

# Tunisia's President Visits the White House

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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**The Obama administration should use the occasion to expand the strategic partnership with Tunis, in part by expediting economic and security assistance that would bolster the country's hard-fought gains in democratization.**

**O**n May 21, Tunisian president Beji Caid Essebsi will meet with President Obama in Washington, marking his first trip to the United States since his election to a five-year term in December. The formation of a new government in Tunis has ostensibly capped the political transition sparked by the 2011 ouster of longtime autocrat Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali. To ensure that Tunisia remains a success story, however, Washington should use the occasion of Essebsi's visit to more vigorously demonstrate its stated commitment to an expanded strategic partnership with the struggling state.

## A TALE OF TWO TUNISIAS

**W**hile most countries caught up in the "Arab Spring" have devolved into chaos and violence or reverted to authoritarianism, Tunisia has emerged from its Jasmine Revolution on relatively solid democratic footing. Since 2011, it has adopted a constitution enshrining civil liberties, gender equality, and the separation of powers; peacefully conducted two election cycles, a key benchmark for nascent democracies; and begun to build an inclusive political system in which Islamists and non-Islamists are participating. For example, the parliament elected in October 2014 includes representatives from Essebsi's secularist party Nidaa Tounes ("Tunisian Call"), the Islamist Ennahda ("Renaissance"), the anti-Islamist al-Ittihad al-Watani al-Hurr (Free Patriotic Union), a coalition of leftist parties known as the Popular Front, the neo-liberal Afek Tounes (Tunisian Horizons), and a host of independents. The government of Prime Minister Habib Essid, formed in February, likewise includes Islamist and non-Islamist ministers. While there is no shortage of polarization in Tunisia, consensus-minded political leaders in the Islamist and non-Islamist camps and a flourishing, vigilant civil society have kept the transition on track.

Despite these achievements, however, Essebsi will return from his White House visit to a country facing enormous economic and security-related threats to its experiment in democratization. Unemployment remains stubbornly high at around 15 percent -- down from 18 percent after the uprising but still above pre-revolution levels. Tourism, traditionally a key source of jobs and foreign currency, plummeted after 2011 and had only moderately rebounded when a brazen terrorist attack this March killed twenty-one foreigners and one citizen at the Bardo Museum in Tunis. The phosphate industry -- traditionally the other leading source of foreign currencies -- has lost roughly \$2 billion since the uprising, partly due to strikes by the nearly 30,000 Tunisian employees of the state-run mining company. Recent months have also witnessed a growing number of protests, hunger strikes, and sit-ins on the part of marginalized communities and unemployed university graduates frustrated by the lack of government investment and access to jobs. In some cases, protesters have clashed with police, raising the prospect of more widespread unrest. For many Tunisians, democracy has yet to improve the basic standard of living.

The security situation is equally worrisome. A Salafi jihadist movement emerged in the first year following the uprising, reflected in the *dawa* (evangelism) and violence carried out by groups such as Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia, Katibat Uqba ibn Nafi, and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. In 2013, two prominent leftist politicians were gunned down by jihadists (with the so-called "Islamic State"/ISIS recently, if dubiously, claiming responsibility), and members of Katibat Uqba ibn Nafi killed eight soldiers in the Jebel Chaambi region near the western border with Algeria. A subsequent government crackdown led to the arrest of several jihadist leaders and reduced the visible presence of their groups in the cities, but such gains have been offset by the deteriorating situation along the borders.

On the Algerian frontier, jihadist groups have killed dozens of Tunisian soldiers since 2013, often in collusion with organized crime cartels running smuggling routes. Meanwhile, hundreds of Tunisian jihadists have crossed into Libya, where many are believed to have spent time in terrorist training camps and joined Islamist militias. The lawlessness in Libya has also accelerated the flow of weapons and other contraband into Tunisia, and provided passage for the nearly 3,000 Tunisians who have reportedly traveled to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS and other jihadist groups.

## WHY TUNISIA MATTERS

**S**ome in Washington have concluded that Tunisia holds little geostrategic importance for the United States beyond the symbolic value of a successful Arab democracy. But substantial American assistance to the fledgling democracy is warranted for at least three strategic reasons.

First, a failed Tunisian state would only embolden religious extremists across the region. Policymakers should not underestimate the implications of such a development, especially given the dangerous tumult that extremist actors are already causing throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

Second, Tunisia's political situation belies the prevailing narrative of the past four years that the region must choose between secular autocrats who deride democratic politics and Islamist democrats who promote deeply illiberal policies. This binary framework has long obscured the complexities in a country like Tunisia, where autocrats could be found walking around in religious or secular garb, and liberal democrats could be heard criticizing Ben Ali-era secular elites and Islamists in the same breath. Contrary to conventional explanations or predictions, a space has opened up in Tunisia for liberal Arab democrats to emerge and potentially thrive. This is a remarkable development that Washington should support.

Third, Tunisians take an increasingly positive view of the United States, a rare trend in the Arab world. A 2014 Gallup poll listed Tunisia among only seven countries in the world where approval ratings for U.S. leaders increased by at least ten percentage points over the previous year. For an American administration facing heavy criticism over

its perceived lack of attention (or worse) to friends and allies, Tunisia offers a possible example to the contrary.

## U.S. SUPPORT MOVING FORWARD

The Obama administration has rightly, if belatedly, recognized that Tunisia's situation demands greater U.S. engagement. This February, the State Department announced plans to nearly double economic assistance and triple security-related assistance to Tunisia for fiscal year 2016. And following the Bardo attack, U.S. officials announced additional increases in security aid. Given that bilateral assistance to Tunisia has steadily declined over the past three years, the administration's ostensible aim to reverse that trend is encouraging. President Essebsi's visit is an opportune moment to build on recent commitments and further strengthen the strategic partnership.

On the economic front, U.S. policymakers should think creatively about ways to help Tunisia implement the structural reforms needed to reduce unemployment and grow the economy, particularly in neglected regions where crime is on the rise and the prospect of jihadist incursions more immediate. While there are no quick fixes to this predicament, U.S. assistance can make a difference if properly targeted. Even providing aid that is not directly tied to the economy could have important economic ramifications. For example, funding that enables Tunisian parliamentarians to rent office space and hire staff -- essentials that too few currently enjoy -- could expedite the legislature's day-to-day operations and adoption of proposed economic reforms.

On the security front, Tunisia offers an exception to the regional rule that has so often found Washington cooperating with Arab regimes that share its strategic interests but remain decidedly undemocratic. If Tunisia continues along its current trajectory -- and the pressures being exerted on the government to avoid returning to a heavy-handed police state do not let up -- then U.S. policymakers can provide security assistance without facing a heavy moral dilemma. Expediting the delivery of much-needed military equipment, training the armed forces in counterinsurgency methods, and helping security decisionmakers streamline intelligence gathering and devise a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy would all go a long way toward ensuring stability. Ideally, the security component of a strengthened strategic partnership with Tunisia would focus on helping the country secure its borders, root out the insurgency in the western mountains, keep close track of Tunisians fighting for jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq, and reform the security sector. If conducted properly, such reform could strengthen the state's capacity to protect citizens and tourists alike without undermining the country's hard-fought gains in political freedom.

*Sarah Feuer is a Sorel Fellow at The Washington Institute.* ❖

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