

Kerry in Tunis: Bolstering an Arab Democracy Through Strategic Dialogue

by [Sarah Feuer \(/experts/sarah-feuer\)](#)

Nov 12, 2015

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/kyry-fy-twms-tzyz-dymqratyt-rbyt-mn-khlal-alhwar-alastratyjy\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Sarah Feuer \(/experts/sarah-feuer\)](#)

Dr. Sarah Feuer, an expert on politics and religion in North Africa, was the Rosenbloom Family Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy's Geduld Program on Arab Politics.



Brief Analysis

At a time of political and economic uncertainty in Tunisia, this week's bilateral talks could offer urgent protection to the lone 'Arab Spring' success story.

On November 13, Secretary of State John Kerry will travel to Tunisia for the latest installment of the bilateral Strategic Dialogue. The high-level trip follows a September visit by Assistant Secretaries Anne Patterson and Tom Malinowski, who met with various officials and activists. In the interim, Tunisian civil society groups made international headlines for winning the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of their role in the country's successful democratic transition. Notwithstanding that well-deserved accolade, however, the Strategic Dialogue will take place against a backdrop of growing political uncertainty, ongoing economic woes, and a precarious security situation for the struggling North African state. Thus, the talks give the Obama administration an opportunity to reaffirm much-needed U.S. support for the only "Arab Spring" country that has remained on a recognizable path to democracy.

A CHAOTIC POLITICAL SCENE

When Secretary Kerry arrives in Tunis, he will find a political landscape shaken by the recent resignation of thirty-two parliamentarians from the secular Nidaa Tounes (Call of Tunisia) Party. Nidaa was established in 2012 with the principal goal of countering the Islamist party Ennahda (Renaissance), which had emerged from the 2011 revolutionary upheaval in a dominant position. An anti-Islamist message carried Nidaa to victory in the October 2014 parliamentary elections, and party leader Beji Caid Essebsi to the presidency two months later. But the coherent campaign rhetoric masked internal differences over economic policy, cleavages between elites from the former ruling party and a newer guard of politicians, and disagreement over whether to work with Ennahda in government.

In the absence of internal decisionmaking structures, Nidaa's fissures have only grown since the elections. One such division concerns the party leadership, with rival factions congregating around the current secretary-general, Mohsen Marzouk, and President Essebsi's son, Hafedh. The party members who broke away from their parliamentary bloc on November 9 hail from Marzouk's camp and have alleged that their opponents seek to install Hafedh as party leader. It remains to be seen whether the dissidents will rejoin their bloc (presumably in exchange for concessions) or form a new party, but the immediate result of the defection was to reduce Nidaa's seat tally to fifty-four, putting Ennahda in the lead with sixty-nine seats and increasing the likelihood of a government reshuffle.

Although the Islamists may be quietly reveling in Nidaa's troubles, Ennahda faces challenges of its own. Despite its extensive internal, democratic decisionmaking bodies, the party has repeatedly put off convening a formal congress while various factions debate its long-term orientation and the proposed separation of its political and missionary (*dawa*) functions. As long as consensus on such questions remains elusive, the prospect of greater responsibility in government may prove to be a mixed blessing. Both Ennahda and Nidaa face the challenge of transitioning from opposition movements to governing parties, and the extent to which they succeed will greatly affect Tunisia's ability to continue adopting much-needed policy reforms, not least in the economic realm.

PERSISTENT ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

Since last year's parliamentary election, Tunisian legislators have made steady, if slow, progress in implementing economic reforms. Most of the public banks have been recapitalized, a public-private partnership law is currently making its way through parliamentary committee, and a revised investment code will likely come up for vote in December, to cite a few examples. Such initiatives will take time to yield fruit, but they are crucial first steps toward improving Tunisia's business and investment climate, and lawmakers deserve credit for pushing them through despite crippling staff shortages and related resource constraints.

Still, the economy faces serious challenges. Unemployment remains stubbornly high, and economic growth has been hampered by the decline in tourism receipts, a rise in imports (especially of energy-related goods), and the stalled manufacturing and mining industries. IMF and World Bank loans are helping Tunisia stay afloat, but they will require deeper structural reforms that may prove painful to constituencies whose support remains crucial to the country's broader democratic transition and long-term success.

At this year's UN General Assembly in New York, U.S. Commerce Secretary Penny Pritzker conveyed the Obama administration's desire to lend technical assistance to Tunisian lawmakers as they devise medium- to long-term economic development plans. The Strategic Dialogue provides an opportune moment to make good on that offer.

A QUIET, IF PRECARIOUS, SECURITY SITUATION

Perhaps unexpectedly, the one relative bright spot awaiting Secretary Kerry will be in the security realm. Since a June terrorist attack killed thirty-eight tourists at a beach resort in Sousse, Tunisia has not experienced any major security incidents. Following the massacre, President Essebsi declared a thirty-day state of emergency, then extended it for two months. The ensuing deployment of the armed forces to guard sites around the country, coupled with the passage of a controversial counterterrorism law over the summer, prompted concerns in Tunisian civil society and the international community that the government intended to clamp down on civil liberties in the name of preserving security. But by and large, these fears have not been realized, and the president quietly lifted the state of emergency in early October.

Even so, the relative calm should not lead to complacency. Next door, Libya remains a cauldron of violence with ongoing potential for spillover into Tunisia. Authorities also face the prospect of an estimated 3,000 battle-hardened Tunisian jihadists eventually returning home from the wars in Syria and Iraq. In the meantime, security forces continue to uncover weapons caches, terrorist cells, and nefarious plots inside the country.

Given Tunisia's formal designation as a "Major Non-NATO Ally" by the U.S. government, the Strategic Dialogue gives the Obama administration a chance to evaluate the status of bilateral security cooperation and discuss ways of expediting assistance on counterterrorism and related matters. Recent reports of joint U.S.-British-Tunisian counterterrorism training exercises suggest there is momentum on which to build.

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

Consistent with the purpose and tenor of most strategic dialogues, the U.S.-Tunisian talks will help both countries assess the fundamentals of the bilateral relationship. The first round of the Tunisia dialogue, held in 2014, was led by then-deputy secretary William Burns, so the Obama administration is rightly signaling even stronger support at a pivotal moment by sending Secretary Kerry this time around. Some Tunisians may be expecting a major policy shift from the talks and will likely be disappointed, but the dialogue could still inject momentum into existing assistance programs for the lone remaining Arab Spring success story.

Sarah Feuer is a Soref Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

TOPICS

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

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

Energy & Economics (/policy-analysis/energy-economics)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

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