

As Tunisia’s Instability Worsens, U.S. Should Not Wait to Take Action

by [Sabina Henneberg \(/experts/sabina-henneberg\)](#)

Oct 29, 2026

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Sabina Henneberg \(/experts/sabina-henneberg\)](#)

Sabina Henneberg is a Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of its Junior Research Program.



The Saied government seems intent on just hanging on until the next presidential election, but the current situation is politically and economically unsustainable unless Washington lends a hand.

Following a disastrous summer, Tunisia’s government faces as much uncertainty as ever. The opposition has been displaying more unity, but a clear transition away from the autocratic regime of President Kais Saied remains elusive. To avoid a chaotic collapse with potential regional spillover, the United States should take measures now to support the country’s economy, solidify security assistance, and prepare for an eventual transition.

Untenable Situation

Although Saied’s popularity is impossible to measure precisely without credible polling, several indicators suggest he has lost the population’s trust. His reelection two years ago was marred by illegality and very low voter turnout, while participation in local elections has been almost nonexistent ([https://kapitalis.com/tunisie/2025/07/21/legislative-partielle-a-bizerte-la-desaffection-des-electeurs-se-confirme/](#)). Pro-Saied demonstrations are paltry, and public criticism of the president, including by parliamentarians ([https://x.com/TapNewsAgency/status/2081726689743122487](#)), has increased. Last year, a major movement ([https://www.reuters.com/world/tunisians-revive-protests-gabes-over-pollution-state-chemical-plant-2025-12-17/](#)) in the southern city of Gabes reemerged, drawing attention for its significant numbers and resonance with past movements that led to the fall of former dictator Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali. Protests have continued in 2026—including a major one ([https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/tunisians-stage-biggest-protest-years-against-president-saied-2026-10-17/](#)) in Tunis on October 17—reportedly spurring Saied’s police forces to clash ([https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/tunisian-police-clash-with-protesters-capital-day-heightened-tensions-2026-10-22/](#)) with demonstrators.

Meanwhile, daily living conditions worsened this summer due to electricity and water shortfalls amid a series of unprecedented heatwaves. Saied seemingly has no one left ([https://www.brookings.edu/articles/tunisias-summer-of-discontent/](#)) to blame: he has already cycled through six prime ministers in seven years, and evidence presented ([https://www.leconomistemaghreb.com/2026/07/23/fathi-msallmi-la-steg-avait-alerte-des-2024/](#)) by his own administrators shows that investments in the electricity sector have been entirely inadequate ([https://www.economie-tunisie.org/fr/la-crise-electrique-tunisienne-une-panne-d-investissement](#)) under his tenure. The power crisis has also undermined public confidence in his statements ([https://www.radionationale.tn/article/6a646f95227443b6422214f/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B0%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%89-69-%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%85%D9%87%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B5%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%88%D8%A5%D9%86%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%B7%D8%B7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%86%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9](#)) about Tunisian sovereignty, since the country has become dependent ([https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/04/tunisias-climate-crisis-economic-downturn-and-growing-dependency-on-algeria](#)) on gas supplied by Algeria just to generate electricity. Combined with global inflation and the government’s continued underinvestment in other sectors, the turbulent summer has spiked ([https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/9/1/how-prices-in-tunisia-have-skyrocketed-since-the-arab-spring](#)) the cost of living and contributed to shortages and tensions ([C:/Users/DavidS/AppData/Local/Microsoft/Olk/Attachments/ooa-940260f4-9074-4c64-ba7e-7976ae7616b6/cb01b9f21260405aa875613629a96217a700cb77b13ed86ab5e55ecd4a204fc4/1.https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2026/08/30/la-tunisie-fait-face-a-une-grave-penurie-de-bouteilles-d-eau-au-terme-d-un-mois-d-aout-caniculaire_6760779_3212.html](#)) as citizens try to obtain scarce essentials.

Yet there is no evidence of a government plan to address this crisis. The draft 2027 budget appears to rely ([https://www.challenges.tn/economie/budget-2027-en-tunisie-un-besoin-de-financement-de-28-1-milliards-de-dinars-sous-haute-tension/](#)) on the same internal borrowing strategy that Tunis has used since rejecting an IMF loan in 2022. External financing sources such as remittances and tourism ([https://timep.org/2026/07/30/power-cuts-protests-and-lack-of-policy-tunisias-economy-under-pressure/](#)) could also be at risk due to domestic mismanagement and global downturns. Moreover, the most

common metric for foreign reserves is hovering (<https://www.bct.gov.tn/bct/siteprod/indicateurs.jsp?la=AN>) around 90 days worth of imports—a psychological threshold (<https://www.imf.org/en/news/articles/2015/09/28/04/53/sopol040711b>) below which panic behaviors like hoarding typically set in.

What's Next?

Clearly, Tunis will need to take drastic measures at some point to prevent a wider crisis, yet it appears unprepared to do so. Three years remain in Saied's current term, but many expect it to end prematurely, whether because of an incapacity to keep the country running or due to his reportedly poor health (<https://www.ilmfoglio.it/esteri/2026/07/17/news/saied-hospitalized-as-kamel-ghribi-sends-a-trojan-horse-to-tunis--402446>).

Certain scenarios remain unlikely, however. Many Tunisians would hesitate to join another mass uprising, since the so-called "Dark Decade" that followed the 2010-11 revolution failed to deliver greater freedoms or economic growth. The prospect of a military coup also remains distant given the army's aversion to politics.

Saied's options are limited as well. Changing his prime minister yet again is unlikely to satisfy anyone. Some speculate that he could elevate Justice Minister Leila Jaffel to that post, in part because she is the only minister he has yet to sack. Yet she is unpopular now that Tunisia's once-respected judiciary is no longer independent (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/06/25/tunisia-executive-capture-of-the-judiciary-and-the-criminalization-of-the-legal>). Another oft-cited option—appointing a prime minister affiliated with the military, the one institution that still seems somewhat trusted by the public—would be difficult for Saied given his concern about empowering someone who could prove to be more popular than him.

Hence, an organized transition appears to be the most promising prospect. In talking about a post-Saied Tunisia, opposition figures tend to characterize the first step as a technocratic transitional administration lasting one or two years. Before declaring and implementing a political roadmap, authorities would first need to reassure the public that the country's institutions and prospective political leaders are reliable. A transitional period would also be needed to stabilize the economy—likely through an IMF package or other large external loan—and restore a sound constitutional and legislative framework for elections.

Yet there is no guarantee that such an approach could get off the ground. Tunisia's notoriously fragmented opposition has yet to show that it has coalesced around a common plan, let alone a single leader or bloc.

What the United States Should Do

Even if Saied manages to keep the government intact until the next presidential election in 2029, attempting a transition via the ballot box would be uncertain at best. Voter turnout and other metrics would need to improve drastically from the 2024 vote—otherwise, doubt would be cast on the legitimacy and mandate of any successor. Moreover, one can assume that Saied would have to continue repressing (<https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/repression-and-judicial-struggles-in-kais-saieds-tunisia/>) the opposition just to hang on until then, so the main candidates to succeed him would likely be bureaucrats from the current regime who have no viable new program to offer.

The alternative—a collapse before 2029—is even more troubling because it would quickly make the entire region more dangerous. Among other risks, a weakened Tunisia could exacerbate cross-border human (<https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/human-smuggling-and-trafficking-in-north-africa-and-the-sahel-2025/>) and drug (https://www.unodc.org/romena/uploads/documents/2026/Drug_Trafficking_Dynamics_in_Libya_and_across_North_Africa_EN_Report.pdf) trafficking, further destabilizing Libya and the Sahel.

Conversely, boosting U.S. support could help prevent either of these scenarios from materializing while capitalizing on the country's geographic and demographic potential (https://www.stimson.org/2026/reassessing-tunisiass-strategic-importance-for-the-united-states/#elementor-toc_heading-anchor-1). This would also preserve the option of getting Tunisia back on the path toward democracy—a difficult challenge, but one that is still viable given the nation's small, homogenous population and nonviolent history. Although the lessons of 2011 show (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/why-economic-reform-failed-tunisia-assessing-four-donors-and-country-transition>) that authorities must temper public expectations and avoid rushing the process, any measures that help restore stability in the next one to two years would be an encouraging first step.

Despite Washington's longstanding support for Tunisia, vital security and economic assistance has been reduced in recent years due to Saied's autocratic measures. Moreover, aside from regular military engagement via U.S. Africa Command, the administration has sent only one high-level official (Special Advisor Massad Boulos) to Tunis since 2025. Supporting a future transition will require more than just military exercises and commercial deals, however. In cooperation with European partners, the administration will need to elevate and sustain its commitment to economic reform, political change, and respect for human rights.

The immediate focus should be on preventing further deterioration in Tunisia and maintaining a relationship on which Washington can build once Saied is out of power. Investing in Tunisia now could enhance American influence there in the long term by improving public perceptions of the United States. It could also leave the country better prepared for a fresh attempt at political transition down the road. Toward these goals, the Trump administration should:

Increase security and counterterrorism assistance. Decades of U.S. security assistance—including roughly \$2 million in annual funding via International Military and Education Training (IMET) programs—have helped (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/02/world/africa/us-tunisia-terrorism.html>) protect Tunisia from terrorist activity and cultivated (<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c1021f7a9e028788fb04a9b/t/62ed19bbdab1ab35d023bdb4/1659705788235/Grewal+2022+Norm+Diffusion.pdf>) healthy views of civil-military relations within the armed forces. Because the army values its relationship with Washington, and because Saied relies in part (<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/843610>) on the generals' support, this security assistance has indirectly discouraged Tunis from turning more dramatically toward China or other U.S. adversaries. Yet in fiscal year 2025, Washington sent Tunisia (<https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/Tab-1-National-Security-Department-of-State-and-Related-Programs-Appropriations-Act-2026-Acessible.pdf>) an estimated \$20 million in Foreign Military Financing, down from \$85 million in FY 2021. And last month, the State Department notified (<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/u-s-pulls-millions-in-military-aid-from-europe-and-mideast-to-support-trump-aligned-nations-in-americas>) Congress that it planned to reprogram a portion of this funding to

countries in the Western Hemisphere. Besides signaling U.S. uninterest in Tunisia, further reductions would leave the country more vulnerable to extremism. Instead, security assistance to Tunis should be expanded during this vital pre-transition period, in part to avoid the potential regional destabilization effects described above. In doing so, Washington should be mindful of its public messaging, explaining to Tunisians that it will carefully vet such assistance to make sure internal security forces do not exploit the extra funding for human rights abuses.

Enhance visitor exchange programs. Given the dramatic weakening of Tunisia's political parties since 2011, Washington should do what it can to support the development of a robust political landscape and prepare the people for a new generation of leadership. For example, it could provide [opportunities \(https://tn.usembassy.gov/apply-now-for-the-fulbright-visiting-scholar-program-for-the-2027-2028-academic-year/\)](https://tn.usembassy.gov/apply-now-for-the-fulbright-visiting-scholar-program-for-the-2027-2028-academic-year/) for promising young Tunisians to visit the United States, which could help build ties with future leaders and restore local trust in democratic politics.

Fund multilateral investments and restore initiatives meant to support economic growth. Once economic reform efforts are clearly under way, the Trump administration should partner with international financial institutions on longer-term projects that can help return Tunisia to a more prosperous trajectory, including infrastructure and education initiatives. It should also revitalize the [Millennium Challenge Corporation Compact \(https://www.mcc.gov/where-we-work/program/tunisia-compact/\)](https://www.mcc.gov/where-we-work/program/tunisia-compact/) and the [Tunisian American Enterprise Fund \(https://www.taefund.org/en/\)](https://www.taefund.org/en/), which can help strengthen the private sector and deepen ties with the existing state administration. Notably, many Tunisians remain skeptical of international interference, so U.S. officials will need to emphasize transparency and articulate the specific benefits of such projects (e.g., jobs, technology transfer).

Increase pressure on the government to stop human rights abuses. Despite his anti-Western rhetoric, Saied remains susceptible to U.S. and European pressure, as [exhibited \(https://www.durbin.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/durbin-schiff-cassidy-mcgovern-urge-tunisian-president-to-release-sonia-dahmani\)](https://www.durbin.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/durbin-schiff-cassidy-mcgovern-urge-tunisian-president-to-release-sonia-dahmani) in the [release \(https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/tunisia-frees-prominent-lawyer-sonia-dahmani-critic-president-2025-11-27/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/tunisia-frees-prominent-lawyer-sonia-dahmani-critic-president-2025-11-27/) of imprisoned rights advocate Sonia Dahmani. The Trump administration has already been messaging Tunis on this issue in private, but continued pressure may be needed to spur wider action and send a moral signal of support to those seeking change.

Sabina Henneberg is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute. ♦

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Trump's Middle East Dealmaking Is Working Against Itself](#)

Oct 28, 2026



Eitan Danon,
Joshua Kram

[\(/policy-analysis/trumps-middle-east-dealmaking-working-against-itself\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Israel After the Election: Policy Implications of a Crucial Vote](#)

Oct 28, 2026



Gili Cohen,
David Makovsky,
Dennis Ross,
Felicia Schwartz

[\(/policy-analysis/israel-after-election-policy-implications-crucial-vote\)](#)



How to Secure the Straits

Oct 28, 2026

◆
Dana Stroul

(/policy-analysis/how-secure-straits)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

North Africa (/policy-analysis/north-africa)