

Political Uncertainty Deepens in Tunisia

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Brief Analysis

Washington should publicly emphasize the importance of preserving hard-won progress on political pluralism and human rights, while privately conveying that Tunis must return to the constitutional framework in order to receive MCC and IMF funding.

On August 24, the official Facebook page of Tunisian president Kais Saied announced that he would be extending “until further notice” the extraordinary measures he **implemented last month** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/political-crisis-tunisia-us-response-options>), when he dismissed the prime minister, suspended parliament, rescinded the legal immunity granted to legislators, and designated himself as the country’s chief prosecutor. The move deepens the uncertainty surrounding Tunisia’s young democracy, which had already been roiled by anti-government protests, economic struggles, and widespread anger at the state’s handling of the COVID-19 crisis. Article 80 of the 2014 constitution allows the president to take “any measures necessitated by exceptional circumstances,” but with three key limitations: the measures can only be in force for thirty days (a period that expired August 24), they require consultation with the other branches of government (something Saied appears not to have done), and they do not give the president authority to suspend parliament (which requires deliberation by a constitutional court yet to be formed). Such stipulations led critics to conclude that Saied’s July 25 declaration amounted to a coup; his latest announcement has only broadened that criticism.

The President’s Gambit

Initially, Saied’s centralization of power enjoyed widespread domestic support, but not because Tunisians were eager to turn the page on democracy. Although many citizens praise the individual freedoms they have gained, they perceive the country’s decade-long experiment in political pluralism as a failure because of persistent problems with corruption, political paralysis, and economic dysfunction. The fact that Tunisia now has the world’s highest COVID mortality rate per capita only adds to the general sense of exasperation. Hence, most political blocs and civil society organizations have greeted Saied’s power move with cautious acceptance or even euphoria—with the notable exception of Ennahda, the dominant Islamist party that many citizens accuse of prioritizing its own survival over the needs of its constituents.

Since his July announcement, Saied has not presented a path forward, named a new prime minister, or outlined an economic agenda, focusing instead on pursuing allegedly corrupt businesspeople and politicians. Like his other moves, this anti-corruption push enjoys broad domestic support, but its ultimate goal and benefits are unclear. His actions thus far have frozen Tunisia’s negotiations to secure the \$4 billion IMF program needed to address deepening debt and unlock additional international financing. Saied apparently believes he can rely on recovered assets and a potential influx of financial support from Saudi Arabia rather than implementing the unpopular IMF-mandated reforms Tunis has avoided over the past decade.

On the human rights front, the government has been arresting critics of the president and barring politicians, businesspeople, and judges from traveling. Yet other factors may work in Saied’s political favor, including an accelerated, military-supported medical campaign that has more than doubled the country’s vaccination rate in the past thirty days, to more than 15 percent now fully vaccinated.

U.S. Interests and Support

Tunisia proved to be a regional rarity in the past decade: a broadly liberal Arab democracy that granted its citizens wide freedoms even as it contained extremist and jihadist threats, all while retaining a U.S.-friendly foreign policy orientation. Thus, the United States has an interest in seeing the country stabilize and consolidate its democracy rather than backtrack toward authoritarianism. The precise form of the country’s nascent democracy—whether a presidential or parliamentary system—is not as important as the need to respect basic principles of representative government within the context of the constitution. Saied seems to be aiming for a more radical realignment that would eliminate political parties and devolve most decisionmaking to local councils. This idea has a certain appeal among citizens in peripheral, long-neglected areas of the country, but the president has not outlined a practical plan

for implementing it.

Whatever Saied's plans are, Washington should be working to ensure Tunisia does not revert to a full-blown autocracy or deeper instability, which would open a space for bad actors in the region to exploit. Quiet but firm U.S. inducements could go a long way toward that end.

Since the 2011 revolution, the United States has **[provided \(https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-tunisia/\)](https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-tunisia/)** over \$1.4 billion in aid to Tunisia. Some of this has come in the form of Economic Support Funds (\$45–\$89 million annually over the previous five years, with a new request of \$85 million in the Biden administration's **[first budget proposal \(https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/FY-2022-State_USAID-Congressional-Budget-Justification.pdf\)](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/FY-2022-State_USAID-Congressional-Budget-Justification.pdf)**). Washington also signed a five-year bilateral agreement to provide up to \$335 million for private-sector growth. And on June 30, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) approved a five-year, \$500 million compact to develop Tunisia's water and transportation sectors—though it remains unclear to what extent Saied's actions might jeopardize the deal, which requires partners to commit to good governance and democracy.

Tunisia also receives millions of dollars annually for internal security programs (e.g., professionalizing its counterterrorism units; implementing prison reforms), while the broader defense relationship has grown substantially since 2011. Prior to the revolution, the Ben Ali and Bourguiba governments kept the military a weakened institution to preclude the possibility of a coup. Since then, however, the military has built up its capabilities by increasing its budget and securing international support, particularly from the United States. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the country's defense spending rose from \$666 million in 2012 to \$1.14 billion in 2020, fueled in part by \$65–\$95 million in annual Foreign Military Financing from Washington over the past five years. This makes Tunisia a top ten global recipient of FMF, and another \$85 million has been requested for fiscal year 2022. Meanwhile, Washington designated the country as a major non-NATO ally in 2015.

Regarding specific acquisitions, the United States has approved the sale of twelve UH-60M Black Hawk helicopters (eight have already been delivered) to support counterterrorism missions, as well as the delivery of OH-58D Kiowa Warrior helicopters and C-130s. Indeed, the Tunisian military is now primarily focused on conducting counterterror operations and enforcing border security, and U.S. Special Forces have reportedly advised its counterterror units. Ensuring that the country can continue such operations is crucial to preventing a resurgence of terrorist activity. Although U.S. security cooperation has enabled Tunis to degrade the jihadist threat over the past six years, the country is still contending with residual effects from one of the **[world's largest recruitment mobilizations \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/your-sons-are-your-service-tunisias-missionaries-jihad\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/your-sons-are-your-service-tunisias-missionaries-jihad)**. Recent political developments could provide the impetus for al-Qaeda or Islamic State affiliates to test Saied's resolve, while the army will presumably be less available for traditional security operations if Saied continues to rely on it for vaccination-related tasks.

Policy Options

Prior to the Afghanistan crisis, senior Biden administration officials rightly urged Saied to restore “parliamentary democracy” as soon as possible. Deputy National Security Advisor Jon Finer and Acting Assistant Secretary of State Joey Hood **[delivered \(https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/08/13/readout-from-nsc-spokesperson-emily-horne-on-senior-administration-officials-travel-to-tunisia/\)](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/08/13/readout-from-nsc-spokesperson-emily-horne-on-senior-administration-officials-travel-to-tunisia/)** this message to Tunis in person on August 13. Yet Saied's latest announcement suggests that he feels emboldened enough to dismiss outside pressure and maintain the state of emergency.

Despite the competing crises that will continue to occupy its time, the administration should convey to Saied that it cares about Tunisia's future and expects him to maintain the country's hard-won progress on representative

government and human rights. And given that he apparently favors abolishing parties and devolving authority to municipal councils, the administration should continue emphasizing that any change to the political system must come through a constitutional process. Ambassador Donald Blome should be empowered to lead this dialogue and coordinate messaging with European partners.

Saied is likely keen on maintaining a positive relationship with the United States even as he attempts to consolidate his power. Washington should tell him—clearly and privately—that he cannot have it both ways, and that access to the MCC compact, future loan guarantees, and productive IMF negotiations depend on his actions. At the same time, the administration should avoid making critical public statements or threatening military assistance at this time, unless unlawful imprisonments persist or Tunis signals zero receptivity to democratic restoration in the coming months. ❖

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