

Are Tunisia and Iran Really Growing Closer?

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Although their diplomatic and economic overtures are on the rise, bilateral ties remain largely superficial for now, indicating a shared anti-Western posture rather than risky strategic cooperation.

Last month, Iran's ambassador to Tunisia [announced \(https://www.tap.info.tn/en/Portal-Politics/18407640-tunisia-and-iran\)](https://www.tap.info.tn/en/Portal-Politics/18407640-tunisia-and-iran) the formation of a joint mixed economic commission following a phone call between the two countries' foreign ministers. Days later, U.S. legislator Rep. Joe Wilson (R-SC) [called \(https://x.com/RepJoeWilson/status/1892231704745558525\)](https://x.com/RepJoeWilson/status/1892231704745558525) for cutting assistance to Tunisia in response to concerns that it is "working with...the Iranian regime." Indeed, some might interpret [various developments \(https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2024/05/25/tunisia-kais-saied-s-inclination-to-turn-to-iran-6672647-124.html\)](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2024/05/25/tunisia-kais-saied-s-inclination-to-turn-to-iran-6672647-124.html) over the past year as signs of a deepening relationship—most prominently President Kais Saied's May 2024 visit to Tehran, where he was one of only three heads of state to attend Ebrahim Raisi's funeral and met directly with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. By most metrics, however, their relations remain largely superficial, reflecting Tunisia's current foreign policy posture more than any deep threat to Western interests.

Iran-Tunisia Relations by the (Small) Numbers

The two countries have maintained diplomatic ties since Tunisia achieved independence in 1956. Although relations dipped in the 1980s due to President Habib Bourguiba's concerns about political Islam, they were largely restored under his successors Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali and Beji Caid Essebsi.

Economic ties remain negligible: according to the most recent IMF statistics, Tunisian [imports \(https://data.imf.org/regular.aspx?key=61013712\)](https://data.imf.org/regular.aspx?key=61013712) from Iran were \$1.4 million in 2022, down from \$4.8 million in 2015. Tunisian exports to Iran have dropped as well (from \$12.58 million in 2014 to just \$80,000 in 2023), though they were miniscule to begin with. In March 2024, Saied [met with \(https://president.ir/en/150389\)](https://president.ir/en/150389) Raisi at a summit of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum in Algiers, and both presidents expressed interest in deepening

economic ties.

Meanwhile, security ties have been [described \(https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2024RP08/\)](https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2024RP08/) as “non-existent,” and the cultural links are likewise quite modest. Tunisia is home to a few thousand Shia Muslims—less than 1 percent of the total population, mostly clustered in the southern regions. Iran [opened \(https://en.irna.ir/news/8919779/Tunisia-Culture-Iran-GNR\)](https://en.irna.ir/news/8919779/Tunisia-Culture-Iran-GNR) a cultural center in Tunis in 2007, one of approximately seventy such centers worldwide, including eight in the Middle East and North Africa. Far from signaling deep cultural ties, however, the Islamic Republic generally uses these institutions for activities such as proselytizing, covert recruitment, intelligence gathering, and planning/conducting terrorist operations. Europe [has closed \(https://aawsat.com/%D8%B4%D8%A4%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A5%D9%82%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9/5108200-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D8%AA%D8%AA%D9%87%D9%85-%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%85-%D9%85%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%B2-%D8%AB%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B6-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%B3%D8%B3\)](https://aawsat.com/%D8%B4%D8%A4%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A5%D9%82%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9/5108200-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D8%AA%D8%AA%D9%87%D9%85-%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%85-%D9%85%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%B2-%D8%AB%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B6-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%B3%D8%B3) several such centers in response to suspected espionage activity; in North Africa, Sudan closed three in 2014, [reportedly \(https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2014/09/140902_sudan_iran_cultural_centres_closure\)](https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2014/09/140902_sudan_iran_cultural_centres_closure) on charges of “proselytizing Shia Islam.”

Notably, Tunisia [lifted visa requirements \(https://en.mehrnews.com/news/216502/Tunisia-announces-visa-free-policy-for-Iranian-citizens\)](https://en.mehrnews.com/news/216502/Tunisia-announces-visa-free-policy-for-Iranian-citizens) for Iranians last June as part of a general easing of restrictions on visitors from more than thirty countries. Whatever the potential cultural and economic benefits, this move increases the possibility of Iranian intelligence operatives entering the country.

The Tunisian Foreign Policy Context

Under Saied, Tunisia has broken with its traditional foreign policy stance of friendly and balanced international relations, instead taking an explicitly anti-Western stance. In that sense, its new diplomatic warmth toward Tehran may simply reflect Saied’s determination to demonstrate that he will not be beholden to the West, as seen most recently when he announced the [severing of communications \(https://www.africaintelligence.com/north-africa/2025/02/24/tunis-cuts-ties-with-imf,110378632-bre\)](https://www.africaintelligence.com/north-africa/2025/02/24/tunis-cuts-ties-with-imf,110378632-bre) with the IMF.

This approach has been a mixed bag for Tunisia so far. On one hand, Saied has maintained his firm rhetoric about issues affecting national sovereignty [without totally disrupting \(https://nationalinterest.org/feature/has-west-learned-work-tunisia-211559\)](https://nationalinterest.org/feature/has-west-learned-work-tunisia-211559) relations with the West—most notably nearby Italy, one of Tunisia’s top trade partners. On the other hand, he has not been able to convince alternative partners [like China \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/chinas-presence-tunisia-how-far-has-it-come-and-where-it-headed\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/chinas-presence-tunisia-how-far-has-it-come-and-where-it-headed) of Tunisia’s value. Observers [note \(https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/01/tunisian-foreign-policy-under-kais-saied?lang=en\)](https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/01/tunisian-foreign-policy-under-kais-saied?lang=en) that his foreign policy generally lacks coherence, though his anti-Western stance has seemingly been [clarified and intensified \(https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2024RP08/\)](https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2024RP08/) by the Gaza war.

Tunisia has also become more dependent on Algeria. Wary of regional instability and extremism, Algiers has supported Tunis with [loans and central bank deposits \(https://www.echoroukonline.com/algeria-lends-tunisia-200m-grants-it-100m\)](https://www.echoroukonline.com/algeria-lends-tunisia-200m-grants-it-100m) as well as favorable [electricity and gas \(https://www.watanserb.com/en/2025/01/15/algeria-supports-tunisia-in-overcoming-domestic-gas-crisis-amid-growing-economic-ties/\)](https://www.watanserb.com/en/2025/01/15/algeria-supports-tunisia-in-overcoming-domestic-gas-crisis-amid-growing-economic-ties/) deals. Algerian foreign policy rests on similar principles of non-alignment and strong solidarity with the Palestinian cause, though President Abdelmadjid Tebboune tends to display more nuance

than Saied. For example, while Saied has distanced himself from Tunisia's traditional commitment to a two-state Israeli-Palestinian solution and taken fiery public stances on the Gaza war, Tebboune recently **suggested** (<https://thearabweekly.com/tebboune-statements-about-normalisation-israel-spark-controversy-algeria>) that Algeria would consider normalization with Israel conditioned on Palestinian statehood. If Algiers were to reduce its support, Saied would find himself isolated given his reputation for controversial positions, both in other Arab capitals (e.g., his support for Syria's Bashar al-Assad) and among Western governments (e.g., Germany was a strong supporter of Tunisia's post-2011 liberalization but has been reluctant to support Saied's **creeping authoritarianism** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/avoiding-election-error-tunisia-why-us-policy-should-focus-real-reform-not-votes>)).

Tunisia's opening to Iran is perhaps more driven by Tehran, which seeks to **expand its influence** (<https://www.natofoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/NDCF-Paper-Schiavi-Iran-rise-in-Africa-r.pdf>) in Africa and improve ties with Arab countries as part of the "neighborly policy" started under Raisi. Yet discussions with experts indicate that Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force—whose mission is to expand the regime's influence abroad by operating through nonstate proxies, typically in ungoverned or weakly governed spaces—has not yet shown much appetite for engagement in Tunisia, instead focusing its North African activities on Libya and potentially Algeria (as the chief sponsor of the armed Polisario Front secessionist movement).

Limits to the Partnership

Although the growth in ties between Tunisia and Iran is real, **it has limits** (<https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/irans-north-africa-play-a-strategic-bid-for-influence-in-algeria-and-tunisia-200122>). Tunisia's strong tradition of separating mosque and state has left many citizens highly suspicious of all forms of political Islam, from the regime in Tehran to local movements like the once-prominent, Muslim Brotherhood-aligned party Ennahda. The hostility between secularists and Islamists has helped keep Tunisian parties divided despite their shared opposition to Saied. For example, the president's warming relations with Iran **reportedly** (<https://iranwire.com/en/world/71451/>) caused fierce anti-Islamist figure Abir Moussi to accuse Ennahda of essentially abetting the country's evolution "from Brotherhood political Islam to Iranian political Islam." In other words, although Saied's anti-Western rhetoric resonates with many Tunisians, his apparent interest in growing closer to Iran does not.

In addition to its general insistence on political secularism, Tunisia's national traditions and values differ substantially from Iran's in key respects. For instance, despite some similarities between Shia Islam and the variants of Sufism practiced occasionally in Tunisia, much of the population views the Islamic Republic's Shia tenets with suspicion. This mistrust was on display in February following a Tunisian-Iranian cultural festival in a suburb of the capital, in response to which residents **circulated a petition** (<https://www.webdo.tn/fr/actualite/national/tunisie-petition-contre-une-conference-presentee-par-des-iraniennes/219746>) rejecting "the influence of theocratic regimes." And in a 2022 **survey** (<https://www.arabbarometer.org/2022/09/citizens-lukewarm-on-leaders-cold-war/>) on the policies of regional heads of state, Tunisians reportedly ranked Supreme Leader Khamenei dead last.

Notably, Saied's **closeness** (<https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1286130/politique/tunisie-naoufel-saied-lomnipresent-frere-du-president/>) with his brother Naoufel—known for his fondness toward certain strands of Iranian intellectual thought tied to the Islamic Revolution—could explain some of the president's recent overtures toward Tehran. Yet Saied is also notoriously fickle with his advisors, suggesting that his brother's influence could be limited.

U.S. Policy Implications

Ties between Tunisia and Iran appear to be strengthening, but the two governments do not appear equipped to

offer each other additional tools for challenging the West. This is especially true on the economic front, where Saied’s populist attitudes seem unsustainable. Now four months into his second term, he will need to start reversing the deterioration in living conditions for Tunisians—something Iran can do little to help with given its own economic constraints.

Intelligence sharing between the two governments may represent the greatest threat to Western interests, though even this will likely be constrained by Tunisian popular suspicions of Iranian influence. Saied’s dismantling of judicial independence, enhanced media repression, and other brazen policies are ultimately weakening the state, compounding Tunisian concerns about creeping Iranian influence and likely making the government a less effective potential partner to Tehran.

In short, while some of the concerns expressed by U.S. legislators may be warranted, the ties between Tunis and Tehran are nascent and not particularly problematic. Washington should therefore focus not on punishing Tunis, but on preventing its relations with Tehran from expanding into sectors that might actually affect U.S. interests. Tunisia’s security forces—particularly its military but also the internal security forces—benefit from significant Western (especially American) assistance, so continuing this longstanding partnership is perhaps the most effective way of preventing future Tunisian security collaboration with Iran. Additionally, maintaining rather than cutting U.S. support for education and other means of rebuilding Tunisia’s crumbling social and economic infrastructure will be crucial to curbing Iran’s malign influence.

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