Congressional Research Service
Informing the legislative debate since 1914

Tunisia: In Brief

Updated March 16, 2020

Congressional Research Service
https://crsreports.congress.gov
RS21666

CRS REPORT
Prepared for Members and
Committees of Congress

Summary

As of March 15, 2020, Tunisia had initiated travel restrictions and other emergency measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, having reported at least 20 confirmed domestic cases.

Tunisia remains the sole country to have made a durable transition to democracy as a result of the 2011 "Arab Spring." An elected assembly adopted a new constitution in 2014 and Tunisians have since held two competitive national elections—most recently in late 2019—resulting in peaceful transfers of power. Tunisia has also taken steps toward empowering local-level government, with landmark local elections held in 2018. Yet the economy has suffered due to domestic, regional, and global factors, driving public dissatisfaction with political leaders. High unemployment and inflation, unpopular fiscal austerity measures, and concerns about corruption have spurred protests, labor unrest, and a backlash against mainstream politicians in recent years.

Voters in the 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections largely rejected established parties and candidates in favor of independents and non-career politicians. The results unsettled Tunisia's previous political alliances and may have implications for the future contours of its foreign relations and economic policies. Newly elected President Kais Saïed, who ran as an independent, is a constitutional scholar known for his socially conservative views and critique of Tunisia's post-2011 political system. The self-described "Muslim democrat" party Al Nahda secured a slim plurality in parliament, but it has lost seats in each successive election since 2011. After protracted negotiations, a technocrat designated by President Saïed, Elyes Fakhfakh, secured parliamentary backing for a coalition government in late February 2020.

The Trump Administration has pledged to support Tunisia's security and economic reforms, while also proposing to decrease annual bilateral aid appropriations. Congress, which has not adopted such reductions to date, has shaped U.S. relations with Tunisia through legislation, oversight, and direct engagement with Tunisian leaders. The Administration's FY2021 aid budget proposal included $83.9 million in bilateral economic and security assistance for Tunisia, less than half of what Congress appropriated for Tunisia under the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2020—which was which "not less than" $191.4 million (P.L. 116-94, §7041j of Division G). In addition, in the FY2020 measure, Congress directed "not less than" $50 million in prior-year Economic Support Fund (ESF) appropriations for Tunisia. 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 also been a top cumulative recipient within Africa of DOD "global train and equip" counterterrorism assistance (currently authorized 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 Wolverine light attack aircraft with bombs and other supporting equipment, along with Black Hawk helicopters, and additional planned 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.) U.S. advisors have reportedly aided 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.

Contents

Introduction 1
Background: The "Jasmine Revolution" and Tunisia Prior to 2011 3
Politics: A 2019 Electoral Reset? 3
Terrorism Threats 8
The Economy 9
U.S. Policy and Aid 10

Figures

Figure 1. Tunisia at a Glance 2
Figure 2. Parliamentary Election Results: 2019 5

Tables

Table 1. U.S. Bilateral Foreign Assistance to Tunisia, State Department and USAID 11

Appendixes

Appendix. Chronology of Key Events, 2011-2020 to date 13

Contacts

Author Information 15

Introduction

Tunisia and COVID-19

As of March 15, 2020, Tunisia had initiated travel restrictions and other emergency measures in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic, having reported at least 20 confirmed domestic cases. Authorities were reportedly preparing to take additional steps to encourage social distancing.[1] The country's first confirmed case, a Tunisian national who repeatedly traveled from Italy, was announced on March 3.[2] Tunisia's health system capacity is likely to be tested by the pandemic. Tunisia has approximately 1.3 physicians and 2.3 hospital beds per 1,000 people (slightly below the global average of 1.5 and 2.7, respectively), according to World Bank statistics.[3] Tunisia's median age is 32.7 years (see **Figure 1** below).

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, after which Islamist and secularist political parties formed a transitional coalition government. In 2013, coalition leaders negotiated a peaceful way out of a political crisis sparked by the assassinations of two secularist leftist politicians by Islamist extremists. A quartet of local civil society groups who mediated the negotiations later won the Nobel Peace Prize for their role in this feat. The Assembly finalized and 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 other transitional countries in the region. (See **Appendix** for a chronology of key events since 2011.)

Socioeconomic grievances that helped fuel the 2011 uprising have yet to be addressed, however, while domestic, regional, and global challenges have placed new strains on Tunisia's economy. Growth has been anemic since contracting in 2011, unemployment is above 15%, inflation rose above 7% in 2018, and public debt rose to 77% of GDP **(Figure 1)**.[4] 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 Ben Ali family no longer monopolizes business opportunities, but many Tunisians perceive corruption to have flourished as new players have joined the political class.[5]

Between 2014 and 2018, a "consensus" political alliance among rival Islamist and secularist leaders helped quiet conflicts over identity and social mores, but arguably this came at the expense of ideological coherence or accountability to voters. Declining living standards, political power struggles, unpopular policy compromises, and perceived corruption apparently eroded support for those who led the government during this period. Authorities did, however, complete an orderly succession after the death in office of President Béji Caïd Essebsi in July 2019.

In general elections held in September and October 2019, newcomers and independents outperformed many established politicians, reflecting surging voter discontent and shaking up

[1] *Kapitalis*, "Coronavirus: Réunions d'urgence entre les chefs de blocs parlementaires et le président de l'ARP," March 16, 2020.

[2] *Le Point*, "Le coronavirus se déclare en Tunisie," March 3, 2020.

[3] Data available at https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.MED.PHYS.ZS; statistics for Tunisia as of 2015-2016.

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

[5] 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.

past political alliances. Protracted negotiations delayed the formation of a coalition government until late February, narrowly averting new parliamentary elections, but the coalition's stability is uncertain (see "Politics" below). International observers generally praised the 2019 election process as transparent and well-administered, while raising concerns about the timing and apparent political selectivity behind a leading presidential candidate's imprisonment (discussed below).[6] Domestic observer groups reported some minor procedural irregularities, along with some violations of regulations regarding campaign finance and campaign activities.[7]

Figure 1. Tunisia at a Glance

Population: 11.7 million; ***Urban:*** 69% of total	**Government Gross Debt (%GDP):** 74.4% (2019)
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%	
Median Age: 32.7 years	
Life Expectancy: 76.3 years	**Key Imports:** textiles, machinery and equipment, hydrocarbons, chemicals, foodstuffs
Literacy: 82%; male 90% / female 74% (2015 est.)	
GDP Growth / Per Capita: 1.5% / $3,287 (2019 est.)	**Top Trade Partners:** France, Italy, Germany, China, Turkey, Algeria, Spain (2017)
Unemployment: 15.5%; ages 15-24, 34.7% (2017; 2013)	

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); 2020 estimates unless noted.

[6] 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.

[7] *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.

In March 2020, the suicide bombing of a guard post near the U.S. Embassy in Tunis killed a local police officer and underscored enduring terrorist threats, despite general security gains since a string of large attacks in 2015-2016. In June 2019, twin suicide bombings targeted police posts in Tunis. Militant groups affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State remain active in border areas, and the return of Tunisian "foreign fighters" from Iraq, Syria, and Libya poses concerns.

It remains to be seen whether Tunisia's new leaders will be able to meet public demands to create jobs, improve living standards, counter corruption, ensure security, and advance accountability for abuses committed under the former regime. Turbulent events in neighboring Algeria and Libya may create additional headwinds for Tunisia's stability and economic prosperity.

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.[8]

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.[9] 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?

Context. 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, an arrangement they referred to as "consensus"

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

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

politics.[10] The consensus coalition oversaw landmark local elections in 2018 and the adoption of a new law against gender-based violence in 2017.

The coalition did not, however, manage to respond effectively to public demands for job creation, investment in relatively impoverished interior regions, or improved living standards. A 2017 law granting amnesty for officials implicated in corruption under the former regime sparked public controversy,[11] as did 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.) Partisan disagreements prevented the establishment of a constitutional court, one of several new institutions to be created under the 2014 constitution.

Election Results. In the 2019 general elections, newcomers and independents outperformed many established politicians. 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** below). President Saïed's landslide victory (73%) in the October 13 run-off vote against rival Nabil Karoui—a secularist media mogul and self-styled populist who spent most of the campaign period in jail on money laundering charges[12]—arguably provides him with a strong popular mandate and legitimacy, although many of his policy preferences remain to be publicly defined. The results apparently reflected "a groundswell of support from young voters."[13] Enthusiasm was further reflected in turnout for the run-off—which, at 55% of registered voters, was over six percentage points higher than in the first round vote featuring 24 candidates—and in seemingly spontaneous public street-cleaning initiatives to express support after he won.[14]

Who is President Kais Saïed?[15]

President Kais Saïd, 62, is a constitutional law professor who is new to electoral politics who campaigned on an anti-corruption and anti-establishment platform. 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, called for resurrecting the death penalty (suspended since 1994), and referred to homosexuality as a foreign plot. Whether he will seek to prioritize such actions as president remains to be seen. In his inauguration

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

[11] An initiative of then-President Caïd Essebsi, the law effectively granted amnesty for state employees implicated in corruption during the former regime. 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.

[12] 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. He was released from pre-trial detention days before the run-off. Appreciation for Karoui's charitable activities—often highlighted on Nessma TV, a private station that he owns—appear to have driven popular support. The charges against Karoui, which remain pending, stem from an investigation by a credible local anti-corruption organization, iWatch, into Nessma's financial structure and taxes. See Project on Middle East Democracy, *A Guide to Tunisia's 2019 Presidential Election*, September 2019.

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

[14] Saïed won the largest share of the vote (18%) in Tunisia's September 15 first-round presidential contest, in which the top two candidates advanced to a run-off. *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.

[15] 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.

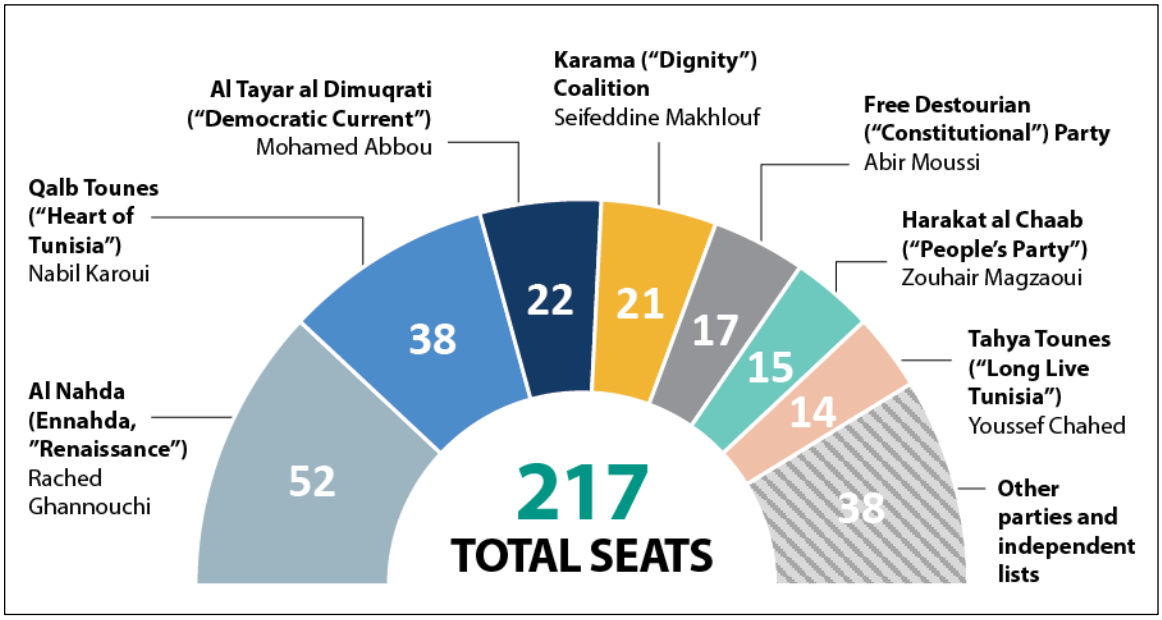
speech, President Saïed vowed to fight poverty and corruption, counter terrorism, protect women's rights, and champion the Palestinian cause. He has offered few specific policy prescriptions since then, however.

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.

Al Nahda secured a slim plurality in parliament (**Figure 2** below), outperforming other established parties as well as newer ones.[16] The party has lost seats in each election since 2011, however, and saw a wave of senior defections in early 2020—unusual for a movement that has generally prided itself on its internal democracy and discipline. The party's presidential nominee (its first ever) came in third in the first round, failing to qualify for a run-off vote. Party leader Rached Ghannouchi nevertheless won a seat in parliament (representing part of Tunis), and was elected Speaker. A large number of independents and small parties won one to two seats each in parliament, rendering coalition-building challenging.

Figure 2. Parliamentary Election Results: 2019

displayed left to right from most to fewest seats won per party/coalition/independent list



Source: CRS graphic, based on data released by Tunisia's High Independent Authority for Elections (ISIE, after its French acronym) on November 8, 2019.

Note: Proportions are subject to shift over time, as under Tunisia's parliamentary rules, individual members of parliament can change party affiliation without losing their seats.

After the October 2019 legislative elections, Al Nahda tried but failed to form a government capable of garnering majority support in parliament.[17] At that point, per his constitutional

[16] The party's presidential candidate, co-founder Abdelfattah Mourou, came in third in the presidential race.

[17] *Middle East Monitor*, "Government falls in Tunisia after no-confidence vote," January 11, 2020. Tunisia's constitution tasks the largest party in parliament with forming a government, barring which the president may designate a person of their choosing after consulting with political stakeholders. If, within four months total, no government has gained majority backing in parliament, the president may call new legislative elections.

prerogatives, President Saïed designated Elyes Fakhfakh—a former finance minister generally viewed as a technocrat—to form a government. In late February 2020, Fakhfakh won a thin majority vote in parliament in support of a coalition comprising Al Nahda, the leftist party Harakat al Chaab, the social-democratic party Tayar al Dimuqrati, and the secularist centrist party Tahya Tounes (see **Figure 2** above). The vote of confidence narrowly averted new parliamentary elections, were constitutional deadlines for government formation not met. Several cabinet members are relative unknowns, and the coalition's legitimacy and potential stability are subjects of debate.[18] Fakhfakh himself won less than 1% of the vote as a candidate for president in 2019; his party, center-left Ettakatol, holds no seats in parliament.

Presidential runner-up Nabil 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. As of late February, Qalb Tounes was poised to lead the opposition bloc in parliament, although its internal discipline and ability to marshal other parties' support are in doubt. Also in parliamentary opposition are the religiously conservative and nationalist Karama ("Dignity") coalition, with 21 seats (although Karama endorsed Saïed during the presidential contest), and the arch-secularist Free Destourian ("Constitutional") Party (or PDL after its French acronym), with 17 seats. The PDL is headed by a former senior figure in Ben Ali's party, Abir Moussi, who has decried the 2011 uprising and subsequent political changes as a foreign plot.

Analysis. Voters' rejection of top political figures in the 2019 elections may reflect economic frustrations, anger at perceived corruption, local-level influences, and/or disenchantment with a series of ideologically incoherent coalition governments.[19] The fracturing of Nidaa Tounes after its 2014 election victory, and the death of President Caïd Essebsi, also reshaped the political landscape. The results of the 2018 local elections, which were a key step toward political decentralization and thus a centerpiece of post-2014 political reforms, hinted at similar public disenchantment.[20] The 2019 parliamentary results confirmed the electoral demise of Nidaa Tounes, which won three parliamentary seats in 2019 compared to 86 in 2014.[21] Some Nidaa Tounes supporters may have migrated to Qalb Tounes, as Karoui was at one time close to Caïd Essebsi and previously, to the Ben Ali regime.

In contrast to Nidaa Tounes, Al Nahda has historically exhibited strong internal discipline and wielded its political power cautiously, mindful of past repression (it was banned in the 1980s and many of its leading figures were jailed 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 national elected office.

The apparent dwindling of voter support and senior defections early 2020 suggest future challenges for Al Nahda, however. Its future leadership is in question, as Ghannouchi reportedly

[18] Sarah Yerkes, "After Months of Deadlock, Tunisia Has a New Government. How Long Will It Last?" *World Politics Review*, March 10, 2020.

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

[20] Al Nahda won the largest share of the vote (29%), followed by Nidaa Tounes (21%), but independents collectively outpolled both, garnering 32%. 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). Emir Sfaxi, "Sustaining Democracy," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 11, 2018.

[21] Between 2014 and 2019, Nidaa Tounes was riven by internal power struggles and friction over the decision to form a coalition with Al Nahda. Some of President Caïd Essebsi's initiatives also sparked controversy, such as his efforts to elevate his unpopular son, Hafedh Caïd Essebsi, as party leader, as well as the 2017 administrative reconciliation law.

intends to step down from heading the party in 2020.[22] 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.[23] After the presidential first-round vote, Ghannouchi pledged that the party would seek to lead the government if it won and would only join a coalition with "the forces of the revolution" in parliament—presumably excluding Karoui. The announcement seemed to reflect an acknowledgement that "consensus" politics and Al Nahda's alliance with Nidaa Tounes (which included Ben Ali regime figures in its ranks) had damaged Al Nahda's relationship with its base. Al Nahda ultimately relied on support from Qalb Tounes for Ghannouchi's election as speaker, however, and later called for Qalb Tounes to be included in the ruling coalition under Fakhfakh, before ultimately reversing itself again.[24]

Outlook. Tunisia's 2014 constitution divides executive powers between the president and prime minister.[25] Even with the recent vote of confidence, Prime Minister Fakhfakh will have to manage divisions in a fragmented legislature. His coalition may also face internal pressures due to ideological differences and/or maneuvering in anticipation of snap elections, should the coalition fracture. Al Nahda endorsed President Saïed in the run-off against Karoui, and the two may share 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[26]

Tunisia is among the top performing Arab countries for women's representation in politics. Women won 54 seats in parliament in the 2019 elections (25%, a decline from 34% in 2014), and women reportedly headed about 14% of all electoral lists.[27] 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. No parties nominated a woman candidate for the presidential elections, however.[28]

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 in 2018 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.

In late 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 newly elected Member of Parliament from the Qalb Tounes party masturbating in front of a school.[29] Some 60% of Tunisian women have experienced

[22] *The Arab Weekly*, "Tunisian Islamist figure resigns from party in widening split in Ennahda's leadership," March 8, 2020.

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

[24] *Al-Monitor*, "Tunisia's long road to a new government," February 25, 2020.

[25] 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.

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

[27] Data from the *Majles Marsad* project, at https://majles.marsad.tn/2019/.

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

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

domestic violence, according to the Ministry of Women, Family and Children.[30] In 2017, parliament passed a law to prevent and address violence against women, though there have been challenges to full implementation.[31] In the explanatory statement accompanying the FY2018 aid appropriations measure (Division K, P.L. 115-141), Congress directed some funds "to support implementation of Tunisia's Law on Eliminating Violence Against Women."

Terrorism Threats

Domestic Islamist armed groups have emerged since 2011, along with threats from groups and individuals based in Libya, Mali, and Algeria. 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.[32] 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, terrorist 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 attacks in Tunisia since an Al Qaeda bombing of a synagogue on the island of Djerba in 2002. In early 2016, Tunisian security forces and local inhabitants put down a militant assault on the border town of Ben Guerdane (located at the border with Libya) that prompted fears of a nascent IS-linked insurgency.[33] 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.[34]

Internal security conditions appear broadly to have improved since then, notwithstanding the aforementioned attack near the U.S. Embassy in Tunis in March 2020 (see "Introduction") and near-simultaneous suicide bombings targeting two police posts in Tunis in June 2019, which the Islamic State claimed.[35] The State Department reported as of 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."[36]

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

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

[31] 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.

[32] 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, had ties to Al Qaeda leadership and to a Tunisian-led foreign fighter network in Afghanistan in the 1990s, the Tunisian Combatant Group. He relocated to Libya after AST was banned in Tunisia in 2013, and later moved to Mali, where he was reportedly killed in a French air strike in 2019. AST no longer operates openly in Tunisia and appears to have decreased in size since its peak in 2012-2013.

[33] ICG, "Seven Ways to Steady a Tunisia under New Attack," March 2016.

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

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

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

southern, western, and central Tunisia, citing terrorist threats.[37] Tunisia's southernmost desert area is a military zone, where foreign travel is officially restricted.

In early 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.[38] 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.[39] 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—as well as the emergence of domestic Islamist extremist networks.[40] Perceptions among some Tunisian youth that despite political changes since 2011, state institutions and personnel remain corrupt, unresponsive, and/or abusive, may also be a driver.[41]

The Economy

Tunisia's economy has struggled since 2011, amid domestic political tensions, the war in Libya (previously a source of employment for many Tunisians), and continuing strains in Europe, its largest trade partner. Investor perceptions of political risk, terrorism threats, and labor unrest have 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. 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 and under-employment.

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.[42] Growth was expected to fall to 1.5% in 2019, however. The impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic on Tunisia's tourism sector and broader economy remains to be seen. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has expressed particular concerns about inflation, declining foreign exchange reserves, and vulnerability to spikes in global energy prices.[43]

Tunisia has historically had a large middle class by regional standards, but economic challenges since 2011—and arguably, some fiscal austerity measures undertaken by the government in recent years at the urging of donors—have negatively impacted its size and purchasing power. Per-capita GDP has fallen (in nominal terms) every year since 2014, dipping below the upper middle-

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

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

[39] 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.

[40] See Aaron Zelin, *Your Sons Are at Your Service: Tunisia's Missionaries of Jihad*, Columbia University Press: 2020.

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

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

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

income threshold of $4,036 in 2015 and remaining below it since.[44] 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.[45] 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.[46]

Tunisia has participated in two IMF lending programs since the 2011 transition. Under the second, a $2.9 billion program initiated in 2016 and set to conclude in 2020, 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. Some policies undertaken as a result have faced opposition from powerful domestic constituencies, including labor unions and monopolistic business interests. For instance, 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."[47] Critics further allege that the devaluation of the *dinar*—urged by the IMF—has devastated households' purchasing power.[48] In 2017, the IMF temporarily suspended loan disbursements over concerns that Tunisia was not making sufficient progress. 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.[49] Tunisian transparency advocates have called for economic reforms to focus less on austerity and more on countering high-level corruption.[50]

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. Between FY2007 and FY2011, U.S. bilateral aid appropriations for Tunisia averaged about $17 million per year[51]; over the last five fiscal years, they have averaged over $179 million (**Table 1**, below). Substantial regionally and centrally allocated foreign assistance and security cooperation funding has also been provided to Tunisia. 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."[52] 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.

For FY2021, the Administration proposed $83.9 million in bilateral State- and USAID-administered aid appropriations for Tunisia, less than half of FY2019 and FY2020 enacted levels. The FY2020 Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act

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

[45] 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.

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

[47] *TAP*, "UGTT warns against consequences of rising prices of fuel and commodities," June 26, 2018.

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

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

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

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

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

(Division G of P.L. 116-94) directed $50 million in prior-year Economic Support Fund (ESF) appropriations for Tunisia; the equivalent FY2019 measure (Division F, P.L. 116-6) directed $50 million in prior-year RRF appropriations for Tunisia.

The FY2020 Department of Defense Appropriations Act (Division A of P.L. 116-93) made funds appropriated to the Department of Defense (DOD) 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 through CY2021 under the FY2019 national defense authorization act (§1213 of P.L. 115-232).

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 up to $352 million over the next five years.[53] Tunisia also is under consideration for a U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) multi-year development aid compact, possibly to be signed in 2020.[54]

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

current $ millions, appropriations

	FY2015	FY2016	FY2017	FY2018	FY2019 (initial actual)	*FY2020 (req.)*	FY2020 (P.L. 116-94)	*FY2021 (req.)*
Total	61.4	141.9	205.2	165.3	191.4	*86.4*	191.4	*83.9*
ESF	20.0	60.0	89.0	79.0	85.0	*31.5 ("ESDF")*	45.0	*31.5 ("ESDF")*
DA	-	-	-	-	-	-	40.0	-
FMF	30.0	65.0	95.0	65.0	85.0	*40.0*	85.0	*40.0*
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	*8.1*
NADR	2.2	2.6	6.1	6.1	6.1	*2.6*	6.1	*2.0*

Source: State Department Congressional Budget Justifications, FY2017-FY2021; conference report accompanying. P.L. 116-94 Division G.

Notes: In recent appropriations acts, Congress has directed additional prior-year appropriated aid for Tunisia (including $50 million in prior-year RRF under the FY2019 act and $50 million in ESF under the FY2020 act). Does not include funding allocated on a regional or global basis. 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 Programs.

U.S. economic aid since 2011 has supported fiscal stabilization,[55] economic growth initiatives, good governance and political decentralization programs, civil society capacity building, and efforts to counter violent extremism. Congress appropriated $100 million between FY2012 and FY2018 to endow a Tunisian-American Enterprise Fund, with a mandate to invest in small- and

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

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

[55] In 2012, the Obama Administration provided $100 million as a cash transfer for short-term fiscal relief. The transfer funded payments on debt that Tunisia owed to the World Bank and African Development Bank. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, "Assistance to Tunisia," March 29, 2012.

medium-sized enterprises, and also appropriated funds for three U.S. loan guarantees that have allowed Tunisia to access up to $1.5 billion in financing from international capital markets.[56]

Bilateral State Department-administered 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, including the Counter-Terrorism Partnerships Fund (CTPF) and the Relief and Recovery Fund (RRF)—intended for assistance to areas "liberated or at risk from" the Islamic State—for Tunisia. Tunisia also participates in the State Department-led Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP) and was a focus country of the 2014-2017 interagency Security Governance Initiative.

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. For example, the State Department licensed the sale of four Wolverine light attack aircraft and related munitions in early 2020 and 12 Black Hawk helicopters in 2014. Significant additional grant-based equipment transfers have been approved through U.S. Excess Defense Articles (EDA), including Kiowa helicopters and C-130H aircraft. DOD has provided substantial military aid in addition to the State Department-administered funds reflected in **Table 1**, focusing on counterterrorism and border security. Much of this assistance has been delivered under DOD's "global train and equip" authority (currently authorized under 10 U.S.C. §333), of which Tunisia has been a top recipient in Africa since Congress first enacted the authority in FY2006. The Defense Threat Reduction Agency has also supported surveillance infrastructure along Tunisia's border with Libya.

President Obama designated Tunisia a Major Non-NATO Ally in 2015 after hosting then-President Caïd Essebsi at the White House. The U.S. military has, at times, conducted intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance activities from a Tunisian facility, and U.S. soldiers have reportedly advised some local counterterrorism activities.[57] 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.[58] 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 then-government's handling of the investigation.[59]

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

[57] 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.

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

[59] U.S. Embassy Tunis statement, May 29, 2013.

Appendix. Chronology of Key Events, 2011-2020 to date

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.
2020	
February	Prime Minister-designate Elyes Fakhfakh, a former Finance Minister generally seen as a technocrat, secures parliamentary backing for a new coalition government.
March	Tunisia announces its first known cases of COVID-19.

Author Information

Alexis Arieff
Specialist in African Affairs

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.