

Assessing the Protests in Tunisia

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Brief Analysis

The latest demonstrations will test the government of Prime Minister Chahed and the broader democratic experiment under way in the birthplace of the Arab Spring.

On Monday January 8, protests erupted in roughly a dozen towns across Tunisia, ostensibly in response to an increase in the price of fuel, produce, and other goods resulting from implementation of the 2018 budget a week prior. In the days since, the protests have spread to more than twenty locales. Further, clashes with police have resulted in the death of one protestor and injuries to roughly eighty police officers; more than six hundred protestors have been arrested; a Jewish school has been firebombed, causing property damage but no injuries; and the military has been deployed in certain cities. The coming days will likely determine whether this unrest proves a momentary, if acute, bump in the road or a turning point in Tunisia's fragile transition.

SOURCES OF GRIEVANCE

The protests come seven years after the uprising that toppled longtime dictator Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali and ultimately inspired a wave of revolts across the region, most of which devolved into chaos, violence, or authoritarian resurgence. Tunisia has thus far managed to avoid such a fate, carrying out two successful rounds of national elections, approving a new constitution widely seen as the most progressive in the Arab world, and beginning the lengthy and difficult process of transforming state institutions that previously served the interests of an elite few into bodies accountable to an entire citizenry.

The transition has not always been smooth. Between 2012 and 2016, the most overt sources of instability were security related and political in nature. On the security front, the country experienced an attack on the U.S. embassy, a series of political assassinations, two high-casualty terrorist strikes, and an attempted insurgency in a town along

the Libyan border—all perpetrated by individuals with ties to extremist Islamist groups. With the exception of the 2013 assassinations, the terrorists behind these attacks all had links to Libya, highlighting the spillover effect on Tunisia from the chaos next door. Since early 2016, the country has not endured a major security incident, reflecting improvements in the state's border control and counterterrorism apparatuses.

In the political realm, deepening polarization between supporters of the country's main Islamist party, Ennahda (Renaissance), and secularly oriented parties and civil society organizations brought the transition to the brink of collapse in 2013. Legislative elections in 2014 produced an unlikely alliance between Ennahda and the country's leading secular party, Nidaa Tounes (Call of Tunisia), which has since brought a considerable measure of political stability, albeit at the expense of a halting legislative process and ongoing postponements of local elections.

Whereas the state has managed to reduce the security threats and establish a functioning political system, the current protests expose the extent to which Tunisian leaders have failed to tackle the country's economic problems. In a December poll conducted by the International Republican Institute, 89% of respondents described the current economic situation as "very bad" or "somewhat bad," the highest such percentage since the IRI began tracking Tunisian public opinion in 2011. And whereas in previous years Tunisians ranked unemployment as a leading economic concern, today a plurality consider the economic and financial crisis the single biggest problem facing their country.

Such perceptions find support in reality. Alongside persistent unemployment (15% nationally and 30% among university graduates), and skyrocketing prices for staples such as meat and vegetables, the country's fiscal health has continued to deteriorate. The government of Prime Minister Youssef Chahed inherited a deficit constituting 6% of GDP, a public debt eating up half of GDP, and a currency that had lost a quarter of its value in just two years. In 2016, the IMF approved a four-year loan to Tunisia of \$2.9 billion, in exchange for which the government agreed to rein in spending by shrinking the public sector (accounting for 50% of government expenditures), reducing wage increases, raising taxes, and implementing subsidy reforms. The last of these resulted in the price hikes fueling the recent protests. Notwithstanding Chahed's recent warnings that painful economic decisions would be necessary, the austerity measures come at a time when a quarter of the population reports having difficulty finding the means to feed itself.

MORE OF THE SAME, OR A TURNING POINT?

This is not the first time since 2011 that Tunisia has experienced protests stemming from the grim economy.

Spring of 2017 and winter of 2016 saw similar outbursts sparked by deep frustrations over the lack of jobs and the ongoing marginalization of communities in Tunisia's interior. In those instances, the protests remained largely confined to traditionally restive places in the country's center and south, like Kasserine and Gafsa. The current wave has spread to areas in and around the capital, prompting allusions to the 2010-11 protests.

Such comparisons are tempting, but the vastly different domestic political contexts may limit their utility. The same IRI poll that highlighted citizens' preoccupation with the country's economic travails also revealed a growing approval of the Chahed government's performance in recent months, most likely in response to its anti-corruption agenda—which some civil society organizations have deemed inadequate to the task. Chahed's personal favorability ratings also increased, from (an admittedly dismal) 21% in August 2017 to 34% in December. The poll was conducted before the current price hikes went into effect, though, so these figures could dip again if the austerity measures prove unbearable for too many citizens. At the very least, they suggest Chahed and his government enjoy more room to maneuver than Ben Ali did in 2011. Further, the persistent chaos and violence in neighboring Libya and the region more generally will likely continue to suppress the appetite in most Tunisians for widespread social mobilization that could risk instability.

Still, the possibility that the latest protests will morph into a larger phenomenon cannot be dismissed, especially if the days ahead bring heightened clashes with law enforcement or if established civil society activist networks decide to join the current wave of protests. Thus far, the government's response has suggested an attempt to strike a balance between identifying with the economic grievances of average Tunisians and condemning the violence to which some protestors have resorted in expressing those grievances. Chahed, for example, has issued a series of statements acknowledging the country's economic severities while characterizing the riots as serving "networks of corruption" and indicating the state will not tolerate acts of vigilantism. The events have also led to sparring between the political parties, with the prime minister and members of Ennahda accusing the Popular Front, the main bloc of leftist opposition parties in the legislature, of instigating the demonstrations for political gain. Whether the protests expand henceforth will partly depend on the degree to which such accusations resonate with the Tunisian public.

OPTIONS FOR WASHINGTON

For U.S. policymakers, the latest round of unrest serves as a reminder that Tunisia's relative success in an otherwise turbulent region remains tenuous and vulnerable to collapse without continued attention. An emergency aid package, bolstered by contributions from European and Arab allies, would send a strong signal of support to the struggling Arab democracy. The latest incidents also reflect a need for U.S. officials to coordinate closely with the IMF and Tunisian officials in determining the timing of future reforms, to mitigate their effects. Moreover, the Trump administration should consider three measures to help Tunisia emerge from the current period intact: one economic, one security related, and one political.

To date, the United States has guaranteed \$1 billion in loans to Tunisia, facilitating much-needed access to international capital markets. In October 2017, Tunisian officials indicated they plan to request an additional loan guarantee in the amount of \$500 million. Previous agreements vaguely stipulated that the Tunisian government would direct funds to economic development. This time, Washington should approve the request but tie the guarantee to more explicit and detailed pledges from Tunisian lawmakers that they will invest the funds in infrastructure and small business development in the country's neglected interior regions.

A key component of U.S. security assistance to Tunisia has come in the form of police training. The initial returns on this investment were apparent in 2016, when a similar outbreak was met with police restraint—widely seen as a product of U.S. (and French) training and credited with preventing the protests from spiraling out of control. To the extent the reactions of law enforcement affect the trajectory of social upheavals, continued training of the police—especially units serving in the country's interior—will be crucial.

Finally, U.S. policymakers should work closely with their Tunisian counterparts to help prepare the country for local elections, now scheduled for May. Although the current protests did not stem from political grievances per se, establishing mechanisms of local representation and governance would bring Tunisians a measure of accountability and a greater say in decisions concerning local economic development, two outcomes that would reduce the likelihood of future unrest.

Sarah Feuer is a Soref Fellow at The Washington Institute and the author of [Regulating Islam: Religion and the State in Contemporary Morocco and Tunisia](http://www.cambridge.org/us/academic/subjects/politics-international-relations/middle-east-government-politics-and-policy/regulating-islam-religion-and-state-contemporary-morocco-and-tunisia?format=HB&isbn=9781108420204#pyAbjulQOUTrUuG1.97) (<http://www.cambridge.org/us/academic/subjects/politics-international-relations/middle-east-government-politics-and-policy/regulating-islam-religion-and-state-contemporary-morocco-and-tunisia?format=HB&isbn=9781108420204#pyAbjulQOUTrUuG1.97>) (Cambridge University Press). ❖

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