



United States Institute of Peace

“Tunisia: Examining the State of Democracy and Next Steps for U.S. Policy”

**Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the
Middle East, North Africa, and Global Counterterrorism**

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Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson and members of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa and Global Counterterrorism, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the unfolding political crisis in Tunisia. This hearing is timely and important as Tunisia is at a critical moment in its democratic transition that began nearly eleven years ago.

I am the Director of the U.S. Institute of Peace's Middle East and North Africa Programs based in Tunis, although the views expressed here are my own. The U.S. Institute of Peace was established by Congress over 35 years ago as an independent, nonpartisan national institute to prevent and resolve violent conflicts abroad, in accordance with U.S. national interests and values.

Tunisia, as the only Middle East and North Africa country to emerge from the 2011 uprisings with a relatively successful democratic transition, is now facing another defining moment that could either springboard the country onto a path of recovery or spark a downward spiral into dysfunction and instability. As one of the few politically plural countries in the region, a key U.S. counterterrorism ally, and located in a region on the frontline of the global great power competition, it is important that the United States' relationship with this North African country is handled with great care.

Even before the President's decision to suspend the Parliament on July 25, Tunisia was dealing with several destabilizing factors that have long-term implications for American interests, such as violent extremism, irregular migration to Europe, deep-seated socioeconomic grievances, and a political crisis making the country's future uncertain. All these factors have the potential to increase fragility in an already volatile region. My testimony today will shed light on the current realities on the ground in Tunisia and their potential impact on the country and U.S. vital interests in North Africa.

Overview

On July 25, following nationwide protests amidst a deep political and social crisis exacerbated by the public health crisis, the President of the Republic of Tunisia, Kais Saied, invoked Article 80 of the Tunisian Constitution which, as he interprets it, gave him the power to lift parliamentary immunity, suspend the parliament for 30 days, and dismiss the Prime Minister.

In the days leading up to this move, nationwide protests were fueled by public outrage over the country's paralyzed institutions, a deteriorating economy, and continued impunity for corruption and abuse amidst the deadliest wave of COVID-19 to date. The President's decision was greeted with jubilation on the streets of Tunisia. Initial reactions from political parties and major civil society organizations were mixed. Some supported this unprecedented executive action to correct the perceived downward trajectory of the country. Others immediately condemned it as a constitutional coup. Many in the international community immediately voiced concerns that Tunisia was at grave risk of sliding back into authoritarianism.

Fears of democratic backsliding were exacerbated on August 24 when President Saied extended his extraordinary powers indefinitely, ignoring calls from within and outside the country for a clear roadmap back to inclusive politics and constitutional order. Finally, in a breach of democratic norms, on September 22 President Saied replaced much of the Tunisian Constitution with a three-page decree that officially dissolved parliament and granted himself control over all executive and legislative functions. At the same time, President Saied renewed his pledge to bring about rule of law, end impunity, and restore the proper functioning of the state. Saied's actions and statements indicate he is determined to amend the Tunisian Constitution by changing the current "representative democracy" to a "direct democracy" thus fulfilling his campaign pledge to address the issues underlying Tunisia's 2011 revolution.

While many have condemned the president's most recent actions as outside the bounds of the constitution, his takeover has enjoyed large levels of support from those who wanted strong government action to improve living standards and hold corrupt elites accountable. Tunisians' support for the President's actions is illustrative of their disappointment in both the political transition and the government performance since 2011.

However, there is growing concern within the country and internationally that President Saied has overreached in removing all constitutional checks and balances. In recent weeks, ambassadors of the G7 countries and the U.S. have publicly and privately urged President Saied to appoint a government and return to constitutional order. In response, President Saied announced in various public speeches that he would not tolerate foreign interference as he faces rising pressure from Western governments. The President's intransigence has led many to wonder how democratic allies, like the United States, can induce more constructive actions.

A potentially positive development was the appointment of Ms. Najla Bouden Romdhane, a university professor and senior official in the Ministry of Higher Education, as the new Prime Minister. However, based on the President's decree, the Prime Minister's role is to carry out the orders of the President. This raises questions about the amount of influence that Romdhane will actually have in political decision-making. A new government was sworn in on October 11 and it remains to be seen how much influence the new ministers will have going forward.

Tunisian Views

Many Tunisians, while cherishing personal freedoms of the post-revolution period, agree with the president's assertion that the post-2011 political system weakened and divided the executive branch to such a degree that it hindered economic growth, facilitated corruption, and impeded social mobility.

Just as in 2011, the underlying concerns of the public remain economic stagnation and pervasive corruption rather than the democratic transition itself. President Saied was elected because of his brash promises to address both issues through radical reform. In his 2019 Presidential campaign and in the months leading to the July 25 Presidential decree, Saied promised to bring accountability into politics and end impunity for the political and business elite.

President Saied used the public's grave concerns about continued high levels of underemployment and unemployment as well as a mishandled COVID-19 pandemic response campaign to build a public case for overhauling the political system and casting the post-revolution political order as a primary culprit for the country's woes. His argument came at a time when public sentiments of despair, hopelessness, and frustration with the post-2011 political class had reached a breaking point. His decisive actions on July 25 provided a source of hope for a population desperate for good governance.

Even prior to July 25, Tunisia was still a country in transition and not a consolidated democracy. The 2011 revolution resulted in greater freedom of speech, freedom of expression, and political pluralism. But these elements alone did not constitute a consolidated democracy and did not necessarily portend economic prosperity. And while far less prevalent than pre-2011, the government's use of the security sector and the judiciary to suppress dissent continued post-revolution.

After his actions in September, however, the President has lost the support of the major civil society organizations and nearly all of the political parties. Similarly, displeasure with the President has increased from the private sector. That said, large scale mobilization against the President has not occurred due to widespread fear of popular backlash. Added to the fact that he has removed all checks on his power and appears to have the support of the internal security forces, the chilling effect that this has had on civil society's willingness to firmly and publicly oppose his authoritarian moves cannot be overstated.

In line with President Saied's stance, there is a consensus among Tunisians that the expectations of the 2011 revolution have not been met. However, there is disagreement about what kind of intervention is necessary to put the country on a path to prosperity and democracy. The President's focus on remaking the political system overlooks the need for more structural change, such as reforming the systems that have perpetuated deep injustices and prevented prosperity. Such reforms would require confronting the crony capitalism and state capture of the old regime which has only expanded in the post-revolution era.

In addition, the public's perception that the Tunisian state has unlimited resources to address major issues simultaneously creates unrealistic expectations that no political system can accommodate. A more reliable course of action for Tunisia to achieve political stability would be to focus on economic growth while reducing regional disparities and increasing economic sovereignty and opportunities for upward social mobility. This can be done through a series of reforms: rightsizing and restructuring the public sector; rehabilitating and expanding the public education system that is the country's primary ladder for social mobility; addressing corruption, cronyism and monopolies; improving agricultural policy for small farmers; and addressing rapid environmental degradation. These actions will enable a larger market for unemployed young people to seek economic opportunities.

Reforms would also require breaking down legal and extra-legal barriers for small and medium sized businesses to enter the market and thrive. This must come with more transparency, efficiency, and rule of law. Policing must also be reformed in line with international democratic and human rights norms.

None of these reforms, which will take decades, can be accomplished sustainably if done through extra-legal and autocratic means. Such deep changes require consultation with and buy-in from the public if they are to succeed. History has shown that bold reform via “strongman rule” rarely yields long-term stability or prosperity and often creates larger problems in the process.

What is at Risk for Tunisia

The most clear and present danger now is that Tunisians and their allies in the West do nothing to encourage the President to return to a governing process that is inclusive, democratic, and legitimate.

Some have advocated for the removal of President Saied, but this could embolden the Ennahdha party and the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as remnant forces from the old regime which has its own dangerous implications for the country.

The role of the security forces and their influence on political stability must also be considered. Thus far, the Tunisian military appears willing to support their commander-in-chief’s controversial takeover. But questions remain about how long and under what circumstances the military will remain loyal to the President. This is a critical area to watch closely.

The Interior Ministry, which oversees the internal security forces including the Police and National Guard, also appears loyal to President Saied. However, the police forces are less disciplined than the military and their command structures are more complex. If opposition within the security forces were to rise, this could create divisions within the security establishment that that would be destabilizing and even lead to the resurgence of terrorist groups. Intervention from the military or the security establishment would create far more instability than good for the country and would most likely not result in a return to democratic norms.

Moving Forward

The best-case scenario now would be for President Saied to lay out a comprehensive and inclusive political roadmap emphasizing the return to normal institutional governance (not personalist) that delivers justice and accountability for the transgressions that have occurred over the last eleven years with a clear vision for how to move forward with badly needed economic and social reforms. The debate about the precise shape and form of the political system can be worked out later. Matters such as implementing a new electoral law, holding elections, and passing a reformed constitution will all take time and can only be legitimate if done inclusively. In the meantime, what is most urgent to address is the economic desperation of the country, which is only worsening.

However, the President’s actions and words since his election indicate he is unlikely to reverse his course voluntarily. At the same time, unilateral pressure from any one country like the U.S. or from the EU or elsewhere will only fuel a prevailing conspiratorial narrative in a country where the anti-Western sentiment remains high. Therefore, the most constructive way to influence President Saied is through concerted multilateral (international and regional) pressure conveyed consistently to him and other power structures of the state through quiet diplomacy.

Leverage and Diplomacy

Since 2011, the U.S. has made several strategic investments in Tunisia especially in the areas of security and justice sector reform, military assistance, financial support, economic growth, democratic governance, and civil society organizations strengthening.

Just prior to July 25, the U.S. was preparing to sign a Millennium Challenge Corporation compact with Tunisia worth nearly \$500 million. This would help modernize Tunisia's ports and facilitate more equitable access to international trade for all Tunisians. This is now on hold. A new United States sovereign loan guarantee was also in the making at the time of the President's takeover. USAID has a large "Development Objective Agreement" (DOAG) with the Tunisian government that supports democracy, governance, and economic growth across the country. The IMF and World Bank continue to provide hundreds of millions of dollars annually to support Tunisia's public financing and to improve governance. Finally, the U.S. continues to invest heavily in Tunisia's security forces and military, providing critical infrastructure and capabilities to meet evolving threats. As a burgeoning democracy, Tunisia was also made a Major Non-NATO Ally. Much if not all of this is now at risk.

While using its points of leverage carefully to decelerate Tunisia's slide toward autocracy, the U.S. must continue to proactively support Tunisia's stability, its democratic activists, and the security sector for better respect of human rights.

The performance and effectiveness of both the security sector and the military in combatting violent extremism and preventing spillover from Libya have improved significantly with U.S. assistance. Despite continued serious human rights violations before and after July 25, there are in fact several senior-level security officials who are reform-minded and pushing for more rights-respecting agendas. In the current context of a potential return to autocracy, abandoning the U.S. engagement with security forces would not be in the interests of the U.S. or Tunisia. With public unrest in Tunisia likely in the near future and impunity for police abuse a continuing issue that drives violent extremism, U.S. assistance to the security forces and justice sector should be supporting reforms and respect for human rights, accountability, and the rule of law rather than mere material assistance.

Also, there should be a redoubling of support to civil society. One of the largest successes from U.S. investment in Tunisia since 2011 is the flourishing and professionalization of civil society. International organizations have found strong and productive partners in civil society that have contributed significantly to advancing fundamental rights and freedoms, preventing democratic backsliding, and chipping away at the legacy of authoritarianism. Now more than ever in this most perilous moment for the country, Tunisian civil society and key public institutions need America's steadfast technical support and encouragement.

It is promising that many Tunisians have realized that President Saied's July 25 decision and subsequent measures are dangerous for the country. In other countries in the region, similar power grabs did not trigger the same level of concern for the future within the general public, even years after they happened.

Furthermore, despite the polarization and tension in Tunisia, there has not been an outbreak of widespread violence and unrest. Notably, the government has not resorted to tactics of large-scale violence and intimidation, which is encouraging. That being said, self-censorship is prevalent and public dissent -- so far -- is orderly and peaceful. Thus, the government has not yet been tested.

Lastly, the main elements of the U.S.-Tunisia relationship have not been negatively affected thus far, beyond some inflammatory media discourse. On the whole, there has not been any action taken by Tunisia to downsize the partnership with the United States. My engagement with interlocutors throughout the government indicate their keen desire to continue a partnership with the U.S.

These are indications that the U.S. should support Tunisians to prevent this gradual slide back into autocracy, and that it is not in the interest of the United States to withdraw aid from or sanction Tunisia at this stage. Instead, the U.S. should increase support and technical assistance for civil society and others who can help prevent violence, maintain stability, increase trust, and move Tunisia back toward constitutional order. Indicators of when security assistance should be reconsidered include a deterioration of human rights, a crackdown on basic freedoms, the continued absence of a plan to restore democratic order, or other indications that Tunisia's old regime police state is being restored.

Leaving Tunisia on its own will lead to instability as President Saied is unable to deliver on the economic and social fronts. Too much pressure or the wrong kind of it could further destabilize the country, harm the Tunisian people, create threats to regional security, and nullify the successes that U.S. investment in Tunisia's democracy and stability has had to date.

As a democratic and friendly Tunisia is in the national security interests of the United States, pressure on the President must be targeted, firm, quiet and multilateral.

The views expressed in this testimony are those of the author and not the U.S. Institute of Peace.