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Tunisia: In Brief

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Summary

Tunisia remains the sole country to have made a durable transition to democracy as a result of the 2011 "Arab Spring." Tunisians adopted a new constitution in 2014 and have since held two competitive national elections resulting in peaceful transfers of power. At the same time, living standards have worsened for many Tunisians, increasing pressure on political leaders. High unemployment and inflation, unpopular fiscal austerity measures, and concerns about corruption have spurred protests, labor unrest, and a backlash against political elites in recent years.

In September-October 2019 general elections, voters largely rejected established parties and candidates in favor of independents and non-career politicians. Newly elected President Kais Saïed, who ran as an independent, is a constitutional scholar known for his socially conservative views and pointed critique of Tunisia's post-2011 political system. His stern personal demeanor, anti-corruption message, pledges of systemic change, and outsider credentials appear to have endeared him to voters—including otherwise politically disenchanted young people. The self-described "Muslim democrat" party Al Nahda (alt: Ennahda, "Renaissance") secured a slim plurality in parliament even as it lost some seats, outperforming established secularist parties as well as new contenders. Several recently founded parties and independents performed well. The results leave the future contours of Tunisia's domestic political alliances, foreign relations, and economic policies uncertain.

The Trump Administration has pledged to support Tunisia's security and economic reforms, while also proposing to decrease bilateral aid administered by the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Congress has shaped U.S. relations with Tunisia through legislation, oversight, and direct engagement with Tunisian leaders. FY2020 aid appropriations bills (Division D of H.R. 2740 and S. 2583) would provide "not less than" $191.4 million in bilateral aid for Tunisia, equivalent to the FY2019 enacted level under P.L. 116-6; S. 2583 would also make available for Tunisia $50 million in prior-year Economic Support Fund (ESF) appropriations. Congress has also made aid funds available for Tunisia under the State Department Relief and Recovery Fund (RRF) and the Department of Defense (DOD) Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund, and has authorized DOD to aid Tunisia's military in securing the border with Libya on a reimbursement basis. Tunisia has been a top cumulative recipient within Africa of DOD "global train and equip" counterterrorism assistance, authorized by Congress since FY2006 (most recently under 10 U.S.C. 333).

Tunisia has expanded its acquisitions of U.S. defense materiel in recent years in order to maintain its U.S.-origin stocks and expand its counterterrorism capacity. The State Department has licensed the sale of Black Hawk helicopters, and Tunisia has been approved to receive additional grant-based equipment transfers through the Excess Defense Articles (EDA) program, including Kiowa helicopters and C-130 aircraft. (Tunisia's Major Non-NATO Ally status, granted by President Obama in 2015, provides priority access to EDA.) The U.S. military has acknowledged conducting intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) activities from a Tunisian facility and U.S. advisors have reportedly played a role in some Tunisian counterterrorism operations.

The U.S. Embassy in Tunis also hosts the U.S. Libya External Office, through which U.S. diplomats engage with Libyans and monitor U.S. programs in Libya. See CRS Report RL33142, *Libya: Transition and U.S. Policy*, by Christopher M. Blanchard.

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Introduction

Tunisia's 2011 popular uprising, known as the "Jasmine Revolution," ended the 23-year authoritarian rule of then-President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali and sparked a wave of unrest across the Arab world. Tunisians elected a National Constituent Assembly later that year, and Islamist and secularist political parties formed a transitional coalition government. In 2013, they negotiated a peaceful way out of a political crisis sparked by the assassinations of two secularist leftist politicians by Islamist extremists. A quartet of Tunisian civil society groups who mediated the negotiations later won the Nobel Peace Prize for their role in this feat. The Assembly adopted a new constitution in 2014, and presidential and parliamentary elections later that year ended the formal transition period. Civil and political liberties have expanded dramatically since 2011, and Tunisia has experienced far less violence than some other transitional countries. (See **Appendix** for a chronology of key events since 2011.)

Various socioeconomic grievances that helped fuel the 2011 uprising have yet to be addressed, however. The Ben Ali family no longer monopolizes business opportunities, but many Tunisians perceive corruption to have flourished as new players have joined the political class.[1] Economic growth has been anemic since contracting in 2011, unemployment is above 15%, inflation rose to over 7% in 2018, and public debt rose to 77% of GDP **(Figure 1)**.[2] Fiscal austerity measures adopted at the urging of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Western donors have sparked protests and a backlash by trade unions, a powerful domestic constituency.

The pragmatic political alliance among rival political leaders that emerged from the 2014 elections helped quiet conflicts over identity and social mores that raged during the transitional period, but arguably at the expense of ideological coherence or accountability to voters. The leading parties in the "consensus coalition" have emerged weakened by internal divisions and by the loss of supporters who questioned the policy compromises that consensus politics entailed. Several policy initiatives prompted significant pushback from local civil society groups, including a 2017 law granting amnesty for officials implicated in corruption under the former regime and a decision to disband Tunisia's post-2011 Truth and Dignity commission before its scheduled completion. (The commission's final report, issued in March 2019, may still be considered a landmark for human rights accountability.)

The coalition nonetheless oversaw several reform initiatives, including landmark local elections in May 2018 and a new law against gender-based violence. The government oversaw a peaceful succession process after the death in office of President Béji Caïd Essebsi in July 2019, which also triggered changes to the calendar for national elections, ultimately held in September and October 2019. The coalition did not, however, respond effectively to public demands to create jobs, address regional inequalities, and counter corruption. Power struggles between President Caïd Essebsi and two successive Prime Ministers (technocrat Habib Essid, followed by then-ruling party figure Youssef Chahed) further divided the coalition, which also failed to establish a constitutional court, one of several new institutions to be created under the 2014 constitution.

Security conditions have improved since large attacks in 2015-2016, although militant groups that have pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda and the Islamic State remain active in border regions, and

[1] See, e.g., International Republican Institute (IRI), "Tunisia: Poll Reveals Persistent Dissatisfaction with Economy and Corruption," January 13, 2017; International Crisis Group (ICG), *Blocked Transition: Corruption and Regionalism in Tunisia*, May 2017.

[2] International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Economic Outlook database, October 2019.

the return of Tunisian "foreign fighters" poses concerns. The Islamic State claimed twin suicide bombings targeting police posts in the capital, Tunis, in June 2019.

Although many Tunisians are proud of their country's progress, an opinion poll conducted in early 2019 found that 87% (the highest rate recorded since 2011) thought the country was headed in the wrong direction.[3] In the 2019 elections, voters largely rejected established parties and candidates in favor of independents and first-time politicians. Whether newly elected leaders will be able to meet demands to create jobs, bolster living standards, counter corruption, advance accountability for abuses committed under former regimes, and ensure security is in question. Turbulent events in neighboring Algeria and Libya may create additional headwinds for Tunisia's stability and economic prosperity.

Figure 1. Tunisia at a Glance

Population: 11.5 million; ***Urban:*** 69% of total	**Government Gross Debt (% of GDP):** 77%
Religions: Muslim (official; Sunni) 99.1%, other (includes Christian, Jewish, Shia Muslim, and Baha'i) 1%	**Key Exports:** clothing, semi-finished goods and textiles, agricultural products, mechanical goods, phosphates and chemicals, hydrocarbons, electrical equipment
Ethnicities: Arab 98%, European 1%, Jewish/other 1%	**Key Imports:** textiles, machinery and equipment, hydrocarbons, chemicals, foodstuffs
Median Age: 31.6 years	**Top Trade Partners:** France, Italy, Germany, China, Turkey, Algeria, Spain (2017)
Life Expectancy: 75.7 years	
Literacy: 82%; male 90% / female 74% (2015 est.)	
GDP Growth / Per Capita: 2.5% / $3,422	
Unemployment: 15.4%; ages 15-24, 35.8% (2017)	

Sources: CRS graphic; map boundaries from Esri (2013). Figures from CIA World Factbook, World Bank, IMF (World Economic Outlook database, October 2019, and staff report, July 2019); 2018 estimates unless noted.

[3] IRI, *Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Tunisia, January 25-February 11, 2019*.

Background: The "Jasmine Revolution" and Tunisia Prior to 2011

Prior to 2011, Tunisia was widely viewed as exhibiting a stable and authoritarian regime that focused on economic growth while staving off political liberalization. It had only two leaders since independence from France in 1956: Habib Bourguiba, a secular nationalist and independence activist, and Ben Ali, a former interior minister and prime minister who assumed the presidency in 1987. The country's pre-2011 economic model has since come under greater scrutiny; for example, the World Bank documented in 2014 that government regulations had apparently been manipulated to favor firms closely tied to the Ben Ali family.[4]

Ben Ali cultivated the internal security services and the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) party as his power base, and harshly repressed political participation, freedom of expression, and religious activism. This repression, along with corruption and nepotism, undermined the regime's popular legitimacy, despite relatively effective state services and economic growth. Another factor driving popular dissatisfaction was the enduring socioeconomic divide between the developed, tourist-friendly coast and the poorer interior. Anti-government unrest rooted in labor and economic grievances has often originated in the interior—as it did in 2011.

Tunisia's "Jasmine Revolution"

In December 2010, antigovernment protests broke out in Tunisia's interior after a street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in the town of Sidi Bouzid to protest state repression and a lack of economic opportunities. Protests spread to neighboring towns and eventually to the capital, Tunis, and to wealthy coastal communities associated with the ruling elite. Police opened fire on protesters and made sweeping arrests; an estimated 338 people were killed.[5] The army, however, apparently refused an order to use force against demonstrations, which became a key turning point in the crisis. On January 14, 2011, President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, in power since 1987, fled the country for Saudi Arabia. Tunisian courts brought various criminal charges against him in absentia. Ben Ali passed away in Saudi Arabia from natural causes on September 19, 2019.

Politics: A 2019 Electoral Reset?

The 2019 election results open up a new chapter in Tunisian politics. Newly elected President Kais Saïed, who ran as an independent, is a professor of constitutional law who is new to electoral politics (see text-box profile below). How he will approach the task of governing remains to be seen. Other political newcomers and independents fared well in the parliamentary elections, shaking up past political alliances and dynamics.

Between 2014 and 2019, two parties dominated Tunisian politics: Al Nahda (alt: Ennahda, "Renaissance"), a self-described "Muslim Democrat" party that has historically been viewed as moderate Islamist, and Nidaa Tounes ("Tunisia's Call"), a big-tent secularist party founded in 2012 in opposition to Al Nahda. Despite being rivals, the two parties agreed to share power in a series of coalition governments, in an arrangement they referred to as "consensus" politics.[6] The 2019 elections dealt a sweeping defeat to Nidaa Tounes and its various splinter parties, which struggled to unite around a single candidate or cause. Al Nahda fared comparatively well in the elections and is poised to lead the next government, but the results nonetheless reflect a continuing decline in voter support for the party.

[4] World Bank, *The Unfinished Revolution*, May 2014.

[5] Associated Press, "Report Raises Number of Killed During Tunisia's Revolution to 338," May 5, 2012.

[6] See Sarah Yerkes and Zeineb Ben Yahmed, "Tunisia's Political System: From stagnation to competition," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 28, 2019.

International observers generally praised the 2019 election process as transparent and well-administered, while raising concerns about the timing and appearance of political selectivity behind a leading presidential candidate's imprisonment (discussed below).[7] Domestic observer groups reported some minor procedural irregularities, along with some violations of regulations regarding campaign finance and campaign activities.[8]

The Presidency. Despite conducting a minimalist campaign, Saïed won the largest share of the vote (18%) in Tunisia's September 15 presidential contest against 23 other candidates. He then overwhelmingly won a run-off vote on October 13, garnering 73% against Nabil Karoui, a secularist media mogul and self-styled populist who spent most of the campaign period in jail on money laundering charges. Saïed's landslide in the run-off apparently reflected "a groundswell of support from young voters."[9] Such enthusiasm was reflected in turnout for the run-off—which, at 55% of registered voters, was over six percentage points higher than in the first round—and in seemingly spontaneous public street-cleaning initiatives to express support after he won.[10]

Who is President Kais Saïed?[11]

President Kais Saïd, 61, is a constitutional law professor who has expressed socially conservative views, and who is new to electoral politics. He campaigned on an anti-corruption and anti-establishment platform that appears to have been particularly popular among young people. Saïed has criticized the political system enshrined in Tunisia's 2014 constitution, calling for eliminating the directly-elected legislature in favor of elected local councils that would, in turn, select national leaders. He has also opposed proposals to make Tunisia's inheritance laws more gender-equal (although he has advocated advancing women's economic rights more broadly), called for resurrecting the death penalty (suspended in Tunisia since 1994), and referred to homosexuality as a foreign plot. In his inauguration speech on October 23, President Saïed vowed to fight poverty and corruption, counter terrorism, protect and expand women's rights, and champion the Palestinian cause.[12]

Saïed's stern personal demeanor, anti-corruption message, pledges of systemic change, and outsider credentials appear to have endeared him to voters—including otherwise politically disenchanted young people. His views defy easy ideological categorization. He was endorsed in the run-off by Al Nahda and the religiously conservative and nationalist Karama ("Dignity) coalition, along with several secularist leftist parties. Saïed asserted during the campaign that any endorsements were unilateral on the part of the parties or individuals in question.[13]

Karoui won 16% in the first round presidential contest despite being in jail and thus unable to campaign in person, participate in historic televised presidential debates, or give media interviews. Appreciation for Karoui's charitable activities—often highlighted on Nessma TV, a

[7] See, e.g., Carter Center, "Preliminary Statement on Tunisia's Parliamentary Elections," October 8, 2019; and International Republican Institute/National Democratic Institute, "Preliminary Statement of the IRI-NDI Election Observation Mission to Tunisia's October 13, 2019, Presidential Runoff Election," October 14, 2019.

[8] *HuffPost Tunisie*, "Élection Législative: L'ISIE et la société civile relèvent plusieurs infractions électorales," October 6, 2019; *TAP*, "Second tour du scrutin présidentiel : Les dispositions réglementaires respectées à 98%, selon Mourakiboun," October 13, 2019.

[9] Ramy Allahoum, "Kais Saied: Who is Tunisia's new president?" October 23, 2019.

[10] *Al-Monitor*, "Painting the town: How Kais Saied inspires change on Tunisian streets," October 23, 2019. The total number of votes cast in the 2019 run-off was higher than in 2014, although the percentage turnout was lower, due to new voter registration in the lead-up to the vote.

[11] Drawn from: *Al-Monitor*, "Tunisia's 'Poker-Face' President Sworn In," October 23, 2019; Al Jazeera, "Tunisia's Kais Saied: 'He's just not interested in power,'" October 11, 2019; *Nouvelobs*, "'Ai-je l'air d'un salafiste?': Kaïs Saïed, favori de la présidentielle tunisienne, s'explique," September 20, 2019; Project on Middle East Democracy, *A Guide to Tunisia's 2019 Presidential Election*, September 2019; *Business News*, "Kaïs Saïed: j'éliminerai les élections législatives et je suis pour la peine de mort," June 11, 2019.

[12] *Al-Monitor*, "Tunisia's 'Poker-Face' President Sworn In," October 23, 2019.

[13] In an interview with a French media outlet on September 20, Saïed asserted, "If I cite Voltaire and Victor Hugo, how can I be a Salafist? […] I am independent and will remain so." Nouvelobs, "'Ai-je l'air d'un salafiste?'" op. cit.

private station that he owns—appear to have driven popular support.[14] He was released from pre-trial detention four days before the October 13 presidential run-off, after which he participated in a televised debate against Saïed. Karoui's lawyers alleged that his imprisonment was "a political decision," and Tunisia's independent electoral commission expressed concern about the lack of "equal opportunity" among candidates during the campaign period.[15]

The charges against Karoui remain pending. The case stems from an investigation by a credible local anti-corruption organization, iWatch, into the financial structure and taxation of Karoui's Nessma media company. A judicial inquiry was initiated in 2016 due to the iWatch findings.[16] Karoui was arrested ten days before the start of the presidential campaign period, in August 2019, after the leading parties in parliament sought unsuccessfully to amend the electoral law to exclude candidates who, like him, owned media outlets or engaged in charitable giving.[17] Parliament passed the bill, but President Caïd Essebsi declined to sign it into law before he passed away.

Al Nahda nominated a presidential candidate for the first time in 2019, selecting then-deputy speaker of parliament and party co-founder Abdelfattah Mourou. After he came in third in the first round and thus failed to advance to the run-off, Al Nahda endorsed Saïed. Nidaa Tounes did not run a presidential candidate but backed former Defense Minister Abdelkrim Zbidi, an independent, who came in fourth. Prime Minister Youssef Chahed, who split from Nidaa Tounes during a struggle over party leadership and was at one time considered a presidential front-runner, came in fifth. The first-round results broadly reflected pre-election polling showing independents and first-time candidates who had not served in government surging in the presidential race.

Parliament. Al Nahda secured a slim plurality in parliament with 52 seats out of 217 (24%; see **Figure 2**). The party's founder and leader, Rachid Ghannouchi, also ran for elected office for the first time, securing a seat in parliament representing part of Tunis. The results nonetheless reflected a continuing decline for the party: Al Nahda previously won 89 seats in the 2011 National Constituent Assembly elections and 69 seats in 2014. After the presidential first-round vote, Ghannouchi pledged that the party would seek to lead the government if it won (versus selecting a technocrat to be prime minister) and would only join a coalition with "the forces of the revolution" in parliament (presumably excluding Karoui, known for his previously cozy ties with the Ben Ali regime). The announcement seemed to reflect acknowledgement that "consensus" politics and alliance with Nidaa Tounes (which included former-regime figures in its ranks) had damaged Al Nahda's relationship with its base.

The parliamentary results confirmed the demise of Nidaa Tounes, which won three parliamentary seats in 2019 compared to 86 in 2014. Karoui's party, Qalb Tounes ("Heart of Tunisia") won the second-largest bloc in parliament with 38 seats, despite having been founded only months earlier. The Free Destourian ("Constitutional") Party, a new arch-secularist party headed by a former senior figure in Ben Ali's party, Abir Moussi, who has decried the 2011 uprising and subsequent political changes, won 17 seats. Prime Minister Chahed's party, Tahya Tounes ("Long Live Tunisia"), founded after he split from Nidaa Tounes, won 14 seats, the seventh-largest bloc.

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[14] See Project on Middle East Democracy, *A Guide to Tunisia's 2019 Presidential Election*, September 2019; and

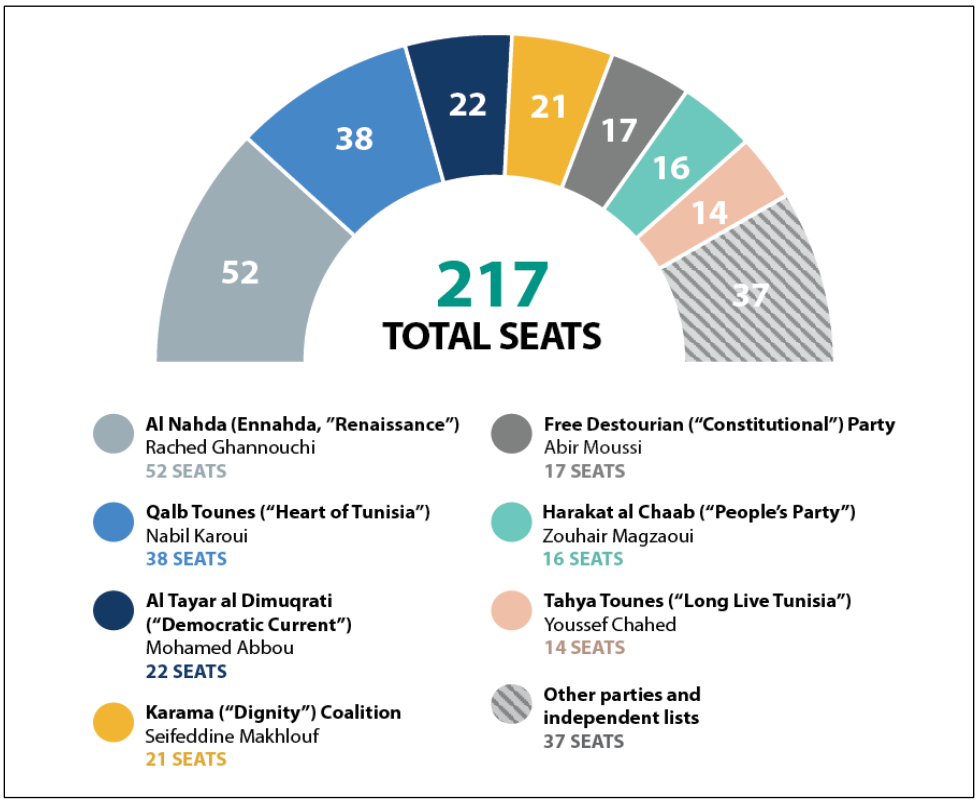
[15] *New York Times*, "Tunisia's Presidential Runoff: Two Candidates, and One Is in Jail," October 6, 2019; *Réalités*, "Arrestation provisoire de Nabil Karoui: la situation est 'préoccupante' selon le président de l'ISIE," September 29, 2019.

[16] IWatch has also lodged corruption complaints against several other prominent politicians, including Prime Minister Chahed, who have not faced formal charges to date.

[17] The bill also would have prohibited candidates who denigrate democracy, an apparent swipe at presidential candidate Abir Moussi, a former high-level figure in Ben Ali's party who has called the 2011 uprising a foreign plot. See *Middle East Eye*, "Why did Tunisian MPs limit who can run for office? Depends on who you ask," June 23, 2019.

Figure 2. Tunisia's New Parliament

Preliminary results as of October 9, 2019; subject to legal challenges.



Source: CRS graphic, based on preliminary parliamentary results released by Tunisia's High Independent Authority for Elections (ISIE, after its French acronym); shown from most (left) to fewest (right) seats per list.

Analysis. The 2019 election results constituted a broad rejection of the parties and politicians who led the government between 2014 and 2019, in favor of newcomers, independents, and non-career politicians. This may be a result of economic frustrations, anger at perceived corruption, local-level influences, and/or disenchantment with a series of ideologically incoherent coalition governments.[18] Nidaa Tounes' fracturing and the death of Caïd Essebsi also reshaped the political landscape. The 2018 local elections, which were a key step toward political decentralization and thus a centerpiece of post-2014 political reforms, hinted at similar trends. Turnout was relatively low at 34% and was reportedly particularly low among young people (although candidates under 35 years old won over a third of the seats).[19] Al Nahda won the largest share of the vote (29%), followed by Nidaa Tounes (21%), but independents collectively outpolled both, garnering 32%.

In contrast to Nidaa Tounes, which fractured almost immediately after winning the 2014 elections, Al Nahda has historically exhibited strong internal discipline and wielded its political power cautiously, mindful of past repression (it was banned in the 1990s) and of the recent anti-Islamist backlash elsewhere in the region, such as Egypt. Perhaps because it feared isolation under a Karoui or Moussi presidency, the party ran a presidential candidate in 2019 for the first time (albeit unsuccessfully), and party leader Ghannouchi ran for the first time for elected office.

[18] Yerkes and Ben Yahmed, "Tunisia's Political System: From Stagnation to Competition," op. cit.

[19] Emir Sfaxi, "Sustaining Democracy," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 11, 2018.

The party appears to retain the loyalty of many longstanding members, along with an organizational capacity that few can match. One might question, however, whether it can sustain its political influence and cohesion in the face of new competition. Al Nahda's past alliances with secularist parties appear to have weakened its image as an incorruptible opposition force, and forced policy compromises that were ideologically unpopular with its base. For example, party leaders decided not to support a reference to *sharia* (Islamic law) during the constitution drafting process, and backed the controversial 2017 administrative reconciliation law, reportedly over objections within the party.[20] An initiative of then-President Caïd Essebsi, the law effectively granted amnesty for state employees implicated in corruption during the former regime.[21]

For its part, Nidaa Tounes was split by internal power struggles and frictions over the decision to form a coalition with Al Nahda. Some of President Caïd Essebsi's initiatives also sparked public controversy, such as his efforts to elevate his unpopular son, Hafedh Caïd Essebsi, as party leader, as well as the 2017 administrative reconciliation initiative. Finally, Karoui, a former backer of Nidaa Tounes turned critic of Chahed, may have drained some support from both.

Outlook. Tunisia's 2014 constitution divides executive powers between the president and prime minister. The leader of the largest party or coalition in parliament is granted the first shot at nominating a cabinet that can garner majority support in parliament.[22] If Al Nahda is able to form a durable governing coalition, it will have to manage divisions in a fragmented legislature. It may also face internal pressures stemming from ideological differences and recriminations over its performance in the 2019 elections. Al Nahda endorsed President Saïed in the run-off against Karoui, and the two may share conservative views on certain social issues. The president and the leading party in parliament have yet to define their working relationship or formally identify joint priorities, however. What President Saïed's advocacy of significant constitutional changes will mean in practice is also in question.

Women's Rights in Tunisia[23]

Tunisia is among the top performing Arab countries for women's representation in politics; women won 34% of seats in the 2014 legislative elections (most recent official final figure available). Under Tunisia's electoral law, parliamentary candidate lists must alternate between men and women candidates, meaning that any party or independent list that wins more than one seat in a given electoral district will send at least one woman to parliament. Women headed nearly 14% of the total electoral lists in the 2019 parliamentary elections. No parties nominated a woman candidate for the presidential elections, however.[24]

The legal and socioeconomic status of women is among Tunisia's particularities within the Arab world. Polygamy is banned, and women enjoy equal citizenship rights and the right to initiate divorce. Women serve in the military and in many professions, and constitute more than half of university students; the first woman governor was appointed in 2004. Many Tunisians attribute these advances to the country's relatively liberal Personal Status Code, promulgated in 1956 under then-President Habib Bourguiba, as well as Bourguiba-era educational reforms. Inheritance laws and practices are nonetheless disadvantageous toward women; former President Caïd Essbsi put forward a proposal to reform the inheritance laws to be more gender-equal, but his coalition partner Al Nahda did not back the reform and it did not advance.

[20] Monica Marks, "Why do Tunisia's Islamists support an unpopular law forgiving corruption?" *Washington Post* Monkey Cage blog, May 5, 2017.

[21] For critical analysis of the law, see, e.g., HRW, "Tunisia: Amnesty Bill Would Set Back Transition," July 14, 2016; International Center for Transitional Justice, "ICTJ Comments on Draft Organic Bill Number 49/2015 Pertaining to Reconciliation in the Administrative Field," September 14, 2017.

[22] If he or she fails to do so within two months, the president is to appoint an alternative prime minister after broad political consultations. If that person fails, the president can dissolve parliament and call snap elections.

[23] Sarah Collins, Research Assistant for the Middle East and Africa, contributed to this text box.

[24] Project on Middle East Democracy, *A Guide to Tunisia's 2019 Parliamentary Election*, September 2019.

In October 2019, Tunisian women began to share testimonies of sexual harassment under the hashtag #EnaZeda, ("MeToo" in Tunisian dialect) in response to a video allegedly showing a Member of Parliament from the Qalb Tounes party masturbating in front of a school.[25] Sexual and domestic violence has been prevalent in Tunisia; 60% of Tunisian women have experienced domestic violence, according to the Ministry of Women, Family and Children.[26] In 2017, the Tunisian parliament passed a law to eliminate violence against women, though some observers have identified barriers that hinder full implementation.[27]

Terrorism Threats

Domestic armed Islamist organizations have emerged since 2011, along with threats from groups and individuals based in Libya and (to a lesser extent) Algeria.[28] Armed Islamist cells are active in Tunisia's border areas, some of which have asserted affiliation with Al Qaeda or the Islamic State (IS, alt. ISIS/ISIL). In 2015, attacks at the Bardo Museum in Tunis and the coastal city of Sousse killed dozens of foreign tourists, rattled Tunisians, and dealt an economic blow to the vital tourism industry. They were the largest terrorist attacks in Tunisia since Al Qaeda's 2002 bombing of a synagogue on the island of Djerba. In early 2016, Tunisian security forces and local inhabitants put down a militant assault on the town of Ben Guerdane (located at the border with Libya) that prompted fears of a nascent IS-linked insurgency. The 2015-2016 attacks were reportedly planned from Libya; a U.S. military strike on the Libyan town of Sabratha killed a number of Tunisian fighters in February 2016.[29]

Internal security conditions appear broadly to have improved since 2016, notwithstanding near-simultaneous suicide bombings targeting two police posts in Tunis in June 2019, which the Islamic State claimed.[30] The State Department reported in November 2019 that counterterrorism was a government priority for Tunisia, and that "Tunisia cooperated with the United States and other international partners to professionalize its security apparatus."[31]

Turmoil in neighboring Libya, ongoing militant activity in border regions, and the return of Tunisian Islamist foreign fighters from Syria, Iraq, and Libya nonetheless continue to pose challenges. Authorities have repeatedly extended a state of emergency granting the security forces authority to prohibit strikes and public meetings, although many such activities have proceeded without impediment. The State Department warns U.S. citizens to avoid travel to parts of southern, western, and central Tunisia, citing terrorist threats.[32] Tunisia's southernmost desert area is a military zone, where foreign travel is officially restricted.

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[25] *Le Monde*, "#EnaZeda, le #metoo tunisien est né," October 15, 2019.

[26] *New York Times*, "'I Can Finally Dream': Tunisia Expands Protection for Battered Women," May 12, 2018.

[27] See, e.g., *HuffPost*, "Tunisia's Violence Against Women Law Seemed Perfect on Paper. In Practice, It Hasn't Been.," December 13, 2018; *Time*, "One Year Ago, Tunisia Passed a Groundbreaking Law to Protect Women. Has It Worked?" July 26, 2018.

[28] U.S. and Tunisian officials notably blamed a Tunisian-led Islamist extremist group known as Ansar al Sharia (AST) for an attack against the U.S. Embassy and American school in Tunis in 2012. Tunisia declared AST a terrorist group in 2013, and the U.S. State Department designated it a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) in 2014. The group's leader, known as Abou Iyadh, relocated to Libya, where he was reportedly killed in a U.S. airstrike in June 2015. AST no longer operates openly in Tunisia and appears to have decreased in size since its peak in 2012-2013.

[29] See *CTC Sentinel*, "The Islamic State's Libyan External Operations Hub: The Picture So Far," December 2017.

[30] At least one police officer was killed and at least eight other people were wounded in the attacks.

[31] *Country Reports on Terrorism 2018*, "Tunisia," November 1, 2019; see also *Jeune Afrique*, "Tunisia: Comment éradiquer le terrorisme," July 7, 2019.

[32] State Department, "Tunisia Travel Advisory," January 2, 2019.

In February 2019, the head of Tunisia's National Counterterrorism Commission told members of parliament that 1,000 Tunisian foreign fighters had returned to the country between 2011 and 2018, and that authorities had prevented at least 17,000 others specifically from leaving the country for combat zones abroad.[33] Tunisia was a top global source of Islamist foreign fighters at the height of the Islamic State's territorial influence (2014-2015), with U.N. investigators reporting in 2015 that an estimated 4,000 Tunisians were fighting in Syria, plus as many as 1,500 in Libya, 200 in Iraq, 60 in Mali, and 50 in Yemen.[34] Several terrorist attacks in Europe have also been carried out by individuals of Tunisian descent. Youth marginalization and the release of terrorism suspects under a general amnesty in early 2011 may partly explain Tunisia's high number of foreign fighters. Youth perceptions that despite political changes since 2011, state institutions and personnel remain corrupt, unresponsive, and/or abusive, may also be a driver.[35]

The Economy

Tunisia has struggled since 2011 to address economic challenges amid domestic political tensions and continuing strains in Europe, its largest trade partner. Investor perceptions of political risk, terrorism threats, and labor unrest have further challenged efforts to promote private sector growth, alleviate unemployment, and address the structural factors—such as corruption and inequalities—that fed discontent during the Ben Ali era. (For example, after the 2011 uprising, the World Bank documented that authorities under Ben Ali had manipulated government regulations to favor firms closely tied to members of the president's family and in-laws.[36]) Wealth broadly remains concentrated along the urban and tourist-friendly coast, while the interior suffers from relative poverty and a lack of investment. Many Tunisians are highly educated, but the economy has generally created low-skilled and low-paid jobs, fueling unemployment.

Tunisia has historically had a large middle class by regional standards, but the economic downturn since 2011 has had a detrimental impact on its size and purchasing power. Per-capita GDP has fallen (in nominal terms) every year since 2014, dipping below the upper middle-income threshold of $4,036 in 2015 and remaining below it since.[37] Unemployment, while below its peak of 18.9% in the wake of the uprising in 2011, remains over 15% and is more than double that among young people.[38] Although the transitional government oversaw the seizure and resale of assets controlled by individual Ben Ali family members, new corruption has apparently flourished, undermining public faith in institutions and further entrenching regional divisions.[39]

Textile exports, tourism, agriculture, and phosphate mining are key economic sectors. Tunisia also produces some petroleum, but is a net energy-importer. Economic growth was estimated at 2.5% in 2018, the highest rate since 2014, due to positive trends in tourism, agriculture, and phosphate production.[40] Growth is expected to fall to 1.5% in 2019, however. The International

[33] *TAP*, "A thousand Tunisians have returned from conflict zones from 2011 until October 2018, says Mokthar Ben Nasr," February 18, 2019.

[34] U.N. Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (UNOHCHR), "Foreign fighters: Urgent measures needed to stop flow from Tunisia – UN expert group warns," July 10, 2015.

[35] IRI, *Understanding Local Drivers of Violent Extremism in Tunisia*, Winter 2016.

[36] World Bank, *The Unfinished Revolution*, May 2014.

[37] IMF, World Economic Outlook database, October 2019; GDP per capita, current prices in U.S. dollars.

[38] IMF, "Fifth Review Under the Extended Fund Facility, and Requests for Waivers of Nonobservance and Modification of Performance Criteria, and for Rephasing of Access," July 2019.

[39] International Crisis Group (ICG), *Blocked Transition: Corruption and Regionalism in Tunisia*, May 10, 2017.

[40] IMF, "Fifth Review Under the Extended Fund Facility," op. cit.

Monetary Fund (IMF) has expressed particular concerns about inflation, declining foreign exchange reserves, and vulnerability to rising global energy prices.[41]

Tunisia has participated in two IMF lending programs since the 2011 transition. Under the second, a four-year $2.9 billion program initiated in 2016, the government committed to take politically challenging steps to cut energy subsidies, public sector wages ("among the highest in the world as a share of GDP," per the IMF), and state pensions. Local critics allege that the devaluation of the *dinar*—urged by the IMF—has devastated households' purchasing power.[42] Other structural reforms face opposition from powerful domestic constituencies, including labor unions and monopolistic business interests.[43] In 2017, the IMF temporarily suspended loan disbursements over concerns that Tunisia was not making sufficient progress on structural reforms. In mid-2019, the Fund agreed to disburse a $245 million tranche of financing, while noting that the government had not yet met its fiscal commitments.[44] Tunisian transparency advocates have called for economic reforms to focus more on countering high-level corruption.[45]

U.S. Policy and Aid

U.S. diplomatic and military engagement have expanded significantly since 2011, and Congress has appropriated increased foreign aid and authorized new defense cooperation. In 2018, Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan affirmed that the United States "will continue to support Tunisia's efforts to improve security and modernize its economy."[46] At the same time, the Trump Administration has repeatedly proposed to cut U.S. bilateral aid, in line with its global foreign aid proposals. Congress has not adopted the Administration's budget proposals for Tunisia to date.

Between FY2007 and FY2011, U.S. bilateral aid appropriations for Tunisia averaged about $17 million per year[47]; over the last five fiscal years, they have averaged over $153 million (**Table 1**). U.S. economic aid since 2011 has provided support for fiscal stabilization, economic growth initiatives, good governance and political decentralization, civil society capacity building, and efforts to counter violent extremist ideology. Congress has appropriated funds for an endowed Tunisian-American Enterprise Fund to invest in small- and medium-sized enterprises, and for three U.S. loan guarantees that have allowed Tunisia to access up to $1.5 billion in affordable financing from international capital markets.[48]

In mid-2019, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) elevated its presence to a full bilateral Mission. USAID and the government of Tunisia subsequently signed a five-year "Development Objective Agreement" under which USAID pledged to provide about $352 million

[41] IMF, "Statement on Tunisia," May 30, 2018; see also IMF, "Key Questions on Tunisia," July 18, 2019.

[42] *Middle East Eye*, "'Two classes left - rich and poor': Sinking Tunisia's currency," May 4, 2018.

[43] Tunisia's powerful national trade union federation, the UGTT, decried efforts to end state subsidies for fuel and other consumer commodities in 2018, asserting that "rising prices will only accentuate the social and economic crisis." *TAP*, "UGTT warns against consequences of rising prices of fuel and commodities," June 26, 2018.

[44] IMF, "IMF Executive Board Completes Fifth Review Under the Extended Fund Facility (EFF) Arrangement for Tunisia," June 12, 2019.

[45] *Sada*, "Tunisia's Fight Against Corruption: An Interview with Chawki Tabib," May 11, 2017.

[46] "On the Occasion of Tunisia's National Day," statement released by the State Department on March 20, 2018.

[47] CRS calculation based on State Department annual congressional budget justifications.

[48] USAID, "Tunisia signs $500 million loan guarantee agreement with the United States," June 3, 2016.

over the next five years.[49] Tunisia also is under consideration for a U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) multi-year development aid compact, with signature anticipated in 2020.[50]

State Department-administered bilateral military and police assistance has supported tactical capabilities as well as institutional reforms. Tunisia has also received State Department-administered security and stabilization assistance under global and regional programs. In the FY2019 aid appropriations act, Congress directed $50 million in prior-year Relief and Recovery Fund (RRF) appropriations—intended for assistance to areas "liberated or at risk from" the Islamic State—for Tunisia (§7071[b] of Division F, P.L. 116-6). Tunisia also participates in the State Department-led Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP) and was an initial focus country of the U.S. interagency Security Governance Initiative (SGI), launched in 2014.[51]

For FY2020, the Administration proposed $86.4 million in bilateral State- and USAID-administered aid for Tunisia, less than half the FY2019 enacted level. FY2020 aid appropriations bills passed by the House and reported out of committee in the Senate (Division D of H.R. 2740 and S. 2583, respectively) would mirror FY2019 enacted levels, providing "not less than" $191.4 million in economic and security assistance for Tunisia. The Senate bill would make available for Tunisia an additional $50 million in prior-year Economic Support Fund appropriations. Congress did not adopt Administration proposals to cut aid to Tunisia in FY2018-2019.

Table 1. U.S. Bilateral Foreign Assistance to Tunisia, State Department and USAID

current $ millions, appropriations

	FY2015	FY2016	FY2017	FY2018	FY2019 (enact.)	*FY2020 (req.)*	H.R.2470 *(FY2020)*	S. 2583 *(FY2020)*
Total	61.4	141.9	205.2	165.3	191.4	*86.4*	*191.4*	*191.4*
ESF	20.0	60.0	89.0	79.0	85.0	*31.5 ("ESDF")*	*45.0*	*85.0*
DA	-	-	-	-	-	*-*	*40.0*	*-*
FMF	30.0	65.0	95.0	65.0	85.0	*40.0*	*85.0*	*85.0*
IMET	2.2	2.3	2.1	2.2	2.3	*2.3*	*2.3*	*2.3*
INCLE	7.0	12.0	13.0	13.0	13.0	*10.0*	*13.0*	*13.0*
NADR	2.2	2.6	6.1	6.1	6.1	*2.6*	*6.1*	*6.1*

Source: State Department Congressional Budget Justifications; P.L. 116-6 Joint Explanatory Statement; H.Rept. 116-78; S.Rept. 116-126.

Notes: Does not include funding allocated on a regional or global basis. Includes funds designated as Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO). DA = Development Assistance; ESF = Economic Support Fund; ESDF = Economic Support + Development Fund (proposed by Trump Administration); FMF = Foreign Military Financing; IMET = International Military Education & Training; INCLE = International Narcotics Control + Law Enforcement; NADR = Nonproliferation, Antiterrorism, Demining, and Related.

Tunisia has expanded its acquisitions of U.S. defense materiel in recent years in order to maintain its U.S.-origin stocks and expand its counterterrorism capacities. The State Department licensed the sale of 12 Black Hawk helicopters in 2014, and significant grant-based equipment transfers

[49] USAID, "U.S. Signs Landmark Agreement with the Government of Tunisia," August 30, 2019.

[50] The MCC) FY2019 budget proposal includes $292 million for a multi-year compact with Tunisia that would aim to reduce water scarcity and address regulations seen as constraining job creation.

[51] The Trump Administration has not requested appropriations for SGI, but it has continued similar activities under other programs in a range of countries.

have been approved through the U.S. Excess Defense Articles (EDA) program, including Kiowa helicopters and C-130H aircraft. The Department of Defense (DOD) has provided substantial military assistance in addition to the State Department-administered funds reflected in **Table 1**, focusing on counterterrorism and border security. Much of this has been delivered under DOD's "global train and equip" authority (most recently authorized by Congress under 10 U.S.C. 333), of which Tunisia has been a top recipient in Africa. The Defense Threat Reduction Agency has also supported surveillance infrastructure along Tunisia's border with Libya.

The House-passed FY2020 defense appropriations bill (Division C of H.R. 2740) would make DOD's Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF) available to support Tunisia's border security, as in prior years. Congress also has authorized DOD to support Tunisia's military in securing the border with Libya on a reimbursement basis, most recently under the FY2019 National Defense Authorization Act (§1213 of P.L. 115-232).

The U.S. military has conducted intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) activities from a Tunisian facility, and U.S. Special Operations Forces have reportedly advised Tunisian counterterrorism operations.[52] President Obama designated Tunisia a Major Non-NATO Ally in 2015, after hosting President Caïd Essebsi at the White House. (The designation provides priority access to EDA, among other largely symbolic benefits.) Tunisia cooperates with NATO's Operation Active Endeavor, which provides counterterrorism surveillance in the Mediterranean; participates in NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue; and allows NATO ships to make port calls.

U.S.-Tunisia Relations: Historical Background

U.S.-Tunisian relations date back over 200 years. Tunisia was also the site of significant World War II battles, and a U.S. cemetery and memorial in Carthage (outside Tunis) holds nearly 3,000 U.S. military dead. During the Cold War, Tunisia pursued a pro-Western foreign policy, despite an experiment with leftist economic policy in the 1960s. Still, U.S.-Tunisian ties were strained by the 1985 Israeli bombing of the Palestine Liberation Organization headquarters in Tunis, which some Tunisians viewed as having been carried out with U.S. approval.[53] More recently, the 2012 attack on the U.S. embassy and American school, days after the Benghazi attacks in Libya, temporarily cooled relations as U.S. officials criticized the interim government's handling of the investigation and prosecution of suspects.[54]

Outlook

Tunisia has peacefully achieved many political milestones since 2011, prompting observers to portray it as the lone success story of the "Arab Spring." The public's rejection of much of the political class in the 2019 elections nonetheless suggests ongoing challenges. At issue is whether Tunisia's newly elected leaders can deliver growth, counter corruption, bolster the justice system, and make government more responsive and accountable to voters, all while maintaining security gains in the face of continued threats. If not, public faith in the ability of peaceful political participation to deliver positive change may be further shaken. Tunisian leaders have welcomed U.S. and other Western assistance since 2011, but local concerns over sovereignty have periodically arisen, and donor-backed fiscal austerity measures remain unpopular. President Saïed has yet to define in full his foreign policy approach or posture toward the United States.

[52] Press briefing by General Thomas Waldhauser, then Commander of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), March 24, 2017; *New York Times*, "Why the U.S. and Tunisia Keep Their Cooperation Secret," March 2, 2019.

[53] Jonathan C. Randal, "Raid Left Scars on U.S.-Tunisia Ties," *The Washington Post*, March 5, 1987.

[54] On May 29, 2013, the U.S. embassy in Tunis released a public statement criticizing the relatively lenient sentences given to several low-level suspects in the Tunis embassy attack. The statement called for a "full investigation" and accused Tunisia's government of failing to uphold its stated commitment to oppose those who use violence.

Appendix. Chronology of Key Events, 2011-2019

Chronology: Key Events January 2011-September 2019

2011	
January	Authoritarian President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali flees amid mounting protests.
February	Béji Caïd Essebsi, an elder statesman associated with the administration of founding president Habib Bourguiba, is appointed interim Prime Minister and promises constitutional reforms by an elected assembly.
October	Formerly banned Islamist party Al Nahda wins a plurality of seats in a new National Constituent Assembly and forms a "Troika" coalition government with two secularist parties.
December	Religiously conservative Salafists conduct a sit-in at Manouba University to protest a ban on the full face veil or *niqab*.
2012	
April	Caïd Essebsi launches Nidaa Tounes as a secularist opposition movement.
May-June	Salafists riot in Tunis and other cities.
September	The U.S. Embassy and American school in Tunis are violently attacked by Islamist extremists, three days after the Benghazi attacks in neighboring Libya.
2013	
February-July	Two secularist leftist politicians are assassinated, reportedly by Islamist militants, sparking a political crisis, general strike, and large protests.
August	The government bans the Tunisian-led Islamist extremist group Ansar al Sharia.
October	A suicide bomber blows himself up near a hotel in the beach town of Sousse.
December	After protracted negotiations mediated by a quartet of civil society groups, Al Nahda agrees to cede control of the government to a technocrat Prime Minister.
2014	
January	The draft constitution is adopted by an overwhelming majority in the Assembly. Prime Minister Mehdi Jomaa forms a transitional cabinet.
June	A national Truth and Dignity Commission is launched to investigate human rights violations committed by the state, and to provide compensation to victims.
July	Fifteen Tunisian soldiers are killed in an ambush near the Algerian border, reportedly the heaviest military death toll in decades.
October-December	Nidaa Tounes wins elections for the presidency and a plurality in parliament. Béji Caïd Essebsi becomes president. Al Nahda, which does not run a presidential candidate, wins the second-largest bloc of seats and joins the ruling coalition.
2015	
March	Gunmen kill 21 foreigner tourists and a Tunisian at the Bardo museum in Tunis. The Islamic State claims the attack.
June	A gunman aligned with the Islamic State kills 39 tourists, mostly British, on the beach in Sousse.
November	A suicide attacker kills 12 Presidential Guard members in downtown Tunis.
2016	

March	Militants claiming affiliation with the Islamic State launch a coordinated assault on the border town of Ben Guardane. The attack is put down by security forces.
July-August	Prime Minister Habib Essid resigns after a no-confidence vote in parliament. Nidaa Tounes and Al Nahda, along with several smaller parties and civil society groups, agree to a broad political coalition aimed at addressing social, economic, and security challenges. President Caïd Essebsi names Youssef Chahed Prime Minister.
2017	
February	The IMF postpones loan disbursements, citing a lack of progress on reforms.
May	Prime Minister Chahed announces sweeping anti-corruption arrests and investigations of high-profile businessmen, politicians, police, and customs officials.
September	Parliament passes a controversial "administrative reconciliation law" that grants amnesty to civil servants implicated in corruption pre-2011.
2018	
January	Large protests erupt in opposition to planned fiscal austerity measures.
March	Parliament votes, controversially, to end the mandate of Tunisia's Truth and Dignity Commission.
April	Powerful UGTT trade union federation calls for a cabinet reshuffle.
May	Long-delayed local elections are held. Al Nahda wins the most votes, followed by Nidaa Tounes, but independent lists collectively outpace both leading parties.
June	A presidentially-appointed commission issues a set of recommended legal reforms to expand women's rights and LGBT rights and abolish the death penalty.
September	Caïd Essebsi announces that the "consensus" alliance with Al Nahda is over, amid strains between Prime Minister Chahed and President Caïd Essebsi over control of Nidaa Tounes, Al Nahda's decision to maintain support for Chahed, and Al Nahda's rejection of the president's proposal to introduce greater gender equality into Tunisia's inheritance laws,
2019	
June	The Islamic State claims two near-simultaneous suicide bombings that kill at least one police officer in Tunis.
July	President Caïd Essebsi unexpectedly dies in office, leading to a constitutional succession in which the speaker of parliament, Mohamed Ennaceur, becomes interim leader for a 90-day period. In response, the electoral commission shifts the order and sequence of national elections planned for later in the year.
September-October	Kais Saïed wins the presidential election and Al Nahda wins a slim plurality of seats in parliament.

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