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US FOREIGN POLICY IN TUNISIA: DILEMMAS AND PROSPECTS

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About the Author

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Cover photo: Tunisian President Kais Saied meets with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken during the US-Africa Leaders Summit in Washington, DC - 15 December 2022. © Tunisian Presidency - Anadolu Agency

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1 US Foreign Policy in Tunisia: Dilemmas and Prospects

Introduction

The sharp reversals in Tunisia's democratization process since 25 July 2021 have created profound difficulties for US policy. This essay reviews the historical context of relations between the US and Tunisia, analyzes US foreign policy in Tunisia since the uprisings of 2011, and discusses the challenges posed to US policy since the autocratizing actions taken by Tunisian President Kais Saied since 2021. The essay concludes with a discussion of the latest developments in Washington and prospects for US policy going forward.

Historical context

Relations between the United States and Tunisia have historically been friendly. The two countries signed a Friendship Treaty in 1799 and deepened their relationship after the end of the French protectorate, due to President Habib Bourguiba's "modernizing" social policies and pro-Western orientation (especially compared to his Arab contemporaries).¹

The relationship has experienced occasional moments of tension, usually connected to security incidents. US support for two Israeli raids against PLO headquarters in Tunis during the 1980s caused some friction,² and Tunisia's opposition to the 1991 Gulf War resulted in cuts to US economic assistance, although these were quickly restored to earlier levels.³ Such events revealed a tension within Tunisian policy between the value it placed on Western (foremost US, followed by France) security assistance – military aid, training, and equipment – and continued wariness of America's role in the region.

Similarly, Washington has also had to balance its priorities within Tunisia and the broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA).⁴ The September 2012 attack on the American

embassy and school in Tunis temporarily complicated US-Tunisia relations, for example with the US criticizing Tunisia for being too lenient on the suspects who were arrested and tried in relation to the attack.⁵ Generally speaking, the more stable Tunisia has appeared in Washington's eyes – whether in terms of its leadership⁶, its exhibit of democratic values and institution-building, and its security conditions -- the stronger the relationship has been.

US policy goals

Since the uprisings of 2011 that overthrew dictator Zine el Abidine Ben Ali and initiated a democratic transition in Tunisia, US policy has had two main goals: democracy promotion and security cooperation.

In support of these goals, US policymakers have deployed a variety of tools. Democracy-promotion tools range from soft power (diffusion of US norms through public diplomacy, aid without conditionality, etc.) to military intervention (such as in Iraq in 2003), with the use of things like rhetoric, assistance, and conditionality as a middle ground.⁷ Security assistance tools include military (arms sales, training, peacekeeping operations, etc.) and law enforcement (including through judicial reform, and other means of countering the spread of certain weapons and narcotics).⁸

These two objectives have of course overlapped. For instance, efforts to counter violent extremist ideology are among the goals that make up the larger democracy promotion agenda.⁹ This overlap reflects the complexity of US policy and US

East: 2011-2020: Selected Case Studies. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service.

5 Blanchard (2021), 11 and 14; Arieff, A. and Humud, C.E. (2014, Oct 22). Political Transition in Tunisia. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 12.

6 Deeb and Laipson (1991), 234.

7 Adapted from Boduszynski, M. (2019). US Democracy Promotion in the Arab World: Beyond Interests vs. Ideals. Boulder: Lynne Reinner, 39.

8 Morgenstern, E.M. and Brown, N.M. (2022, Jan 10). Foreign Assistance: An Introduction to U.S. Programs and Policy. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 9.

9 The main broad objectives of U.S. foreign assistance are: peace and security; investing in people; governing justly and democratically; promoting economic growth; and humanitarian assistance. See Morgenstern and

1 Deeb, M.J. and Laipson, E. (1991). Foreign Policy in Tunisia: Continuity and Change under Bourguiba and Ben Ali. In Zartman, W.I. (ed), *Tunisia: The Political Economy of Reform*. Boulder: Lynne Reinner, 230.

2 Deeb and Laipson (1991), 243-5.

3 Perkins, K. (2006). *A History of Modern Tunisia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 192. Similarly, during the second Gulf War of 2003, then-president Ben Ali criticized the invasion but was careful not harm bilateral ties. Arieff, A. (2011, Jan 18). Tunisia: Recent Developments and Policy Issues. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 10.

4 Blanchard, C. (coordinator) (2021, May 21). Congress and the Middle

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policy-making – different individuals and entities within the US government rarely agree on how the relationship with a particular country should be approached; how and when specific foreign assistance objectives should be pursued; and through which policy tools.

The development of US policy toward Tunisia between 2011 and 2021, therefore, reflected a variety of factors, including US domestic considerations such as a tightened budgetary environment in the early years following the 2011 Arab Uprisings.¹⁰ Nonetheless, funds allocated for foreign assistance and security cooperation with Tunisia during the first three years after the uprisings amounted to nearly seven times as much as those allocated during the three years preceding the uprisings.¹¹ However, it was really beginning in Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 (1 October 2015 to 30 September 2016) that bilateral assistance to Tunisia began to increase sharply.¹² That year, Congress went as far as setting a minimum floor (\$141.9 million), “which had the practical effect of ensuring aid funding for Tunisia in the context of competing economic and security aid priorities.” This rather unique position in US foreign policy reflected Tunisia’s relatively promising experience as a MENA country attempting to transition from authoritarian rule, especially after 2014.¹³ In addition to dedicated bilateral funds for Tunisia, around this time Congress authorized a Tunisian-American Enterprise Fund and several loan guarantees for Tunisia.¹⁴ It also legislated new multi-country security programs that included Tunisia to combat violent extremism and enhance border security.¹⁵

Brown (2022) for a discussion of the complexities in categorizing US foreign policy objectives and activities.

10 Blanchard (2021), 4.

11 Blanchard (2021), 12. This refers to fiscal years.

12 When comparing the five fiscal years following the uprisings to the five fiscal years preceding it, bilateral assistance increased nine-fold. Arieff, A. (2019, November 1). Tunisia: In Brief. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 10.

13 Congress subsequently increased the minimum assistance floor for Tunisia three times, and decline proposals by the Trump Administration to decrease aid. See Blanchard (2021), 14. In 2013, two members of the House of Representatives even registered a Tunisia Caucus “to inform policy makers of the democratic transition in Tunisia, while strengthening bilateral relations between the United States and Tunisia.”

14 See Arieff (2019).

15 These changes came in a context of heightened insecurity in Tunisia, including several high-profile terrorist attacks.

Democracy promotion

US policy aims in theory to reward countries for progress in building democratic institutions and transitioning from authoritarian rule. In 2013, funding for “Governing Justly and Democratically” (GJD) – the foreign-assistance objective that most closely aligns with democracy promotion – in Tunisia was \$3 million, well below levels of almost every other country in the region receiving such aid. By 2020, the GJD funding level to Tunisia for the year had reached \$49 million, second in the region only to Iraq and Jordan. Among other reasons, the increase was “due to Tunisia’s demonstrated electoral successes and constitutional negotiations.”¹⁶ In March 2011, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Tunisia to “pledge support for democratic reform” in the country and offer several hundred million dollars in economic aid to support job creation.¹⁷ In May, President Obama called on the United States “to show that America values the dignity of the street vendor in Tunisia more than the raw power of the dictator.”¹⁸

Similarly, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), an independent US Government foreign aid agency, provides assistance to “developing nations that demonstrate positive performance in three areas: ruling justly, investing in people, and fostering economic freedom.”¹⁹ In June 2021, the MCC approved a \$499 million five-year compact to strengthen Tunisia’s transportation, trade, and water sectors. The Biden Administration called the Compact “an affirmation of Tunisia’s commitment to constitutional democratic governance and equitable prosperity.”²⁰

Despite evidence of mounting instability in Tunisia by 2021, US policy exhibited continuity, suggesting that policymakers

16 Fishman, B. (2022). Reexamining U.S. Aid to the Middle East: Ideas for Advancing Both Governance and Democracy. Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 10-11. These are references to fiscal years.

17 Thorne, J. (2011, March 17). Hillary Clinton visits Tunisia to press for reform. *The National*, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/hillary-clinton-visits-tunisia-to-press-for-reform-1.421577>. Notably, Clinton’s visit took place among “simmering” anti-US protests.

18 <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa%20>

19 Brown, N.M. (2019, October 3). Millennium Challenge Corporation: Overview and Issues. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service.

20 US Embassy in Tunisia (2021, June 30). MCC Board approves nearly \$500 million compact for Tunisia. <https://tn.usembassy.gov/mccs-board-approves-nearly-500-million-for-tunisia-compact/>

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believed that support for Tunisia's building of democratic institutions was having the desired effect. In particular, the secularist-Islamist consensus governments of 2012-2013 (despite its challenges) and of 2014-2019 and the peaceful transfers of power across successive governments were considered indicators of a burgeoning democracy. However, this approach has since been recognized as failing to address the absence of leadership around economic reforms in Tunisia²¹ and the clear loss of legitimacy among political actors.²²

Security assistance

Security assistance has long been an important part of the US-Tunisia relationship, recognizing Tunisia's role in countering transnational threats, albeit at a lower priority level than other MENA countries.²³ Increases in funding after 2011 for Security Sector Reform (SSR) also reflected the belief that internal and external security was central to Tunisia's regime transition.²⁴

From Washington's perspective, supporting SSR in Tunisia meant strengthening the armed forces (or military) and making the Internal Security Forces (ISF) more democratic. This translated into a sharp increase in both traditional arms sales (known as Foreign Military Financing) and funds for programs dedicated to internal policing such as the International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE).²⁵ In 2015, President Barack Obama also designated

Tunisia a major non-NATO ally.

In contrast to democracy assistance, security assistance to Tunisia since 2011 has been demonstrably effective. Reports have noted improvements within the Tunisian armed forces,²⁶ and data on terrorist activity inside Tunisia and at its borders reflects an enhanced capability to combat such threats.²⁷

Nonetheless, SSR has faced challenges. The traditional neglect of the military in favor of the ISF, which were in critical need of – but often strongly resisted – reform, contributed to political struggles. For example, Ali Laarayedh, the Interior Minister under the first post-Ben Ali government known as the Troika, was unable to remove the director of the intervention forces, who was accused of firing on protesters during the December 2010-January 2011 uprisings, after the latter mobilized police forces to protect him.²⁸ More generally, the rise of police unions has impeded efforts to reduce police violence and impunity since 2011.²⁹ The historical division between the military and ISF along with the general tumult created by Ben Ali's overthrow meant that the army had to step in at the time and fill several internal security functions, such as protecting key state infrastructure, which also complicated SSR efforts.³⁰ In addition, during the early post-revolution years to support SSR, the US lacked a “robust framework” for implementing security assistance programs. The Bilateral Country Action Plan (BCAP) for Tunisia, adopted in 2017, led to improvements. Another problem was the Tunisian security

of strengthening the capacity of the internal security services to counter terrorism threats.

21 Fishman (2022), 18.

22 See Ottaway, M. (2021, April 2). Tunisia: Political Parties and Democracy in Crisis. Washington, DC: Wilson Center Viewpoints Series, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/tunisia-political-parties-and-democracy-crisis>.

23 Yousif, E. (2020 July). Beyond Performance: Lessons Learned from U.S. Security Assistance to Tunisia. Washington, DC: Center for International Policy/Security Assistance Monitor, 6.

24 Hanlon, Q. (2012). Security Sector Reform in Tunisia: A Year After the Jasmine Revolution. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace. Hanlon (2) defines SSR as “a comprehensive tool for fixing the dysfunctional security sectors in fragile states that are emerging from conflict, developing capacities to meet the human security needs of their populations, or transitioning from authoritarian rule.”

25 See Yousif, E. (2020), 8. Yousif (8) cites Arief, A. and Humud, C. (2014), who note the widespread conviction among Tunisians and the international community that the injustices perpetrated by the police and justice sectors in Tunisia would need to be dealt with. He also cites State Department documents (6) in noting the importance to the United States

26 E.g. Yousif, E. (2020); Wehrey, F. (2020, March 18). Tunisia's Wake-Up Call: How Security Challenges from Libya are Shaping Defense Reforms. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; Shah, H. and Dalton, M. (2020). The Evolution of Tunisia's Military and the Role of Foreign Security Sector Assistance. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

27 Zelin, A.Y. (2020, Jan 27). Tunisia Turns a Corner Against the Jihadist Movement. Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tunisia-turns-corner-against-jihadist-movement>.

28 Hanlon (2012), 9-10.

29 Pluta, A. (2023). Impossible 'Reform' of the Tunisian Security Sector? The Role of Unions, International Organizations, and Activist Groups in Policing. Tunis: Arab Reform Initiative, <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/impossible-reform-of-the-tunisian-security-sector-the-role-of-unions-international-organizations-and-activist-groups-in-policing/>

30 Hanlon (2012); Yousif (2020).

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forces – particularly the military’s – limited capacity to absorb international support.³¹ Even as the partnership deepened and the capabilities of the Tunisian armed forces improved, observers as recently as 2020 noted a continued dependence on international support.³²

Perhaps most significantly, recent evaluations of US security assistance in Tunisia found that, particularly in the wake of the 2013 political assassinations and the 2015 terrorist attacks at popular tourist destinations, there was a “deprioritization of reform in favor of tactical effectiveness.”³³ This general neglect for systemic reforms – despite an awareness of the need for them – in favor of combatting immediate threats has meant the outcomes of security assistance have been limited. This is most obvious in the continued significant levels of police brutality.³⁴

Challenges since 25 July 2021

Saied’s actions beginning on 25 July 2021, which culminated in the dismantling or dramatic weakening of checks and balances across governing institutions, and have included in recent months the jailing of several opponents and enhanced populist rhetoric that has left democracy activists, political opponents, and even foreigners³⁵ feeling unsafe, has posed profound policy dilemmas for the United States.

Initial reactions

In the months following Saied’s initial power grab, the international community was stunned by the Tunisian people’s support for what appeared to many as a clear derailing of Tunisia’s democratic development. This posed a dilemma to the US: how could it condemn something a majority of Tunisians seemed to support? Largely for

this reason, American reactions were measured, even as numerous opposition figures and some activists in Tunisia were jailed or placed under house arrest.³⁶ Many who had supported policies of democracy promotion criticized what they called “fence-sitting” by the Biden Administration.³⁷ Another dilemma for Washington was how to live up to its stated commitment to “the Tunisian people”³⁸ without also supporting Saied’s anti-democratic measures. A prime example was the debate over the MCC compact, whose ratification was put on hold “due to democratic governance concerns following the events of July 25.”³⁹ Its suspension was generally favored by those who believed Saied should be punished for his autocratizing moves, but questioned by others who believed that top priority should be supporting Tunisian people.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, agencies including the State Department and USAID began actively trying to “pivot” away from implementing programs that would potentially reinforce Saied’s authoritarian tendencies.

In March 2022, the Biden Administration proposed to Congress significant cuts in funding for both security and economic assistance to Tunisia, slashing both by roughly half of the previous year’s request.⁴¹ Some members of Congress

31 Yousif (2020).

32 Wehrey (2020).

33 Yousif (2020).

34 E.g. Cordall, S.S. (2021, November 9). Kais Saied’s Unholy Marriage of Convenience with Tunisia’s Policy. Foreign Policy, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/11/09/kais-saied-tunisia-police-impunity-protest-violence-coup/>

35 This paper focuses on Western diplomats, but in fact the foreigners who came under the most acute threat during this period were sub-Saharan African migrants and workers living in Tunisia.

36 See Fishman, B. and Robertson, K. (2022, Jul 20). Timeline of Tunisia’s constitutional Crisis and the U.S. Response. Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/timeline-tunisia-constitutional-crisis-and-us-response>

37 Hirsh, M. (2021, July 28). Tunisia’s Democracy Needs Help. Will Biden Step In? Foreign Policy, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/28/tunisia-democracy-needs-help-biden-arab-spring/>. This measured response continued over the next year and a half -- US Assistant Secretary of State Barbara Leaf’s comments in March 2023 that President Saied’s moves had “weakened foundational principles of checks and balances” were called “Washington’s clearest criticism of Saied to date.” Mcdowall, A. (2023, March 23). US says Tunisia president weakened checks and balances. Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/us-says-tunisia-president-weakened-checks-balances-2023-03-23/> .

38 <https://twitter.com/usembassytunis/status/1441731973412622340?lang=en>

39 Arieff (2021), 11.

40 E.g. Henneberg, S. (2022, August 4). How to Engage With Tunisia’s New Constitutional Republic. Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-engage-tunisia-new-constitutional-republic>

41 Szuba, J. (2022, April 1). Biden’s budget proposal would slash military aid to Tunisia. Al-Monitor, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/04/bidens-budget-proposal-would-slash-military-aid-tunisia>

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had also been calling for aid cuts in response to July 25.⁴² That year, Congress removed the minimum floor of guaranteed funding for Tunisia that had been in place for the previous six years and required the Administration to report on the Tunisian government's efforts "to restore constitutional order and democratic governance."⁴³

These policy changes signaled Washington's disapproval of Saied's actions. However, some in Washington argued that such cuts would dangerously weaken Tunisia's ability to defend itself from extremists and other threats and could drive it into the arms of China, Russia, or the Persian Gulf states.⁴⁴ They argued that instead of cutting assistance, Washington should use a more nuanced approach, such as initiating dialogues or providing training on military justice and professionalism.⁴⁵

Throughout 2022, Washington continued to debate how to manage relations in Tunisia. In October the Agency for International Development (USAID) announced a \$60 million "rapid assistance" grant to provide direct support to vulnerable Tunisian families, signaling a recognition of the deteriorating living standards for many Tunisians.⁴⁶ Even as popularity for Saied declined, particularly beginning in September 2021, no clear answers presented themselves

42 Harris, B. (2021, Sep 10). US senators float Tunisia aid cuts and Lebanon assistance package. The National, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/us-news/2021/09/10/us-senators-float-tunisia-aid-cuts-and-lebanon-assistance-package/>

43 See <https://www.congress.gov/117/plaws/publ103/PLAW-117publ103.pdf>, 640.

44 Yerkes, S. (2022 May). Cutting Aid Won't Pull Tunisia Away from Authoritarianism. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/06/02/cutting-aid-won-t-pull-tunisia-away-from-authoritarianism-pub-87244>. ; Gray, G. (2022, Sep 18). Focus Assistance to Tunisia – Don't Suspend it. The National Interest, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east-watch/focus-assistance-tunisia%E2%80%94don%E2%80%99t-suspend-it-204795>

45 Grewal, S. and White, Z. (2021, Dec 1). Expert Q&A – Executing Orders or Eroding Democracy? The Role of Tunisia's Military in Kais Saied's Power Grab. Washington, DC: Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED), <https://pomед.org/publication/expert-qa-executing-orders-or-eroding-democracy-the-role-of-tunisia's-military-in-kais-saied's-power-grab/>; Yerkes, S. (2022).

46 USAID Press Release (2022, October 13). USAID Partners with UNICEF on Social Safety Net for Tunisian People, <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/oct-13-2022-usaid-partners-unicef-social-safety-net-tunisian-people>. This deterioration in living standards was also connected to larger global pressures particularly following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

to US policymakers. Critics continued to lambast Washington for engaging diplomatically with Saied⁴⁷ and for "splitting [its leverage] down the middle."⁴⁸ Meanwhile, Saied continued to consolidate power into his own hands.

The debate over the IMF loan and heightened anti-Western rhetoric

In October 2022, the Tunisian government and the IMF reached a staff-level agreement for a \$1.9 billion loan, conditioned on a set of reforms that included cutting the public wage bill and subsidies and enhancing investment incentives.⁴⁹ A continued decrease in ratings by loan agencies, which said Tunisia was likely to default on its debt payments, as well as a mounting inability to pay for imports of key goods, suggested a loan was necessary.⁵⁰ However, a board meeting scheduled in December 2022 to grant final approval was postponed at the last minute; as of this writing, the agreement has not been finalized.

Some Tunisia watchers in Washington have called for the US to use its influence as the largest IMF shareholder to condition the loan on more explicitly political reforms.⁵¹ Others, as with the MCC compact and the general withholding of assistance, have expressed concern that such actions would deprive Tunisia of much-needed assistance for stabilizing its economy. The US has sought to stay aligned, at least in its rhetoric,⁵²

47 see <https://twitter.com/MonicaLMarks/status/1603883530710302722>

48 Hamid, S. and Grewal, S. (2022, May 9). Tunisia is sliding back into authoritarianism. Here's what the US should do. Washington Post, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/05/09/tunisia-democracy-backsliding-saied-washington-imf/>.

49 <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2022/10/15/pr22353-tunisia-imf-staff-reaches-staff-level-agreement-on-an-extended-fund-facility-with-tunisia>

50 Mcdowall, A. (2023, March 9). Analysis: Fate of Tunisia's Stalled IMF Loan Lies in Hands of Unwilling President. Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/fate-tunisia's-stalled-imf-loan-lies-hands-unwilling-president-2023-03-09/>

51 Hamid, S. (2023, March 28). Don't Bail Out Tunisia's Would be Dictator. Foreign Affairs, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/tunisia/dont-bail-out-tunisia-would-be-dictator>; Hamid, S. and Grewal, S. (2022).

52 See for example: US Secretary of State Blinken says Tunisia risks 'deep end' without IMF deal (2023, March 22). AFP, <https://english.aljazeera.net/news/2023/03/22/us-secretary-of-state-blinken-says-tunisia-risks-deep-end-without-imf-deal>

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with its European partners who worry that without the loan, migrants from Tunisia will continue to flood their shores.⁵³

The question of the IMF loan became still more problematic as Saied intensified his populist rhetoric around foreign – particularly Western – interference, of which the IMF, with its highly unpopular loan conditions, was emblematic. Frustration grew among US officials in Tunisia, who feared that the more Washington insisted on such onerous conditions, the less Saied would be willing to cooperate with the US. Moreover, Saied’s demonizing and reported jailing of individuals who associated with Western officials posed still another dilemma for US policymakers: how to help Tunisian democracy advocates without hurting them?⁵⁴

Recent developments

In March 2023, the Biden Administration’s proposed annual budget to Congress reflected continued skepticism over maintaining previous levels of assistance to Tunisia.⁵⁵ Notably, however, the proposal largely preserved the overall level of security assistance compared to the previous year. Funds for International Military Education Training (IMET) programs, which the Tunisian government has, at least in the past, considered “vital to the development of its officer corps”⁵⁶, increased from \$1.5 million to \$2.3 million. This suggests that the Biden Administration wants to use the close relationship that has developed since 2011 between the American and Tunisian militaries as a channel of influence in advancing its own national security objectives.⁵⁷ However, although

biya.net/News/north-africa/2023/03/22/US-Secretary-of-State-Blinken-says-Tunisia-risks-deep-end-without-IMF-deal

53 Italy pushing IMF to help Tunisia and avoid instability, minister says. (2023, March 19). Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/world/italy-push-ing-imf-help-tunisia-avoid-instability-minister-says-2023-03-19/>

54 Tunisia ‘criminalises contact with western embassies (2023, March 24). Middle East Eye. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/tunisia-criminalises-contact-western-embassies>

55 Hagedorn, E. and Szuba, J. (2023, March 15). Biden Administration Budget Would Slash Tunisia’s Economic Aid. Al-Monitor, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/03/biden-administration-budget-would-slash-tunisia-economic-aid>

56 Yousif (2020).

57 For a good discussion of how the partnership between the US and Tunisian militaries is viewed in Washington, see Mathews, S (2023, April 19). How Tunisia’s Defence Ties with US Endure Despite Aid cuts. *Middle East Eye*, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/tunisia-how-defence-ties-us-grow-despite-aid-cuts>. On the influence of US military norms on the Tunisian military, see Grewal, S. (2022). Norm Diffusion through US Military

Saied is unlikely to significantly criticize or downsize the US-Tunisia security partnership, especially since it is unclear how he could replace US security assistance, the military’s more political role under Saied⁵⁸ means the US will need to use particular caution when exercising this policy option.⁵⁹ The perception among Tunisians that American security assistance bolsters repression against citizens by members of the ISF makes this especially true.

Tunisians living in the United States have also called for sanctions against Tunisian “military generals, security personnel, and government officials supporting” Saied.⁶⁰ This mirrors a similar move by families of jailed Tunisians in the United Kingdom and the European Union, who filed a legal appeal to impose sanctions on several individuals, including Saied, under UK law for human rights violations.⁶¹

Conclusions and recommendations

Credible, unreleased public opinion polls indicate that Tunisians have not given up on democracy. Some observers argue that US policy toward Tunisia at this critical moment will be a litmus test for Washington’s commitment to democratic values in the MENA and worldwide. To overcome its reputation for putting security and economic interests ahead of democratic ideals (such as prioritizing oil or weapons transactions over calling out human rights abuses), the US has an opportunity in Tunisia to stand up for democracy and human rights.⁶²

Training in Tunisia. Security Studies 31(2), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09636412.2022.2065925>

58 Masmoudi, R. (2021, Sep 2). Keep Tunisia’s Military Out of Politics. Foreign Policy, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/02/unisia-kais-saied-constitution-coup-parliament-suspension-military-apolitical/>; Nassif, H.B. (2022 January). *Journal of Democracy* 33(1), [10.1353/jod.2022.0002](https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2022.0002)

59 Indeed, several observers and stakeholders, including members of Congress, have called for a review of US assistance. See <https://twitter.com/HouseForeign/status/1640751133453942787>.

60 See https://us15.campaign-archive.com/?e=test_email&u=be-3f76b39076d20a697d74c94&id=9f2214ca31

61 Al Jazeera (2023, April 26). Political detainees’ families to EU: Sanction Tunisian Officials. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/26/political-detainees-families-to-eu-sanction-tunisian-officials>

62 In fact, these costs are felt much more acutely by southern European

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This can be done by enhancing its use of indirect, less visible foreign policy tools to influence Saied. For example, as US officials have noted, working with regional organizations such as the African Union to verbally pressure Saied would make it harder for him to accuse his foreign interlocutors of Western impositions. Additionally, the US can use its partnerships with Algeria and Egypt, two regional heavyweights who may have Saied's ear, to urge Saied to adopt economic reforms.⁶³ Another strategy (which is likely already in use) is to shift away from policy tools that signal disapproval of Saied's autocratization to tools that allow for under-the-radar support for US goals, such as third-country training for Tunisian democracy advocates and dialogues between Islamists and secularists. This includes augmenting the use of global assistance programs that fund political party trainings, independent journalism, judicial reform, and civil society associations, and offer ways to foster a new, more competent and committed political class in Tunisia. Efforts to ensure that existing programs are accompanied by public messaging programs that help dispel mistrust of American aid, for example by organizing conferences with officials, activists, and the public to discuss how security assistance is conforming to international human rights standards, will also be invaluable. Moreover, Washington should and will likely continue, to the extent possible, contributing to a "social safety net" for the most vulnerable Tunisians, such as the purchase in April 2023 of 25,000 metric tons of wheat for the country.⁶⁴

countries where migrants tend to head. Instead, given that Tunisia is not a hydrocarbons exporter and less strategically important than other MENA countries, policymakers would need to demonstrate their commitment to Western liberal values by investing in Tunisia because there may still be a chance to "save" democracy there.

63 According to some reports, Egyptian president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has already urged Saied to accept the IMF loan.

64 <https://www.usaid.gov/tunisia/press-releases/apr-21-2023-usaid-and-world-bank-partner-address-tunisia-wheat-shortage>

About the Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.



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