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What Can Tunisia Expect from a Biden Administration?

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Introduction

Like most of its North African neighbors, Tunisia saw little attention from the Trump Administration, compared to other parts of the Middle East such as Egypt, Iran, or Israel. While former Secretary of Defense Mark Esper did visit Tunisia shortly before the November 3rd presidential elections, meeting with President Kais Saied and signing a 10-year Roadmap for Defense Cooperation with his Tunisian counterpart, the country received few high level American visitors over the past four years and was rarely the subject of Washington's focus. It is noteworthy that this was not a dramatic change from the Obama Administration.

Although President Barack Obama had been drawn into supporting Tunisia following the 2010 - 2011 revolution and the unleashing of the Arab Spring, for most of his second term, Tunisia took a backseat to more pressing regional issues. These were the Libyan civil war next door, the conflict in Syria, the Iran nuclear negotiations, and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process—and that is despite broad bipartisan congressional support for Tunisia's democratic transition. Even in the years immediately following the revolution when there was a broad consensus within the US government on the need to “go big” in Tunisia to help consolidate its democratic gains, the country was never a priority. To be sure, Tunisia held policymakers' attention only until the next conflict in the region reared its head.

The Biden Administration is likely to treat Tunisia similarly as its predecessors—as a non-controversial democracy that is perceived as doing well, relative to its neighbors, and thus deserves US admiration and support. Nevertheless, Tunisia most likely will not be a place where the incoming administration will devote a lot of time or energy, and this would be a mistake. There are several low-cost but high-reward opportunities for the Biden Administration to pursue there. Conversely, there is potentially dramatic instability that could come from the failure of Tunisia's transition—an area where US assistance has a proven positive track record.

Within Congress, bipartisan support for Tunisia blossomed after 2011 and continued during the Trump Administration. While the country lost its main champion on Capitol Hill with the death of Senator John McCain, members of Congress on both sides of the aisle have tended to support Tunisia's transition through continued appropriations and various statements and resolutions. In 2019, Senators Robert Menendez (D-New Jersey), Mitt Romney (R-Utah), and Chris Coons (D-Delaware) introduced a resolution affirming the “strong partnership between Tunisia and the United States” and recognizing the two countries' shared values of democracy and support for human rights and the rule of law. Thus, even though President Donald Trump proposed dramatic budget cuts in aid to Tunisia in his first (and subsequent) budget requests, Congress largely ignored those cuts, keeping US assistance to the country at the same levels as under Obama.



More of the Same?

Despite Joe Biden's foreign policy experience and interest, having served as chair and ranking member on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and as vice president, his administration will confront the immediate priorities of addressing the COVID-19 pandemic and its concomitant economic challenges. His administration and the incoming Congress will have little appetite for expanding foreign assistance or further engagement in the Middle East. And he may be facing a divided Congress, including a combative Senate leadership that will not be eager to hand Biden any wins.

Thus, under the Biden Administration, the US-Tunisia relationship may very well remain unchanged. President Beji Caid Essebsi and his successor, current President Kais Saied, were both skillful in their handling of President Trump. Neither managed to draw his ire and both kept Tunisia off of Trump's radar in a way that left US policy there to the professionals—from the highly experienced foreign service officers running the US embassy in Tunis to the career North Africa hands back in Washington. This leaves US-Tunisia policy in a good place, able to continue uninterrupted despite the political changeover, which is not the case for many other Middle East states.

Additionally, President Kais Saied was quick to recognize President-elect Biden, issuing his congratulations and expressing eagerness to work with Biden on November 8, the day after US news outlets called the election in Biden's favor. Saied, who is far more wary of the West than his predecessor, is not likely to cozy up too closely to Biden and his team. But he has also remained above the fray and will not need to rebuild a relationship with the new US administration like his counterparts in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, or Israel.

One factor that might point to a more robust US-Tunisia relationship involves the individuals who surround Biden. While the president-elect himself was reportedly more skeptical than President Obama of Washington's ability to influence democratic change on the ground during the Arab Spring, former Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who is likely to serve in the Biden Administration in a highly influential post such as secretary of state or national security advisor,[1] was one of the more vocal advocates for increasing US support to Tunisia in the years after the Arab Spring and could sway Biden toward embracing the young democracy. Additionally, many of those advising Biden on the Middle East served in the Obama Administration during the Arab Spring, witnessing first-hand that unrest and instability in Tunisia have the potential to spill over across the entire MENA region. And they had a front-row seat to the incredible success of Tunisia's democratic activists at bringing massive political and social change to a long-standing dictatorship.

Another sign that Tunisia may see renewed attention from Biden's incoming administration is his team's interest in Europe and in rebuilding the US-European alliance. Tunisia, which is less than 100 miles from Sicily, is inextricably linked to Europe through geography as well as colonial ties, economic links, and a large diaspora. It is at the center of the migration crisis, both as transit point for sub-Saharan African migrants to Europe and as an increasingly sizable source of migrants.



The most recent terror attack in Nice, France, on October 29 was carried out by a Tunisian who left the country just one month before. This has thrown a wrench into Tunisian-French relations, with the French government asking Tunisia to repatriate 231 migrants. With Biden focusing more on Europe and reaffirming US-European relations, the US government will likely be drawn further into the migration debate. And here, specifically, the United States could play a mediating role, working with Tunisia on how to address the root causes of extremism, such as the socioeconomic deprivation and unemployment that are plaguing the country, as well as cooperating with Europe on effective counterterrorism strategies that do not infringe on human rights.

To Embrace Democracy, Begin with Tunisia

In addition to fighting the COVID-19 pandemic and improving the US economy, another crucial domestic challenge for the Biden Administration will be restoring democracy at home. Along with the important work of shoring up trust in US institutions, President-elect Biden and his team have promised to restore US credibility on the world stage. Here, Biden would be well served by focusing on Tunisia. He has promised to hold a Global Summit for Democracies within his first year in office, which also coincides with the 10th anniversary of the Tunisian revolution and the removal from power of President Zine El-Abidine ben Ali. Thus, holding a democracy summit in Tunis would be a perfect opportunity to draw attention to Tunisia's successes over the past decade and send a loud and clear signal to the region's democracy activists that the United States once again recognizes them and has their back.

There are several other low-cost ways that the Biden Administration could support Tunisia and its democratic transition. First, the United States should take seriously some of the requests of the Tunisian government for more regularized and formalized assistance mechanisms. One approach is through a long-desired bilateral free trade agreement. The United States already has a Free Trade Agreement with another North African country, Morocco, which entered into force 15 years ago. Further, the US-Tunisian economic relationship has steadily improved since the revolution. In February, Senators Chris Murphy (D-Connecticut) and Lindsey Graham (R-South Carolina) introduced a resolution "expressing the sense of the Senate that the United States should initiate negotiations to enter into a free trade agreement with the Republic of Tunisia," making clear that there is bipartisan support for such an action. Thus, this could be one area where the Biden Administration could be confident that it would not face Senate opposition.

The Tunisian government has also repeatedly requested a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on US bilateral assistance, similar to the one that the United States has with Jordan, which provides a clear assistance commitment over a five-year period. While Tunisia should not expect to receive assistance at the same level as Jordan (more than \$1 billion a year), an MOU at an appropriate level, closer to the current US assistance levels of around \$150-200 million, would benefit both Tunisia and the United States. A five-year MOU would allow Tunisia to budget more effectively and efficiently and it would save appropriators time by recognizing that Tunisia has received close to the same level of assistance for the past several years—under both the Obama and Trump administrations. More importantly, it would be a low-cost way to signal US commitment to Tunisia.



If an MOU is not on the table, another approach could be a social or economic roadmap document, similar to the 10-year defense roadmap that former Defense Secretary Esper signed with Tunisian Defense Minister Ibrahim Bartagi during Esper's trip to Tunis on September 30. This could be a highly symbolic as well as substantive gesture, indicating US support of the fledgling democracy and showing the rest of the world that the Biden Administration stands by its pledge to uphold democratic ideals and practices. While both an MOU and a roadmap would likely take a year or more to negotiate, they would actually save the administration time in the long run by developing long-term strategies to help both countries achieve their shared goals of a more democratic, stable, and prosperous Tunisia. Furthermore, the 2019 Development Objective Agreement signed by USAID and the Tunisian Ministry of Development, Investment and International Cooperation is a good first step toward a long-term strategy to address Tunisia's development challenges and could be supplemented by a 10-year roadmap or five-year MOU encompassing all forms of US assistance to Tunisia.

Helping the Revolution Succeed

Perhaps most importantly, the Biden Administration would be well served by turning its attention to Tunisia's unfinished transition, continuing to provide assistance to civil society actors, and working to address the massive socioeconomic disparities between Tunisia's interior and coastal regions. Biden's inauguration falls almost exactly on the 10th anniversary of the Tunisian revolution. This will be a crucial year for Tunisia as this anniversary will offer a flashing neon reminder of the goals of the revolution that have yet to be accomplished—particularly to Tunisians living in the interior where the revolution began. With the economic crisis exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, many Tunisians are worse off today than they were in 2010; this is producing higher levels of both regular and irregular migration, increased incidences of suicide and, most troubling, overwhelming despair on which extremist recruiters can prey.

While Tunisia has made tremendous progress, particularly in the arena of free expression and the development of civil society and independent media, its success is by no means guaranteed. The Biden Administration should continue and augment US support for good governance, particularly within the interior regions, to help restore the social contract and bring real, positive changes to the lives of Tunisians. President-elect Biden and his incoming administration should recognize, reward, and build on the Tunisian people's struggle that began a decade ago and heralded the Arab Spring as the hopeful movement for democratic development in the Arab world.