/tunisia/tunisia_en.htm].

Europe than to Tunisia. At the same time, EU leaders expressed concerns over Tunisia's record on human rights and political freedom under Ben Ali.⁹³

Relations with France have recently been strained due to perceived French support for Ben Ali even as his security forces cracked down on pro-democracy protesters. During the last week of Ben Ali's presidency, French Foreign Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie publicly suggested that France could help Tunisia control the protests, remarks for which she was widely criticized in both countries. Press reports additionally revealed that France had authorized shipments of tear-gas to Tunisia in December 2010.⁹⁴ French authorities have since sought to reassure the interim government by refusing to offer Ben Ali exile, replacing the French ambassador to Tunisia, and announcing an asset freeze targeting members of the Ben Ali family. On January 24, French President Nicolas Sarkozy stated that he had "underestimated" the Tunisian crisis.

Tunis is the temporary headquarters location of the African Development Bank (AfDB), which receives significant financial support from the United States.⁹⁵ The headquarters was moved to Tunisia in 2005 due to civil unrest in Côte d'Ivoire, its permanent location.

Regional Relations

Tunisia has sought cordial relations with its immediate neighbors, Algeria and Libya, and participates in Algerian-led regional counterterrorism. Relations with Libya were extremely strained in the 1980s, but patched under Ben Ali. Tunisia participates in the Arab Maghreb Union, established in 1989 by Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Libya, and Mauritania, though the organization is largely inactive due to tensions between Morocco and Algeria. Tunisia has free-trade agreements with Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Turkey, and Libya.⁹⁶

Outlook

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

Questions include:

- Is Tunisia likely to return to stability in the medium-term, or do continued divisions between security services remain a significant threat? Do Ben Ali and/or elements of the former regime continue to influence events in Tunisia?

⁹³ See, e.g., *AFP*, "EU Calls for Release of Tunisian Protesters," January 10, 2011.

⁹⁴ *Le Monde*, "La France a Autorisé, Fin 2010, Quatre Livraisons de Grenades Lacrymogènes à la Tunisie," January 27, 2011.

⁹⁵ See CRS Report RS22690, *The African Development Bank Group*, by Martin A. Weiss, for further background.

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

- What are the prospects for genuine reform under the interim government? What is the potential for free and fair elections? What is the role of the military in steering political developments?
- What will the future Tunisian government and political order look like? What will be the nature and role of previously banned groups, such as Islamist and leftist political parties? Will there be a free and independent press and civil society in Tunisia?
- Which individuals and groups currently enjoy significant public credibility in Tunisia, and what are their likely courses of action? Has Tunisians' experience of secular authoritarianism made the public more likely to place their trust in extremist groups?
- What is the potential impact of the unrest on foreign investment and economic growth in Tunisia and the region?
- To what extent have events in Tunisia inspired protests in neighboring Egypt, Algeria, Yemen, Jordan, Sudan, and other countries? What lesson are neighboring countries drawing from Tunisia's example? What are the medium- to long-term implications for the region?
- What has been the impact to date of U.S. public statements and actions related to Tunisia, and what are the prospects for future U.S. influence on the evolution of events? How, if at all, should the U.S. government reshape its assistance programs for Tunisia in response to recent and continuing events? What position should the United States take vis-à-vis popular anti-government demonstrations in the region? What course of U.S. action will be most likely to fulfill foreign policy and national security goals?

Author Contact Information

Alexis Arieff
Analyst in African Affairs
aarieff@crs.loc.gov, 7-2459

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This report was originally authored by Carol Migdalovitz, now-retired CRS Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs